NECROMUNDA
OMNIBUS ONE

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“In order to even begin to understand the blasted world of Necromunda you must first understand the hive cities. These man-made mountains of plasteel, ceramite and rockrete have accreted over centuries to protect their inhabitants from a hostile environment, so very much like the termite mounds they resemble. The Necromundan hive cities have populations in the billions and are intensely industrialised, each one commanding the manufacturing potential of an entire planet or colony system compacted into a few hundred square kilometres.

The internal stratification of the hive cities is also illuminating to observe. The entire hive structure replicates the social status of its inhabitants in a vertical plane. At the top are the nobility, below them are the workers, and below the workers are the dregs of society, the outcasts. Hive Primus, seat of the planetary governor Lord Helmawr of Necromunda, illustrates this in the starkest terms. The nobles — Houses Helmawr, Catallus, Ty, Ulanti, Greim. Ran Lo and Ko’Iron — live in the ‘Spire’ and seldom set foot below the ‘Wall’ that exists between themselves and the great forges and hab zones of the hive city proper.

Below the hive city is the ‘Underhive’, foundation layers of habitation domes, industrial zones and tunnels, which have been abandoned in prior generations, only to be reoccupied by those with nowhere else to go.

But… humans are not insects. They do not hive together well. Necessity may force it, but the hive cities of Necromunda remain internally divided to the point of brutalisation, outright violence being an everyday fact of life. The Underhive, meanwhile, is a thoroughly lawless place, beset by gangs and renegades, where only the strongest or the most cunning survive. The Goliaths, who believe firmly that might is right; the matriarchal, man-hating Escher; the industrial Orlocks; the technologically-minded Van Saar; the Delaque whose very existence depends on their espionage network: the fiery zealots of the Cawdor. All strive for the advantage that will elevate them, no matter how briefly, above the other houses and gangs of the Underhive.

Most fascinating of all is when individuals attempt to cross the monumental physical and social divides of the hive to start new lives.

Given social conditions, ascension through the hive is nigh on impossible, but descent is an altogether easier, albeit less appealing, possibility."

— excerpted from *Xonariarius the Younger's Nobilite Pax Imperator — the Triumph of Aristocracy over Democracy.*

SURVIVAL INSTINCT

ANDY CHAMBERS

GLORY HOLE

TALK. SOME SAY Underhivers do nothing but talk, that they chatter like reprieved convicts coming out of solitary. Fact is, to them, talking is all about survival: where the lashworms have taken root, where the waste spills are toxic, who's top dog, where to find trade or scav, who's new in town. It's an unwritten law that nothing is taboo down here. A refusal to answer just about any question is a tacit invitation for a fight, not that it's uncommon to see it used as such.

So it is that the drinking holes and slop shops are always filled with a hubbub of gossip that hangs in heavy clouds like the twisting obscura smoke and the greasy fumes of tallow candles.

So when *she* walked into Hagen's place, everyone, and I mean everyone, already knew that Mad Donna was in the settlement of Glory Hole.

It wasn't like in the pict-shows; the music didn't stop, everyone didn't shut up and stop what they were doing to stare. But there was a discemable dip in the noise and a dozen subtle shifts in body postures betrayed curiosity or fear or bravado or guardedness in the crowd. She gazed brazenly at the inhabitants of the shadowy bar with her brilliant blue eye, zapping them with a billion volts of bad attitude. You get a tough crowd in Hagen's place, but few were brave enough to meet her gaze and no one was about to challenge her right to be there.

Outlaw. Psycho bitch. Renegade noble. With a multiple choice of reasons like that to choose from, it was easy to hate or fear Mad Donna. Her gory reputation had spread through Badzones like a twenty-kay rad-cloud in the five cycles she had been below. She was easy on the eye with a dancer's long legs and a set of bewitching curves more flaunted than obscured by her body-casque. Her face would have been beautiful if it wasn't etched by hard lines of cruelty and despair. Legend had it that she'd torn her own eye out years before when a barkeep had told her she was

pretty, and now one socket was covered by a glittering, unblinking bionic. Truly there was more softness and compassion in that metal eye than the remaining real one. She carried well-worn weapons on her curving hips, two pistols and a slender chainsword she called 'Seventy-one' for the number of fingers and toes it had chopped off in its time. A dozen pairs of eyes in Hagen's place quickly found other places to be.

She ordered Wildsnake and was greeted by two Escher gangers - Tola and Avignon - emerging from a side booth looking like they didn't really want to be there. The three had obvious deal-talk to conduct: Tola was speaking fast and waving her hands, Avignon chiming in, Donna nodding occasionally. No doubt they wanted to hire Donna's renowned fighting skills as insurance for some scav-ran, gang fight or turf war.

Meanwhile tongues were wagging amongst the assembled Underhivers and fighters, telling and retelling the old stories about Mad Donna. There was the one of how she had murdered her noble husband in the Spire.

'With a silver fish fork no less,' Akas Fishbelly had added knowingly. 'Gouged out 'is eyes.'

Then how she had fled to down-hive to escape her father's wrath, somehow staying one step ahead of the enforcers and bounty hunters all the way. How she had even ghosted through the impenetrable mass of security at The Wall to get from the Spire into Hive City. How she had killed her own sister, how she had skinned a Goliath who crossed her once, how she had carved out a killer reputation in half a decade of gang fights and craziness.

Gradually thoughts turned to other things and cups rose, dice rattled and chips fell once again. That was when it happened. A new voice was heard above the murmur of talk in the bar, and what it said produced that immediate black hole of silence so beloved of storytellers.

'D'onne Ulanti?'

The speaker found himself with Mad Donna's laspistol pressed between his eyes in an uncoiling blur that was almost too fast too see. She spoke in a husky, murderous burr.

'No one has dared use that name around me for five years, so you'd better have a damn good reason for using it now.'

The man at the edge of death was a scrawny young pit slave. A Merchants Guild ownership stud in his forehead winked nervously a

millimetre above the laspistol's hungry muzzle.

'I-I have a message from Guilder Theodus Relli for D'onne Ulanti,' he bleated. 'Please don't kill me.'

Donna scanned around the bar without moving the gun and wondered which sack of pus had named her to this hapless rube. Many faces flinched away at her icy glare, but none revealed themselves as the potential sump-stirrer. She bolstered the pistol and pointedly turned her back, opening her gloved hand palm-up in front of the slave's nose. After a moment's hesitation a grimy scroll was pressed into her hand and the slave fled.

'What the frik?' said Tola, gazing at the authentic-looking guilder seal embossed in metallic inks on the pale roll of hide.

'Someone wants your attention,' observed Avignon wisely, an effect she ruined only marginally by dripping Wildsnake over her chin as she swigged back another shot.

'Someone is asking for a kicking,' said Mad Donna and dropped the message on the slop-pooled bar top.

'Aren't you going to read it?' asked Tola.

Mad Donna shook her head. 'No, I'm going to finish this bottle and then find Guilder Theodus frikkin' Relli and break it over his no doubt fat and balding head.' Her gaze was distant. 'No one has messages for D'onne Ulanti to hear. She's long dead.'

'Can I read it?' Tola was nothing if not impetuous, little more than a juve really, an effect enhanced by her close-cropped, dirty-blonde hair.

Donna gazed at her evenly for a moment. 'Sure.'

Avignon gave Tola a long-suffering 'I-can't-believe-you-just-did-that' look but Tola was too busy breaking the seal and unrolling the scroll to notice. Her lips moved unconsciously as she read the words. Avignon impatiently snatched the scroll out of Tola's hands and laid it out on the bar for them all to see.

It was handwritten. The practiced pen strokes of a scribe were now growing soft-edged like patches of mould as the pale hide drank up puddles of cheap alcohol, but it had been nicely written. It read:

To the esteemed nobledam D'onne Astride Ge'Sylvanus of the House of Ulanti,

Please forgive this unwarranted intrusion but a matter has come to my attention regarding your past that I felt you should be apprised of with immediacy. I feel it would be unwise to communicate the matter in a simple letter, but I feel sure that such knowledge could be conveyed in person for a suitable consideration. I can be contacted via Strakan's warehouse on the third tier should you wish to pursue this matter further.

Yours in faith,
Theodus Relli
Of the Merchants Guild

'Trap.' belched Avignon.

'No, blackmail. He wants to get a payoff,' said Tola. 'What he's saying is "pay me off or I'll tell someone else about it and they'll pay me off instead".'

'Could be either, or both,' said Donna. 'Most likely the worm has already sold me out and wants to double his money.' Her blue eye was hard and bright with interest. 'It's been tried by bounty hunters before, but never by a guilder.'

The Merchant Guild formed the tenuous threads that stitched the scattered settlements of the Underhive together, moving from place to place trading their wares. They were powerful enough to enjoy as much of a protected status as anyone could claim in the Hive Bottom, the sole supplier of essentials and comforts that were unobtainable otherwise: flak cloth, lumebulbs, protein supplements, data slates, pict slugs, power packs, air filters, fuel rods. They had their fingers in lots of pies and it didn't bode well to make an enemy of one. Guilders had a habit of sticking together and could swing enough credits to put out a bounty so big it would mean a death sentence for just about anybody. Common wisdom was that when guilders took an interest it meant bad things were right around the corner.

'You gonna go?' Tola asked.

Donna shook her head. 'I'd have to be crazy to fall for it.' She wadded up the letter and threw it at Hagen. 'More snake! And make it good or there'll be hell to pay.'

And that was that.

THE SETTLEMENT OF Glory Hole was called that because it *was* a hole: a fungus-like outcropping of trade posts, hovels, workshops, rickety gantries, palisades and trailing cables clustered around a sixty-storey drop between two half-collapsed domes. Centuries ago neglect and unimaginable loads from Hive City above had caused this part of the Underhive to splinter and crack like old bones. A hab-dome that was once half a mile high and six across had been crushed down to a quarter of that size, and the falling debris opened a hole to a larger, older dome beneath that had been previously sealed off by an unbreakable floor of thick ferrocrete.

Underhivers are great survivors by nature; those that aren't get killed off too quickly to find out why. After pulling themselves out of the wreckage they soon investigated the giant hole. The freshly opened dome turned out to be a cornucopia of scav and scrap buried in a vast sea of dust and detritus that was dubbed the White Wastes. People came from all over to try their hand at plumbing the depths, so the settlement of Glory Hole sprang into existence to supply their needs and relieve them of their newly found wealth. Some of the boldest fortune hunters came back with archeotech hoards big enough to buy a place in the Spire, or so the stories went, and some didn't come back at all.

The White Wastes below had long since been tapped out by Donna's day, but the settlement of Glory Hole hung on just because it was there. Most of the gambling holes and flesh joints had closed down, but enough people stayed around to make it a community. Fungus farmers and rat herders brought their produce there, guilders took their cut, gangs and hired guns generally passed right on through and the authorities generally stayed away. That's just the way the Underhivers liked things.

Mad Donna made her way unsteadily across the second tier, its rusty patchwork of metal plates and mesh grilles creaking every step of the way. She was contemplating the fact that a little less Wildsnake and bravado earlier on would have made things a lot easier for her now, but she was definitely intrigued. It had taken a while for it to settle in but it was there now and nagging like a loose tooth.

What she hadn't told Tola and Avignon were the two things that stood out in Relli's letter. Firstly, it had followed the correct uphive forms of address for herself as a spyrer: nobledam was an old term that just

emphasised that nagging fact. Then there was the big one. Relli had used her full name - D'onne Astride Ge'Sylvanus Ulanti, that is, D'onne the divinely beautiful daughter of Patriarch Sylvanus of the House Ulanti. The very name brought back bad memories and a surprisingly hot flush of anger. That name was not commonly known in the Underhive. D'onne Ulanti, for sure, but her full name hadn't even been used on the bounty flyers. That, more than anything else, pointed to the genuine involvement of another noble, quite possibly even a family member.

Donna approached the edge of the tier, where it was unfenced and ragged before the yawning drop. It was quiet in this section, far from the nearest toll-lift. She picked out a sturdy looking cable and carefully wrapped her legs around it before sliding herself over the edge. A cool, foetid breeze blew up from the depths and raffled her long hair with ghostly fingers as she swarmed down the cable. The floodlit warehouses of the next tier looked doll-sized and distant below, further down than she had thought. The indirect approach of sneaking down onto the third tier without being seen had seemed the smart thing to do. Dangling above a dizzying drop on a rusted old cable made it seem a lot less smart.

'Nobledam,' she hissed to herself. 'Ge'Sylvanus,' she spat. Gripping the cable suddenly seemed a lot easier when she could envisage it as her father's throat.

Strakan's warehouse had the trappings of a typical guilder place: three-metre fence rigged with booby traps, a main gate that could stop a tank, guard towers, wall guns. Donna squatted on a nearby roof and contemplated her options. She counted two armed pit slaves making the rounds inside the compound and three more in the towers. Jumping the fence was just about possible if she got it right. She had thought about just going up to the gate and demanding to see Relli but even Mad Donna wasn't that crazy.

It started to rain, a fine drizzle of condensation falling from the upper layers and bringing a smell of wet ash sharpened by a tang of ammonia. The two slaves in the compound hurried for cover, obviously frightened of acid rain. Stupid green hivers, Donna thought to herself as she dropped from the roof. The kind of effluvia from above which could strip flesh from bones smelled of rotten fruit. This rain produced only a mild

prickling burn and was actually good for getting rid of lice and other parasites.

She ran, fast and limber, towards the fence with its ominous hanging fruit of booby trap frag grenades and scatter shells. At the last instant she leapt forward and up, kicking her legs high and arching her body to clear the top of the fence. Wildsnake and the wet surface conspired to screw up her landing, so she turned it into a shoulder roll and came up next to a pile of crates.

No alarms sounded from the slaves in their little towers. All good. A sort of covered veranda ran around the outside of the warehouse, cloaked with invitingly deep shadows. She moved cautiously towards it, resisting the urge to run and staying in cover. The two pit slaves on patrol rounded the corner and she froze as they went by. They were tough-looking characters for all their obvious inexperience. Like most pit slaves, their owner had modified them with crude bionics to suit their function better. One's arm ended in a circular buzz-saw blade and his legs in metal claw feet that rang on the veranda as he approached. The other sported a piston-powered set of shears on one forearm and a half-skull of metal. Both were carrying big bore stub pistols and a bandolier of cartridges.

The modified pair was making more noise than a Goliath gang at a line dance and passed Donna obliviously. As they rounded the corner out of sight she got up and started across the few metres of open space to the veranda. Then it happened.

A door opened and Donna made out a figure emerging. She was then blinded by a row of floodlights kicking on along the edge of the building, bathed in a harsh sea of light totally unfamiliar to someone used to the natural gloom of the Underhive. As she tensed to spring back, a hotshot las-blast scored the plates at her feet in a glowing, spitting question mark. Avignon had been right. It was a trap and Donna was well and truly hiked.

'D'onne Ulanti aka Mad Donna, by the authority of Lord Helmawr I arrest you on warrants outstanding in the Spire.' She recognised the harsh, whispering voice. It was Shallej Bak, an ex-Delaque gang fighter turned bounty hunter. If he was here, the puke with the hotshot was probably his cousin, Kell Bak. Like so much else in the Underhive, bounty hunting was a family business.

'Drop your weapons.'

'Come and get them, Shallej, if you've got enough fingers left to try.'

Another hotshot sizzled into the plating close enough to make her involuntarily skip sidewise.

This was hopeless. She could hear the two pit slaves coming back but she could barely make out either them or Shallej in the glare. She raised her hands and closed her bright blue eye.

One thing most people forgot when it came to bionics was that good ones could have distinct advantages over the fleshy original. Donna's artificial eye was a top-range Van Saar model. Among several useful quirks it featured an automatic photosensitive glare filter.

Shallej, a bald, bulky figure in a long flak coat, was standing a little to the left of the door, covering Donna with the red dot of a bolt pistol targeter.

Buzz-saw and Shears were approaching from the right. Shears had his pistol holstered and was carrying a jangling set of manacles. Donna reckoned Kell was in a tower also off to the right.

Shears grinned confidently and stepped forward to toss the manacles to her. As he did so, he momentarily blocked Shallej's line of fire. That moment was all Donna needed. She bounded forward and grabbed Shears in an arm lock. Buzz-saw's stub pistol boomed off a round but fired wide and Kell's shot was a fraction of a second slow as the hotshot's power pack struggled to build up a fresh charge. Shears howled when Donna bit off his remaining ear and spat it in his face. Shallej cursed.

Blinded by the hot, sticky blood covering his bionic thermal sensor and reeling off balance, Shears was in trouble and he knew it. He panicked and tried to use his piston-enhanced strength to throw the snarling, laughing woman off, but Donna spun him by the elbow and rammed his cumbersome bionic blades into Buzz-saw's guts. It was unfortunate for the bloody pit slave that Shallej's bolt round caught Shears just above the eye at that same moment. The .75 mass reactive gyro-jet pulped his head like a ripe melon being hit by a truck. His death-reflex jerked his shears shut and messily eviscerated Buzz-saw into the bargain.

Donna was still moving while the pit slaves swayed in their gore-slicked embrace of death. Shallej expected her to ran for cover, diving left or right, but she came straight at him instead, ripping out Seventy-one and thumbing the chainblade to life. Her shoulder blades itched with the

expectation of a hotshot at any moment but Kell was obviously off-form and no shot came.

Shallej didn't raise his pistol to shoot at Donna since that had cost him three fingers last time they met and he'd learned from the experience. Instead he ducked out into the yard where he could count on support from his cousin. Donna's screeching chainblade tore at Shallej's coat as she made a backhanded slash but she kept going, diving through the open door and into the warehouse.

Donna rolled to her feet and kicked the door shut, pumping a couple of las-shots through it at chest and groin height to dissuade pursuers. She turned and sprinted off between the rows of crates and bales, sword and pistol ready.

Nothing rose to bar her path. She could hear shouting outside, and then a volley of shots before the door banged open behind her. By that time she had already found what she was looking for: two heavy trapdoors in the floor with a girder-work, a frame and winch assembly over them. No guilder would pay the lift-tolls to have their goods brought up Glory Hole, so each warehouse had their own hoist to the tier below. It was the ideal escape route out of the bounty hunter's trap, or it would have been if the trapdoors weren't secured by heavyweight tungsten mag-locks.

The bounty hunters became stalking shapes behind the rows of chipped plastic crates and overstuffed bales. The distinctive rising whine of Donna's plasma pistol about to discharge sent them ducking back like jackals before a lion. The warehouse was sharply lit by an actinic blaze as the pistol fired, a thunderclap report and wash of ozone sending hard black shadows leaping to the corners.

Bounty hunters knew their guns and a plasma weapon took precious seconds to recharge. They moved quickly to encircle their cornered prize, emerging at the skeletal A-frame hoist in a coordinated rush.

They found the trapdoors melted through, their edges still glowing cherry red from the fearsome heat of a plasma blast. Of Mad Donna there was no sign.

DONNA SWORE LONG and loud as she applied a stinger mould poultice to her burned shoulder. A drip of molten steel had caught her as she clung

to the bracing beneath Strakan's warehouse, listening to the Bak brothers bitching and planning their next move. They hadn't mentioned Relli so it didn't sound like he was in Glory Hole. She'd almost bitten through her lip but hadn't uttered a sound.

She was 'holed up', as Underhivers say, in a broken pipe halfway up the wall of the dome below Glory Hole. She had a dew-sheet stretched out and a small fire going with a couple of cat-sized rats roasting on spits, the dribbling grease hissing and popping in the flames. She kept an eye out in case any other scavengers were drawn to the smell, but most Underhive creatures instinctively steered clear of fire and smoke, except those on two legs of course. Looking out into the gloom Donna could see white ash dunes and mesas of fallen rockrete topped with twisted forests of girders. The only thing moving was a distant string of lights, probably the lanterns of some guilder caravan. It wasn't safe here but it was quiet and it gave her some time to think.

No matter how far she ran or how deep she buried herself she could never outdistance her past. The Underhive was a haven for criminals and renegades of all sorts, and for hivers desperate enough to gamble everything on starting a new life at the very fringes of civilisation. Most were running from something, but most were safely forgotten and ignored once they were in the Underhive - it received both outcasts and hopefuls to its dark bosom with equanimity. Not so for D'onne Ulanti.

Being a feared and hunted outlaw sounded exciting and romantic but the reality was a grim, sometimes desperate, existence dogged by the ghosts of the past. Donna's previous life in the Spire was a half-remembered dream which at moments like this her mind would treacherously patch together as a mosaic of her best memories, pushing her further down the spiral road of regret and despair. Donna occasionally convinced herself it had all happened to someone else. In truth she had become someone else now - Mad Donna had replaced D'onne Ulanti even though she wore her stolen flesh. She had fallen so far and lost so much of the comfort and security guaranteed by life in the Spire. Sometimes she wondered why she kept going at all; it would be so much easier just to put a pistol to her head and end it for good.

To end up in the Underhive was the worst thing that could happen to someone from the Spire. Suspicion was the best you could hope for, since

half of those you meet would be happy to kill you just for having an uphiver accent. If the Underhivers didn't kill you, then there were a hundred other hideous deathmongers close at hand: spiders, scorpions, snakes, rats, mil-lasaurs, carrion bats, ripper jacks, face-eaters, sludge jellies, lash whips, wire weed, brain leaves, gas spores, zombies, cannibals, mutants. The list went on and on, and there were plenty of other things even the Underhivers didn't have names for. There were also the toxic spills, the sludge pits, the acid rain, the gas pockets, the carcinogens in the dust, the food, the water, the air, the hive quakes, flash floods, electrical discharges or the simple expedient of a long drop onto something unforgiving. It was not a gentle land.

And now Donna must walk that land and find some answers, find out *how* Relli had found her and, more importantly, why. In the Underhive, notoriety was like body odour - everyone had it. Actually finding someone specific instead of a bunch of rumours took persistence and no little skill. If she was going to avoid being caught, Mad Donna needed to know a lot more about her hunters. She knew that the best places to find news on guilders were the settlements of Dust Falls and Two Tunnels, both of which see more guilder caravans than anywhere else because of their locations. The only alternative would be to keep running in the Badzones between settlements until the hunters caught up with her again, and next time she might not be so lucky. And why not simply end it all, simply stop running and lie down to die? Because then it would all have been for nothing, and she would have given in to to her innermost daemons, the ones with her father's voice that said it would have been better if she had never been born at all.

Trekking to Dust Falls from Glory Hole usually meant a roundabout journey across the White Wastes up to the rusting gantries over Cliff Wall. From there the commonest paths went through the Looming Halls and down the interweaving tunnels of The Lesser Trunk. There were other ways, quicker ones even, but that was the easiest and safest one. Because of that there was always a good chance that gangers, outlaws or both (and it's often hard to tell the difference) would be roving in parts of the Looming Halls, taxing or murdering travellers as took their fancy. Enterprising gangs often put up toll-blocks on Cliff Wall too, or fought vicious battles for possession of them.

The alternative was to strike out straight across the wastes to the foot of Cliff Wall, go across the rotting pipes at its base and into a confusing tangle of ancient turbine chambers. If you then could find a way through the sludge pits and collapsed areas you would emerge, perhaps, into the generatoria dome at the bottom of The Lesser Trunk, and would only be a march away from Dust Falls and the edge of The Abyss.

Going the roundabout route was simply not an option. There was too much of a chance of being recognised on the way and word getting back to the bounty hunters. They would have thrown out a web of informers around Glory Hole within an hour of losing her, hundreds of ears sharp for any news. Time was also an issue. If she kept ahead of any reports reaching Relli she would have an edge. She desperately needed one.

Flexing her shoulder experimentally, Donna found it surprisingly free of pain. The poultice was doing its work. She realised that her injury would not hinder her and she was pleased since the lower route was sure to be physically demanding. She checked her weapons too, as the sludge pits were supposed to be rife with vermin.

Seventy-one was as close to full charge as it could be, its ceramite teeth sharp and moving freely. She found some torn scraps of Shallej's coat caught between the teeth and braided them amid the other trinkets in her unkempt hair as a memento. Her laspistol was an exquisitely made spyrer pattern that she had carried for as long as she had been in the Underhive. In all that time she had never had to replace the power cell or even recharge it, nor once clean the muzzle lens, yet it remained ever ready to inflict harm. She loved and hated the elegant pistol, and had almost thrown it away or sold it dozens of times over the years. The gun didn't care and continued to serve her as faithfully as a hunting hound.

Her plasma pistol was a different story; a heavy, crudely made and pug-ugly looking Underhive piece. She had cut it out of the dead, nerveless hand of an outlaw called Kapo Barra after a fight outside Two Tunnels. Kapo and his gang had ceased to exist when Mad Donna and Tessera's Escher had caught them in an ambush. The bounty fee from the grateful hivers of Two Tunnels had not been as great as promised, but the loot was excellent.

Donna had kept the cumbersome plasma pistol because it was such a great equaliser. No matter how tough an opponent was, a blast of

incandescent plasma would seriously wound or kill them and they knew it. Even the sound of it about to discharge would make most foes duck for cover, and as the escape from the warehouse had proven, its ability to annihilate obstacles was more useful still. It was on a three-quarter charge, the power-hungry pig that it was, and firing it would have to remain a last resort until she was near a viable power source. Finding a replacement plasma flask for it would be harder still where she was going.

Smoked rat meat plus water from the dew-sheet and filter can would be her food and drink for the journey. What she needed to do now was rest and save her strength for a few hours before setting out. She settled herself into the pipe and flipped her bionic eye to its alarm mode. If anything bigger than a fly approached her hiding place, a motion-sensor would instantly wake her. She slept fitfully

THE FIRING STUTTERED and died away into echoes.

D'onne stuck her head out to see what was going on and a stub round smacked into the pillar right beside her the instant her head was visible. Tola pulled her back in sharply. 'Don't be stupid, Donna. They knows we're still here!

Another shot and a ricochet whined past as if to underline the point.

'So what do we do now, Tola?' D'onne tried to sound sarcastic instead of frightened while pushing her blonde plaits out of her eyes. She felt unable to quite believe that she was being lectured by an Underhive brat, five years her junior, who couldn't even get her name right. Tola didn't even seem to notice her fantastically withering glare.

"Well, if we waits a while they'll start a-sneakin' and a creeeepin' up here,' she sang quietly, eyes wild with the rush of the firefight. 'We could pop out then. *Pow! Pow!* Mebbe take a couple, but then they'd shoot us down like rats! She scowled dramatically. 'Not good!

Having a child talk to you as if you were another, younger child is, D'onne concluded, one of the most excruciating things that can ever happen to a person. She was just glad there was no one else around to hear it. If Tola kept this up she'd rather get shot than stay behind the pillar with her.

'And then...' she prompted.

"Then we could try'n a-sneakin away ourselves, find a spot and wait for them to come nosin' around our old post and then *Pumph*!' D'onne clapped her hand over Tola's mouth to stifle her from saying 'Pow! Pow!' again. Her eyes were bright with fearful intensity.

'Shut it, Tola. I hear them!' D'onne hissed.

And here they came, the jingle and squeak of gun harnesses a chilling counterpoint to the heavy clump of running boots. It was an incredibly menacing sound: the sound of people running to kill you.

D'onne and Tola were in some kind of manufactoria, and it was as dry and dusty as old bones. Most of it seemed to be filled with rusting iron-plated tubs three times the height of a man, and D'onne surmised that they were big silos or mixing vats of some sort.

D'onne had given up trying to tell what the places used to do where the gang went. What was important is what they did now, and that was serve as a battle ground for the gangs.

D'onne was trying to learn but it was hard to look at things in a different way than you had been taught for your whole life, to look at a scene for the tactical instead of the aesthetic. But she was learning.

Once she would have looked around the old building and appreciated the fractal chaos of its disintegrating roof panels, and the coy glimpses they offered of the gantry-garlanded ceiling of the city dome the building stood inside. She would have enjoyed the subtle irony of factories growing old and having to retire and going to pieces just like the workers inside, but how this happened simply over a longer span of time. She might have written a poem about it, or painted a picture in charcoal to get those shadows right.

Now D'onne looked for cover, and for somewhere she could run to before an enemy could draw a bead. She looked for what would stop a bullet or a las-blast, and what would only hide you, where the shadows lay, where the sniper nests might be. She was learning, oh yes.

D'onne let Tola go and the little brat just sprinted off without a word. D'onne followed a second later, skipping backwards for a couple of steps to cover their backs. Then she turned and ran after Tola as if a pack of murderers were on her heels.

Which they were.

Tola jumped down a rubble embankment, slithering down broken chunks of rockrete and kicking off a cascade of smaller bits and pieces that rattled and clattered explosively. It made enough noise to attract the attention of their pursuers and shots boomed out. D'onne stifled a little shriek as rounds cracked past her. She weaved and ran in a different direction, diving behind a fallen beam and dropping flat.

Tola was out of sight and D'onne was suddenly very much alone. She lay as quietly as she could and tried not to pant loudly. After a breathless moment she crawled on her belly towards the other end of the beam and stopped to listen.

The running noises had stopped. Everything had gone quiet again. D'onne hated it: the fear, the feeling of impotence while everyone around her fought out a deadly battle, the fact that she hadn't had the faintest clue what was going on, where her side was, where the bad guys were or what they were trying to achieve. Juves like her and Tola were a liability in a gang battle, D'onne knew, because the experienced gangers told her so loudly and so often. No one wanted to risk a juve getting in their way or drawing attention to them in a firefight. So Juves were abandoned in a fight to sink or swim on their own. It was a form of Underhive natural selection that was brutally efficient at creating live, competent Underhive gang fighters or very dead wannabes.

In some ways it was no different to the Spire; it was all about looking out for number one.

Gunfire cut through the silence, flashes lit the shadows and made them jump, and a man screamed. D'onne smiled at that since her gang - the gang - was all female, like all those from House Escher. The other gang was all male, like all gangs from House Goliath. Whoever had just screamed was an enemy.

Back in her other life (hazy and distant now, hut was it only a few weeks ago she had still been living it?), she had learned about the Industrial Houses of Hive City: the Goliaths, the Escher, the Delaque, the Van Saar, the Orlocks, the Cawdor. They weren't like the noble houses of the Spire; there was no pair-bonding or guardianship of the bloodlines. Her tutors had taught her that they were mongrel partitions of the proletariat with little more integrity than common labour guilds. Reality, of course, was very different.

These Industrial Houses occupied well-defended enclaves within the city and dealt with one another only in conditions of utmost suspicion and secrecy. Each jealously guarded its own traditions and attitudes and old enmities like rival nations. The noble houses frowned on anarchy and disorder in Hive City, so members of the Industrial Houses descended beneath Hive City to fight over the hundreds of square miles of abandoned hab domes, transitways and other crumbling strata of previous industrious generations.

The Escher told her they came to get more resources for their sisters in Hive City, where every mouthful of food or cup of recycled water was treasured. D'onne had a strong feeling they did it because they were sick of Hive City and just wanted to fight. She couldn't blame them. Just a few hours in Hive City had made her understand the desire to give violent release to the unbearable tension she'd felt. To live every day cheek by jowl with a billion angry people in a polluted maze shut away from the skies... D'onne was amazed they didn't all go mad, or perhaps they did and that was how they could stand it.

So the mad ones, or the sane ones, depending on which way you looked at it, came below to fight.

The Goliaths were the diametric opposite of the Escher -a bunch of steroid-fed half-wits who relied on brute force and ignorance to get the job done. This was what the Escher had told her. These Goliaths were outlaws, gang scum who couldn't abide by the coarse rules of the Underhive and had earned a bounty on their heads. The Escher gang's leader, Tessera, had cut a deal with a nearby settlement called Two Tunnels to wipe out the Goliath gang or at least drive them far enough from the settlement to stop harassing anyone who travelled there.

There were only supposed to be half a dozen outlaw Goliaths holed up in the manufactoria, and the Escher were to outnumber them almost two to one. It didn't feel like that at all at the moment. D'onne was alone with the enemy all about her, as evinced by the occasional rattle of stone or clink of metal in the shadows. She had also stayed in the comforting but illusory shelter of the beam for too long -whole stale seconds too long in the midst of a minutes-long fxrefight.

She started to move. A hail of bullets sprayed across the beam, kicking up tiny explosions of dust all around her as she hastily ducked back out of

sight. The bullets kept coming, angrily buzz-sawing chunks out of the beam in a seemingly endless stream. When the fusillade stopped, the momentary silence seemed unreal and disorientating to D'onne after the chaos of being under such heavy fire. In the distance she heard the click of a magazine being ejected and that familiar *drum-drum-drum* of running boots.

Something about Tola's words earlier came back to her and she knelt suddenly upright with her pistol in hand.

Pow! Pow!

A Goliath stood not five metres away from her. He was tall, but massive pectorals and biceps made him seem squat and troll-like. Chrome spikes and rings prominently pierced his nipples, face, arms, and crotch. He had a heavy cylinder-fed slug gun in one hand and a steel bar in the other. The Goliath was looking down, dumbly surprised at the two smoking holes D'onne had put through his meaty chest. He looked about as old as Tola.

D'onne saw the second Goliath right behind him, and amazingly he was even bigger and definitely more ugly and scarred than the other one. He was grinning nastily at D'onne while slapping a fresh clip into his autopistol. As he did so, the corpse of his fellow ganger dropped neatly out of his line of fire. She gaped in astonishment at the realisation that he had used the younger Goliath to draw her out, how he had callously sent him to an almost certain death to get her to come of out of cover. He saw the shocked expression on her face and laughed out loud, a deep booming sound like rocks falling down a shaft.

'Nevuhr mind girly-girl', he said, levelling the autopistol at her. 'If yer quick yer'll catch 'im!'

Donna's eyes were already closed and she flinched as shots hammered out, her body tensing involuntarily at the last instant before giving up her life. After a second she opened them to find she still lived, and instead the Goliath was sprawled in a bloody heap. He seemed shrunken now that hot lead had torn through muscles, organs and bones. D'onne couldn't get the confused idea out of her head that somehow the autopistol had misfired and he hit himself, lots of times, or something.

'That's the last of them,' Tessera's firm voice called out.

Footsteps scrunched all around D'onne as the Escher appeared from the shadows one by one. Big Faer with her heavy stubber still smoking from

the deadly burst which had killed the last Goliath. Little Tola smeared with dirt and covered in bruises, looking like the child she was. Avignon and Sirce were up in the roof supports with their rifles. Jen, Alii and Sara were on the ground with pistols. Crazy Kristi had cuts all over her body and a lot of blood on her long, slender sword that wasn't her own. They carried out the other juve, Veshla, who had a gut wound that probably wouldn't heal before it killed her.

D'onne realised that she had never been alone and that there had always been allies within reach of her. She also realised that Tessera had used her and Tola as bait, just like the Goliath but with a bit more sophistication. That simply reinforced a lesson she already knew, one she had learned at bitter cost in the Spire.

Number one always comes first.

Tola came up to her afterwards and said, loud enough for the whole gang to hear, 'Watcha go a-runnin off on your own like that fori You're mad, Donna!'

CLIFF WALL

MAD DONNA STARED up at a vast, curving cloud approaching her as she tramped across the White Wastes. Twinkling stars strung its upper reaches and hung down like looping garlands across black lightning bolts frozen in the act of splitting the smooth face asunder.

Cliff Wall. Her mouth felt dry at the prospect. Or maybe it was the dehydrating salts of the White Wastes, it was hard to be sure.

The route from Glory Hole was high up to the left from this perspective, climbing a succession of ruined buildings and fallen roadways along the dome wall to come up level with the cliff top. The right hand end of the cliff top road led out of the White Wastes and into the ominous Looming Halls. A ratskin had once told her there were evil spirits there, and truly the rows of towering machinery rusted into solid heaps but not yet completely quiescent were disturbing.

The chalk-white dust of the wastes gave way grudgingly to cracked slabs in a pipe-choked channel near the base of the cliff. Donna went cautiously, testing each step before advancing. The finest dust from the White Wastes could flow like water and would often pool in pits or crevices on its periphery. Usually this was just inconvenient and meant stumbling in unseen potholes, but the base of Cliff Wall was rife with cracks deep enough to swallow a man, or woman, whole. Even a solid-looking slab or pipe might be resting at the edge of an unseen precipice and just waiting to tumble an unwary traveller to their doom.

She stopped, squinting between the pipes and trying to see what had caught her attention. There, a scatter of small bones and chitin. She reappraised the thick tangle of fallen wires hanging above the spot. Tiny, subtle movements made it look like the wires were swaying in a breeze, but there was no breeze to be felt. Wire weed. Doubtless a chunk had fallen from a toll-block at the top and survived down here by catching rats

and spiders. Donna counted herself lucky. Larger thickets would have hidden the evidence of their kills better. The first inkling she might have had about the weed would be when it was looping tendrils around her pretty neck. She had heard stories of wire weed that had learned to lurk under dust or sand, or even behind walls, and burst out on its prey from hiding. Suddenly the floor of the channel seemed a less safe place to be.

She went up, climbing creaking pipes and corroded stanchions, steering well clear of the weed she had spotted. Now that she was alert to it, she spotted a few other clumps dotted around. Nasty as it was, wire weed was a lurker, and as such it was a fair bet that it would be lurking near well-used trails. The weed patches seemed to be spread evenly around a bank of six-metre high outflow pipes, and that would make it likely that they connected to the turbine chambers beneath Cliff Wall.

By the time she got level with the outflow she was dripping with sweat, and the jagged metal she'd climbed had torn her gloves. She clung to a section of gantry and eyed the rockrete apron in front of the pipes dubiously as she caught her breath. There was no sign of what she'd expected to find - the fine grey sensor hairs sticking out of cracks and crevices that denoted the presence of lashworms. It was easy to see why. Every crack or crevice around the outflow pipes had been meticulously broken open and there was obscene rat-graffiti everywhere. Looked like rats had eaten all the lashworms.

Donna hated rats. She started contemplating other directions to try instead of the outflow. A las-bolt whipped past her face without warning, close enough for her to feel the furnace breath of its passage. The bolt struck sparks of molten steel from the metal gantry and the whole thing suddenly shifted beneath her.

Most people get shot in situations like this because their immediate response is to stop and look around for who's shooting at them. If they were really lucky they'd get to see their attacker just in time to get themselves killed dead, dead, dead. Gang fighters, especially ones of Donna's calibre, knew better. Cover first, then worry about who's shooting. The decision isn't a decision at all, its an instant response in a world where death is only ever a trigger-pull away.

Donna pitched herself over onto the rockrete apron. A second bolt clipped shards off the edge as she wiggled over it. The gantry swayed

alarmingly as her weight left it for firmer ground. Donna lay flat for a moment and glared around wildly. No shapes moved in the outflow tunnels, and no more shots came from above. Whoever was shooting at her was below at the base of the cliff.

The practical solution would be to get going before they decided to start lobbing frag grenades up at her, but Donna was consumed with curiosity. She slithered along the edge for a few metres and slipped out a specially polished throwing blade she kept in her boot top. Easing it over the edge allowed her to see a view down the wall with the blade's mirrored surface, which her assailants were unlikely to spot in the dim light. Donna had often considered getting some kind of remote for her bionic eye for times like this but Tessera, her old mentor, had been derisive. 'A gadget will always fail you,' she had sneered. 'Only rely on things that can't go wrong!' She had accepted only grudgingly that Donna needed to replace her eye at all.

There. A figure with a shouldered rifle. It was scanning around the outflow area. She shrank back in case the figure had a scope sight. He had been standing on a slab close to where Donna had started to climb, with another figure just behind it, a darker blur in the gloom. She edged along a little further and put her little blade over the edge to see if there were more of them.

She caught sight of movement and turned the blade to catch a small group of maybe three or four marching up to the slab, obviously allies of the sniper. The figure at the head of the group looked to be dressed in white clothes or armour, and the rest were shadowy blobs that looked like they were cloaked and hooded. The figure in white dashed the rifle out of the sniper's hands and some kind of argument broke out, fragments of angry imprecations floating up the wall from' below. Donna smiled nastily. They wanted her alive, so they *were* bounty hunters. Not Shallej and Kell Bak, but some other posse, fresh out of Glory Hole no doubt.

All attention was being drawn to the argument so Donna risked poking her head over for a better look.

The figure in white (armour she realised, a full-body suit of shaped ceramite pieces by the look of it) stood with his legs spread pointing down imperiously at the fallen lasrifle. Skulking just in front of it was an Underhive gun-scummer, the kind of trash for hire you can find buzzing

like flies around any of the settlements. It looked like he had a gun-scum buddy hovering between backing him up and slinking away.

The two remaining members of the group looked rather, well, weird. They were heavily cloaked in dark robes but that couldn't disguise the fact that one was short and round, the other tall and rail thin. The tall one scarcely moved at all, and the short one seemed to be constantly swaying as if in time to unheard music. Neither carried any visible weapons.

Things were hotting up on the slab. The scummer was shaking his head and White Armour kept jabbing his finger at the lasrifle again and again. The scummer looked surly, his hand flexing closer to his holster. Just when it looked like violence would erupt at any moment, another figure moved fluidly into view. It was low and lean like a hunting hound, all polished chrome and brushed steel. It was in fact an enforcer hound; a standard enforcer cyborg occasionally seen in the Underhive indentured to guilders, watchmen or bounty hunters.

The fire went out of the scummer as soon as he saw the mastiff and he hastily picked up the rifle. Donna cursed inwardly and wished she had a few frag grenades to drop on them. It was too far for a decent pistol shot, and trying would get her in a gun battle with men with rifles - a definably bad idea.

The thought gave her another idea, however, and after some searching she found a hands-breadth section of pipe that would serve her purpose. Coming to a crouch at the edge, she popped up for a second fully exposed to those below. One of the cloaked figures, the short one, seemed to sense her first and pointed. The others were caught flat-footed, clumsily swinging around to look for their forgotten prey.

'Eat frag, you scummers!' Donna yelled and threw the pipe into their midst before ducking out of sight. Alarmed yells could be heard, and Donna imagined them all diving for cover from the so-called frag grenade she had thrown.

As she entered the outflow pipe she heard the first screams floating up from below as the wire weed feasted on its unexpected bounty. She smiled a full, cruel smile.

THE FIRST COUPLE of hundred metres of pipe ran straight, and then it went through a slow left corkscrew and rose perhaps ten metres before debouching into a large chamber. That was where Donna found the rats.

Two-dozen pairs of glinting, narrowed eyes were studying her as she exited the pipe. As four sets of eyes moved closer, her bionic saw their long sinuous forms sidling insouciantly to surround her, their worm-tails dragging in the dirt. She stood her ground; running or even backing off now would most likely bring the whole pack down on her in an instant.

Necromundan giant rats were the stuff of nightmares, over a metre long with scabrous, oily pelts, naked wormlike tails, taloned claws, piercing, red eyes that glitter with malign intelligence and a jaw full of jagged, disease-ridden fangs. Mutations are so common it's unusual to see a rat without bloated tumours, or two heads, or poisonous spines, or drooling acidic green foam. They'd long since learned not to fea humans and there are many parts of the Underhive that belong more to rats than men.

Donna thumbed Seventy-one to life and menaced them with it, the malicious whine of its whirling teeth oscillating as she swung it in a casual figure-of-eight.

"You want some, boys? Want a little rat *fricassee*'? Come on. Donna's waiting and she doesn't have all day.'

The rats stopped when they heard Seventy-one's keening challenge, but hunger or maybe her talking back needled them into advancing again. One skeletal specimen with bony horns on its head hunched its shoulders to jump, but Donna burned it down with her laspistol as it sprang. The distraction gave the other three the opening they wanted, prompting two of them to leap at her face while the third went for her belly.

Her chainblade whipping up in a tight arc, Donna took the head off one rat in a spray of gore and gouged bloody chunks from the other, making it squeal as it was hurled aside. Donna spun with the momentum, twisting desperately to avoid the slavering fangs of the third as its leap carried it past. The wounded one landed near her feet and snapped furiously at her but she kicked it away, levelling her pistol and popping off a shot at the one she'd dodged as it tensed to jump again. The rat skittered away from the las-shot with almost preternatural speed and then started to slowly edge away, chittering and glaring at her menacingly.

Donna stood poised, her heart hammering in her chest. She had passed the test for the present. The other rats began preening disinterestedly or nosed around, pointedly ignoring her. Several of them ambled casually after the wounded one, lapping at the crimson trail it left as it desperately tried to crawl away.

Others trotted over to the rats she had killed and started gnawing on them with shameless cannibalistic gusto.

Donna strode forward through the chamber displaying more confidence than she felt, boot heels scrunching on scattered bones. Two large, square tunnels were visible in the far wall so she headed towards them, trying to cover every angle at once and not ran. As she got closer she could see more rats watching her from the left tunnel and steered to the right.

The rats might be trying to trick her by sending her deeper into their nest but it was unlikely. Having tested her mettle they would be content to follow her now, waiting until she was hurt by something else, sleeping, or off-guard before they came for her again. Or, as the burst of agonised squeaking behind her underlined, they would finish off anything else that crossed her path but limped away from the encounter. Rats were nothing if not supreme opportunists. For now her only hope was to push on and stay ahead of the bounty hunters. They were the real peril.

The tunnel was streaked with crusted patches of old slime and little puddles of moisture winked up at her from the floor. These were good signs that the route connected to the dank turbine chambers. Sure enough, after twenty metres the tunnel ended at a set of corroded, gap-toothed rungs set into the wall. Looking up Donna could see a tangle of rusted metal partially blocking the lip of a shaft perhaps three metres above.

There was an old Underhive adage that said, 'Never trust a rang when you can make the jump,' but then another stated, 'Never make a jump when you can make the climb.' Donna opted for the former this time. She backed up a couple of paces, turned to blow a kiss to the glittering rat-eyes in the shadows behind, sheathed her weapons, and leapt. She caught at the lip of the shaft with both hands but her torn gloves made her hands slip and one skidded off. Flailing around she caught the topmost rung and it tore straight out of the crumbling ferrocrete. Disgusted, she tossed it away and made another grab at the lip. This time her grip held and with some unladylike grants and scrabbling she hauled herself over the edge.

As she did so the pile of rusting scrap creaked ominously. A twisted turbine blade was dislodged and spun lazily down the shaft with a horrendous clattering noise. She gingerly wormed out from under the mass of machinery as it teetered further and settled towards the edge. Donna held her breath.

An instant later the rest of the scrap avalanched down the shaft with a drawn out screeching and crashing fit to wake the dead. Donna got up and ran from the spot before anything turned up to find out what all the noise was about.

Perhaps a hundred metres away, Mad Donna ducked down beside the rusting carcass of another turbine mounting and caught her breath. She was in a broad court studded with the things, and wide archways in all directions gave way onto similar chambers. It had once been an orderly place with the machines set out in precise rows like soldiers on parade. The ranks were now all but obliterated by chunks of masonry that had fallen from the ceiling and the floor was scattered with unidentifiable machine-guts. Stray slivers of light illuminated chambers far into the distance, indicating to her just how deep the giant cracks in the surface of Cliff Wall truly went.

Donna set her back to the direction the tunnel had taken into the shaft below. She hoped that would at least take her vaguely in the direction she needed to go. She started to pick her way through the rows of machines, noting that she had picked up another pair of rats for company. Or was it the same ones from before? It was hard to be sure. She kept her ears sharp for the flutter of carrion bats or ripper jacks as she moved, but all was quiet. Perhaps the noise had frightened them off for the time being.

Hours later it had become apparent to Donna that the biggest threats in the turbine chambers were hunger and thirst. She had come down several dead end rows and had to backtrack so many times that she was afraid of getting hopelessly lost. But when she used a thermal view to check her own trail it confirmed she was moving ever deeper in. Apart from the rats she had seen nothing living in all that time and the chambers seemed to stretch for miles.

A few hours more and Donna was starting to get seriously worried. Even if she could find a way out of there, at this rate she would arrive in Dust Falls to find the bounty hunters already waiting for her. No, she told

herself as she strove to quell her frustration, that was just paranoia. Plodding through the endless ranks was getting to her. There had to be some better way to find a clear path, some clue she had missed before now. She gazed intently around her, willing a solution to appear.

Looking down, she saw a telltale gleam of reflected moisture beneath some scrap. She bent closer. Grey-black sludge was seeping out of a crack in the floor. She followed the crack back several rows until it disappeared under a machine and from there she could see a glistening rivulet of the stuff wending its way between rubble piles. Donna followed it and after only a couple hundred metres came out from between two crashed rows of machines into a relatively open space where the floor sloped up at an abrupt angle.

Mad Donna breathed out a gusty sigh of relief and almost choked when she breathed in again. A bitter, noxious stench was wafting down the slope and warring with her nose and throat, threatening to make her cough or puke, or both. She quickly looped a scarf around her face and trusted its carbon-impregnated weave (well, soot-smeared anyway) to filter out the worst of it. It helped a lot and she scrambled up the slope on her hands and knees without any trouble, scuttling crabwise to avoid several cracks dribbling thick sludge on the way.

The top of the slope opened out onto the wide, ugly vista of the sludge pits. Narrow rockrete piers stretched out in a grid pattern delineating dozens of steep sided cisterns. Some of the cisterns were cracked and dry, others were full to the bubbling brim and slopping obscenely over the sides. Patches of slime, algae and fungus dabbed spots of lurid colour here and there, casting sickly, dim phosphorescence over the scene.

Many of the piers were shattered or at least slick, treacherous and crumbling, and by now Donna expected nothing less. One slip could mean either a bone-breaking fall into a dry cistern, or a slow drowning in a full one. Depending on how corrosive the sludge was, the latter could be infinitely more agonising. Donna looked back down the slope; rat-eyes glittered up at her from between the rusting machines at the bottom. Donna cursed at them dispassionately. She was tired and could use some rest before tackling the pits. But staying up here would mean slowly choking to death, and going down among the machines would mean no rest at all.

With a weary sigh she wandered along the edge to find a row of intact-looking piers she might traverse. Rumour had it that the far end of the sludge pits led to the bottom of the Lesser Trunk and thence to Dust Falls. She turned and stepped out onto the piers. Having come this far she had to believe that rumour was true.

A route avoiding the most cracked piers perforce took her beside or between the fuller cisterns. As she made her way further out she found very few of the cisterns were actually empty except along the edge. Most had at least three metres of foul smelling glop in the bottom, usually bubbling flatulently or swirling in slow, rancid eddies. She steered well away from anywhere the sludge was seeping over and crossed no crack that was bigger than a long step. While looking back to see how far she had come, Donna caught sight of low, lean shapes slinking along the piers after her. At least the rats still had their hopes up.

Donna slogged on through the dizzying stench and concentrated on keeping her feet from straying. Her knees were starting to feel uncomfortably weak when she reached yet another intersection between the piers with four especially full and eye-wateringly foul pits. Donna looked around at her choices and glanced back to check on her rodent companions, noting interestedly that they were nowhere to be seen.

That was her first warning.

She heard a soft plop behind her like a particularly large bubble rising to the surface of the sludge.

That was her second warning.

Something gelatinous writhed around her ankle. She whipped her foot away in revulsion and whirled about. A nest of translucent, questing tendrils was reaching blindly out of the sludge at her. She almost backed right off the pier, her arms flailing and heels skittering on nothing at its edge. Another plop announced the emergence of a similar horror behind her. Crouching to regain her balance, Donna whipped out Seventy-one and slashed around her desperately, shuddering every time the spinning teeth tore through soft, yielding flesh. A severed tendril flopped against her arm, and its very contact raised welts on the skin and instantly made the limb go numb. Donna threw caution to the wind and ran along the pier to escape, and in doing so she missed seeing the third attacker until it was too late.

Tendrils lashed at her face, catching in her hair as she ducked away. She was brutally dragged down to the pier and almost over the edge, her face numbing as tendrils brushed against it. She couldn't see, her sword arm felt like a solid lump of ceramite, and the grip on her long dreadlocks tenaciously dragged her towards the viscid sludge. In desperation she ripped out her plasma pistol, pointed it over the edge and pulled the trigger. There was a heart-stopping fraction of a second delay, and then a tiny part of the sun touched the sludge pits. Raw sludge flashed into geysers of superheated steam where it struck and flames raced away over the surface. In seconds the flames had reached the limits of the cistern and lapped hungrily at its edges. Whatever had a hold of Donna let go and she crawled away along the pier with her sight dimming from the potent toxins in her face and arm.

She could sense light and heat from the burning cistern. She could also feel it becoming more intense as the fire spread. Thick, choking smoke billowed around her, filling her lungs until it felt like they were coated with black soot. She crawled on, dragging her paralysed arm with Seventy-One dangling uselessly from it. For a terrifying eternity her world shrank to encompass only the rough surface of the pier and her inching painfully along it. About a couple of millennia later she felt herself tumbling over an incline. By that time all Donna could do was flail feebly as she rolled over. She hit bottom and blacked out.

THE RATS, THEIR patience rewarded at last, trotted down to the supine form at the bottom of the slope. Jaws twitched and drooled at the prospect of sinking fangs into firm white flesh. Donna lay paralysed and could do nothing as the pack closed in around her. They were led by a scorched and blackened skeletal horror with bony horns on its head. With malicious deliberation, they started gnawing on her arm and face.

Rats! Donna's first conscious thought brought her sharply awake. She started up violendy and fell back down coughing and retching. A burning sensation like pins and needles times a million coursed through her arm and face. She cursed and slapped at them to get the circulation going while she glared around for her tormentors. Outside of her fever-dream there were no rats to be seen, just a bare incline behind her that led up to the

sludge pits. She must have crawled to the edge and rolled down before losing consciousness.

Donna had no way to know how long she had been out but the air was acrid with smoke and she could make out wavering patches of orange illumination smearing the clouds at the top of the slope. That indicated some of the pits were still burning, presumably not too much time had passed. She picked herself up more cautiously this time and bent slowly to scoop up Seventy-one and her plasma pistol from where they had fallen. The Pig was down to a quarter change; she must have pulled back on the trigger way too hard back there. She was lucky it hadn't overheated and taken her hand off.

Whatever horror was in the sludge had either burned on the surface or had been driven to the bottom.

Donna would wager good credit on the fact it couldn't come after her or she would already be dead. She limped slowly away from the pits, her arm and face burning, every part of her body feeling scraped and bruised. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest, but instead she kept going and made a mental note to shoot the next rat she saw for all the trouble the little frikkers were causing.

There had been no revenge killings on her part by the time she reached the back wall. The air was a little cleaner here, but not much as the fires were still burning. Blinking through the smoky haze, Donna felt a moment of heart-crashing defeat as she saw the wall was unbroken along its entire length. There was no way through. The stories were wrong and she was as good as dead. She shook her head to get a grip on the gibbering panic that was rising inside her and looked again, paying more attention to the smoke. It was definitely swirling away from the wall in some places. The fires were drawing air into the pits from an adjacent space, and if air could move there was presumably a way through.

She found an old service crawlway after a dozen steps but it was mostly blocked off by debris so she kept looking. She found an identical crawl space ten steps further along and hauled herself into it. It was a tight squeeze, making her wonder just how big maintenance workers had been back then. Donna didn't really care as the cleaner air was sweet and, most important of all, a way out of the thrice-damned sludge pits.

DONNA DROPPED OUT of the crawlway and into the generatoria dome. Her legs were shaking with exhaustion but she was so far from being in a safe place to rest it wasn't even funny. After the pits, the generatoria dome seemed majestic and cathedral-like. Building-sized reactor stacks reached upward before splitting into branched conduits like so many giant candelabra, their sweeping ironwork arches lit by beams of sodium-yellow light as they ran off out of sight hundreds of metres above. Dark specks floated through the saffron shafts like so many dust motes, probably flocks of carrion bats out looking for a meal. At least some of the generators were still working; Donna could feel vibration through the floor and see the occasional jewel-like blinking among the branches. It was frustrating to be in the presence of so much coursing energy and be unable to use it, but Donna stuck to the dome wall for good reason.

In ages past there had been a time of crisis above as desperate power shortages plagued the ever-growing Hive City. Desperate decisions had been made and some heroic team of engineers had descended to the old generatoria dome to reactivate as many generators as possible. It was a Herculean effort marred by frequent accidents and Underhiver scav-raids making off with equipment, tools and materials at any opportunity. At the end of it all, the techs had left an enduring gesture to their hosts by rigging the casings of the reactors (and just about anything else nearby) so that they ran with live power. Donna could see that each stack was surrounded by its own drift of burned scraps and blackened bones left by over-ambitious power tappers, incautious vermin and ignorant green hivers.

She tried to stay off any areas of metal, whether it be grill-like floor plates, protruding supports or even just where cracked rockrete exposed its reinforcing internal mesh of rods. When there was metal unavoidably in her path she threw bits of scrap at it to see if they raised a spark. She was paying such close attention to her feet that she didn't even notice the little holestead in the dome wall until she was almost parallel with it.

A narrow door had been crammed into a crack in the wall; a crude thing of scavenged plates welded together. The rubble floor in front of it was beaten flat and devoid of cover for several metres, and there were a couple of slime-trenches close to the entry. She was cautious, despite her bone-weariness, since holesteaders were an ornery bunch. They had to be to try and make a living beyond the comparative safety of the settlements. As

such they were as likely to shoot at strangers as welcome them, which was not surprising given most gangers viewed any holestead as a potential source of income in exchange for their dubious brand of 'protection'.

Donna warily approached the door. She drew her laspistol but held it loosely at her side - it was good manners and good sense to show that you were armed and prepared to shoot in the Underhive, if only to show that at least you weren't a liability. Close up she could see the door was hanging slightly ajar and dark handprints marked the jamb. Not a good sign. She raised her pistol and drew Seventy-one with her other hand (still tingling, dammit!), hooking the door fully open with it.

A short entryway led straight into the living area. The holesteaders had widened this part of the crack and dug out sleeping niches but it was still barely more than a corridor. Plastic sheeting hung down separating the living area from another half-dug chamber at the back. There was blood everywhere. There were drag-stains on the floor, handprints on the wall, and arterial spray patterns looped chaotically about the room. Furniture and belongings had been scattered around in some kind of straggle: broken plates, a shattered pict, a child's rag doll that made Donna shudder internally for its owner. Judging by the sleeping niches at least four people had lived here, but there was no sign of any of them.

Some horrible tragedy had occurred at this holestead, and it was all the more mysterious as the door could only be opened from the inside and hadn't been forced as Donna had first assumed. On the bright side their fuel rod was still burning; the wan yellow lights glimmered as she moved through the hole, and there was a humming power outlet near the door. Without hesitation she snapped out the Pig's power pack and slotted it into the outlet. Grisly as the place was, it was the closest to safety Donna had seen in a while. She closed the door and locked it before selecting a sleeping niche and dropping into fitful slumber, her pistol at the ready and internal alarms set on a hair trigger.

DONNA WAS HOURS from the holestead and almost out of the generatoria dome when she noticed she was being followed. She was watching yet another flock of carrion bats circling over one of the stacks, indicating that they were waiting for something to die. She suddenly

sensed movement on the ground. A small group - three of four figures - moved together and slowly followed the route she had taken. Even at this distance she could tell they were not gang fighters; they shuffled along too hesitantly and bunched up all the time.

The exit from the generatoria dome was up a series of switchback ramps of compacted rabble. The group trailing her would have her in a tight spot on the ramps. There was no cover and nowhere to go except up or down. Donna decided to hide and get a look at whoever they were from closer up. and then she would decide whether to just let them pass or deal with them.

She hunched behind a tumble of fallen rockrete and waited... And waited. An interminable time later she heard feet scrunching through the dirt, drawing gradually closer. Donna's patience was already shot, and impulsively she decided to confront them and have done with it. She bounded out behind them, sword and pistol at the ready, and hissed, 'Freeze or you're dead.'

The words had barely left her lips before she realised she had made a mistake. They were already dead.

Two men, a woman, and a little girl stood raggedly before her. Donna immediately reckoned that they were the missing holesteaders. Horrible wounds marked all of them: torn throats, hanging intestines, flapping skin, glistening bone, missing eyes. They were plague zombies.

Even in the Spire Donna had heard stories of the fearful neuron plague that periodically swept the hives of Necromunda with a liberal dose of anarchy and chaos. It destroyed the victim's higher mental functions while leaving intact, or even intensifying, activity in the hindbrain. The result was a creature always hungry for flesh and incapable of feeling pain.

Every time the afflicted pulled down another victim they infected it and added a new member to their ranks. At their peak the zombie plagues touched even the Spire, choking the promenades and boulevards with heaving crowds of restless, ravening dead. Once in the Underhive, Donna had learned that the plague had never really gone away at all, it just lay dormant in the darkness below and contented itself with taking odd victims here and there until it rose again in full force.

Donna felt sick with fear. She had slept in the plague-struck holestead so she might be infected already. Failing that, the zombies could inflict it with so much as a scratch of their ragged, filth-encrusted claws. She

caught sight of the little girl's face, miraculously intact but with slack, drooling lips and cloudy eyes. Something snapped inside Donna's mind, an old familiar break that came when some part of her own hindbrain said 'no more'. She saw red and the fight that followed became a stop-motion flick book of carnage from her perspective.

Two shots as she charged, one body down with limbs flailing. A backhand cut from Seventy-one sliced through the top of a skull like a knife through an egg. Another cut lopped off a reaching claw. A point-blank las-shot fired into an empty eye socket. A zombie tripped on its own entrails. A decapitation. Hacking, hacking, hacking at the dead little girl until she finally stopped writhing.

Mad Donna came to herself sitting, weeping, with her weapons dangling in her hands. The dismembered bodies of the holesteaders lay nearby in a pathetic heap. They had barely even had a chance to move from the spot where she had confronted them. Donna drew a shaky hand over her face to wipe away hot tears and stood abruptly. She would check herself for wounds later; right now she had to get out of this place. The least she could do was return the holesteaders the favour of her use of their power outlet and sleeping niche. Sheathing her other weapons and pulling out the Pig, she lavished the power she had looted from them on their funeral pyre.

SHE REMEMBERED HER mother best of all: breathtakingly beautiful despite two centuries of anti-agathics and restorative surgery, willowy and graceful despite bearing over two-dozen noble offspring of House Ulanti. She had been a proud and distant goddess, seen only occasionally by D'onne and her sisters when they were young, but beloved by all. Each of them aspired to have her stunning looks and queenly presence when they grew up. They all vied for her attention with the pictures, songs, acrobatics, dancing and recitals they worked feverishly to perfect as her visiting day came closer. As the youngest and the prettiest, D'onne had always known that her mother liked her the best.

She remembered her and her eleven sisters having their portrait painted by a famed artist with a strange, offworld accent - Bruphoros? Burfisl She couldn't recall the name now, and had been too young to pronounce it

properly then. They had spent interminable hours sitting primly in elegant chairs in the great gallery, chafing in their formal gowns while the artist moved them fractionally back and forth and fussed endlessly over ambient light or composition. It was an especially good memory because it was the last time she remembered all of her sisters being together at the same time.

She had complained precociously to the artist that spending hours painting was stupid if you could take a pict in an instant. Instead of being angry, he had stopped fussing for a while to explain to her that the true value of something was in direct proportion to the effort put into it. A pict might have sufficed for any normal hiver, but the Noble House of Ulanti deserved better than that. Indeed, it deserved only the best even if it took a little longer. The artist had made her feel very special and from then on she had made an effort not to fidget and to give him her prettiest smile.

Then there was the time an Ulanti hunt had returned in triumph from Hive Bottom. At the time, the Underhive was a home to the worst bogeymen and monsters for D'onne. Its name was invoked only in spooky stories and dreadful admonishments from harried nursemaids. The very idea that someone would descend from the Spire to fight the hideous mutants and outlaws below seemed fantastic to her. The hunters had come up from The Wall in procession, showered with blossoms and heralded by clarions every step of the way. D'onne had squeezed herself to the front of the crowd of well-wishers that met them on the steps of the grand manse to get a good look at the conquering heroes.

There were three men and a woman, all lesser cousins but now lionised by the household for their bravery in the face of the semi-mythical perils of Underhive. Their offworld hunting rigs were darkly magnificent suits of baroque armour, each one entirely different to the others. The hulking silvered form of an Orrus-rig contrasted completely with the spindly obsidian insect-limbs of a Malcadon. Another wore a Yeld-rig with its glittering bladed wings proudly swept back like a cloak of knives.

But the one that had caught her attention the most had been the woman in Jakara armour with her mirror shield and molecular blade. She was small and lithe, stepping lightly with the easy grace of a predatory cat. She had caught little D'onne's wide-eyed gaze as she mounted the steps and winked at her, and it seemed as if she was saying, 'See, noble daughters

can be just as strong as noble sons! They had played spyrers and scavvies for weeks after the hunt returned, and D'onne had always held out to be the Jakara.

Her most favourite place in the Spire had always been the arboretum. It was a marvel of a much earlier time, beyond the skill of anyone to recreate in this day and age. The first time she had been taken there it felt like she was stepping into another world. All her life had been spent among the sterile, high-arched halls of the Ulanti district where living things were confined in beds and borders, planters and terrace gardens. Many of the plants she had seen were cunning artifices of metal spun to take their form, some so finely made that they grew, blossomed brazen flowers, and then withered away again to rust.

The arboretum was different. Everything there was organic and the very air itself seemed vibrant because of it. There were towering trees and meadows of long grass, and bushes and thickets of heady-scented blossoms with colourful insects and birds fluttering between them. Semi-wild animals had grazed shyly among the shadowed trunks, and bright-eyed simians leapt joyously between the overhanging boughs.

Better than that, the arboretum formed a great torus over multiple levels of the Inner Spire. By some great cunning artifice, each quadrant of the torus was at a different point of growth. In one quadrant the trees had bare, leafless branches, and the ground was covered in white powder like ash, but made up (so she was told) of frozen water vapour. In another, the growth was fresh and green with new shoots unfolding and baby animals everywhere. In the next all was ripened and fulsome, lazily dreaming beneath warm sunlight from the skylights above. In the last the leaves were withering in a fantastic display of reds, oranges and browns, the fallen ones forming a scrunching carpet everywhere. This changing landscape slowly rotated through the year; each part of the arboretum undergoing the cycle of death and rebirth.

Her tutors had told her that this incredible ecosystem was the way of it on many worlds. There were often seasons which changed the environment completely through the year. Not so in the great hives of Mankind, they had said. Here man had brought nature to heel entirely and was troubled by the seasons not at all. It seemed a great shame to her at the time, and as she was to find out later, it was not entirely true.

DUST FALLS

IN AGES PAST a trickle of waste seeped down from Hive City into an abandoned dome. In time the trickle grew to become a torrent and collapsed the roof, burying the floor below in sediment. Eventually, further erosion of the dome's floor caused it to collapse as well, and the accumulated debris plunged into another, older dome beneath.

Year after year the flow of effluent grew, carrying detritus further down and wearing away a whole series of domes. At its height there were roaring falls of multi-hued effluent that disappeared down a gaping chasm into the deepest levels of the hive.

By Donna's day the flow had dried up but for a thin trickle of dust cascading from above. In its place, there was the shaft itself, plunging through the Underhive to the darkness of the Hive Bottom. This was the Abyss; a mile-deep hole that pierces dome after dome in the path of the old effluent falls.

Perched on the edge of the Abyss was Dust Falls, a large settlement from which ambitious gangs took the steep path down into the depths of the hive. The trail led to the Hive Bottom itself, and to the lake of pollutants and chemical slime at its base. And at the bottom, Down Town, the furthest reach of what could be called civilization. The toxic crush zones of the Abyss held great riches for those strong and brave enough to win them: spider mares, stinger mould, veins of precious alloy, archeotech, spook, the rare pelts of elusive mutant breeds. They held death too -death in abundance.

Donna watched Dust Falls for a long time before even thinking about making her move. She wanted to know which gangs were in town, whether any guilder caravans were passing through, whether any Redemptionists were haranguing the locals; anything that might make a difference to her plans. She had hoisted herself into the crumbling upper floors of a half-

ruined hab that slouched at the edge of the dome. She had felt no onset of fever from the plague, nor found any injuries caused in the fight with the plague zombies. Still, every twinge or ache seemed like a death spasm when viewed through the lens of a potential onset of plague.

She had a pretty good view of Dust Falls half a kilometre away with the yawning pit of the Abyss seemingly poised to swallow it beyond. Buildings tumbled by the floods centuries ago dotted the edge of the dome, getting lower and finally petering out to rounded-off heaps around the Abyss. The settlement was surrounded by a high stockade with narrow, twisting streets between shanty buildings visible inside. There was only one building that stood out among the others: a three-storey, worn-looking oblong of plasteel that stood at the centre. That was Donna's target.

Everything seemed quiet enough. If anything, it was too quiet. There was hardly anyone on the streets but many up on the gates and stamping along the stockades in between. Lots of lights too, everything from fuel-drum fires to halogen floods. Donna waited and watched, and eventually she saw what she was looking for; a flicker of movement in the rubble beyond the light. Donna didn't try to look for the source, she just watched the area and waited for her eye to pick up movement again. There, two more shapes moving. They looked like tumbling scraps of cloth but the distance was deceptive. Donna upped the magnification in her bionic eye a notch and the blurs sprang into sharp focus.

Donna's full lip curled unconsciously. scavvies - the very dregs of humanity. No, scratch that; scavvies were so devolved and twisted that they didn't even qualify as human any more. Their sallow flesh and ugly appearance showed all too clearly despite the filfh-encrusted rags swathed around them. The ones she could see were armed with a crude assortment of flintlocks, hooks and rusty axes. Now that she was looking in the right area, Donna could see at least a dozen of them crawling like grey lice towards one of the settlement's gates. She watched events unfold with interest.

They were spotted maybe fifty metres out, las-shots suddenly spurting around them like bright rain. Some of the scavvies raised their long muskets and started firing back, but most jumped up and ran (or limped, or hobbled in many cases) towards the gate. Donna was taken aback to see

there were more than twenty rushing to attack, they popped up so suddenly it seemed like a magician's trick.

She saw them windmilling their arms and it took her a second to realise they were throwing bombs at the gate. A couple exploded but most burst into clouds of noxious-looking vapour. Several scavvies were down and writhing by this time, or deathly still, but the gate defenders were driven back by the vapour and their firing slackened appreciably.

The fiery stab of autoguns among the scattered flintlock volleys momentarily distracted Donna. When she focused back on the gate, the scavvies were smashing at it with hammers and axes. A heavy stub gun fired from the parapet off to one side of the gate, its angry stutter ripping a bloody tear through the packed mass. It was followed by the vicious crump of a frag grenade going off. Rags and bits of scav flew in all directions. The survivors broke away before the smoke cleared. Las-rounds plugged a few more scavvies as they limped for cover, leaving perhaps a dozen torn bodies strewn around the gate in mute testimony to the ferocity of the brief skirmish.

Checking carefully around the other gates and parts of the stockade, Donna spotted at least a dozen more scavvy bodies alone or in clusters. For scavvies that showed almost unthinkable determination, or else they were present in disturbingly large numbers. Scav-vies ambushed, raided holesteads, set toll-blocks or, if they felt especially brave and numerous, camped outside a settlement and demanded a 'tax' of anything going in and out until they were driven off or left of their own accord. There was a standing bounty on scavvies, although it was so paltry only the most hard luck cases went out looking for them. If scavvies had got it into their heads to start rushing a well-armed settlement like Dust Falls, something was seriously awry.

The situation posed a completely different set of problems to those Donna had anticipated. It was going to be ten times harder to get past the stockade while it was so heavily manned, so she decided that slipping through the streets without being recognised would be a lot easier. Also, bright lights were all well and good, but men with their eyes adjusted to watching lit areas often missed what was in the shadows. The scavvies were a double-edged sword: they might catch her outside the settlement,

then cook and eat her, or they might provide the ideal distraction for getting inside.

Donna picked out a route to a hollow in the rubble midway between two of the gates and about sixty metres from the stockade on a section covered by floodlights. Fixing it in her mind's eye, she slid down from her eerie and set off quickly through the ruins feeling unaccountably optimistic. As the cover got lower she had to crouch and then slither on her belly through gravel and rounded-off pebbles that lay thick on the floor of the dome. She kept a sharp lookout for scavvies, using her nose as well as her eyes and ears. The rank stench of scavvies was unmistakeable, and there was a stiff breeze swirling up from the Abyss.

After crawling for a while she came across a slight depression scooped out just deep enough so that a prone body inside it would be invisible from the stockade. The shallow trench wound away through the rabble in the direction of the settlement. She wriggled along the little rat run and found it branched and then branched again. She was grateful for the cover from the stockade but the thought of crawling into some pack of scavvies lying in wait made her nape hairs rise. She reckoned it was still five or six metres to the hollow when she almost tumbled into it, kicking free a scatter of gravel as she swung herself precipitously over its lip and into shelter. She quickly discovered she was not alone.

A rag-wrapped form was turning towards her, close enough to touch and possessed of a stench that made Donna's eye water. She caught sight of its lumpen face, one eye closed by sprouting tumours, the other comically bulging in surprise as it saw she wasn't a fellow scavvy. Its slack-lipped mouth dropped open to show black, rotted teeth as it drew breath to yell for help.

Donna rammed her fist into the wet orifice, muffling its cry with some extra broken teeth and slamming its head against the rubble for good measure. It made a grab for a knife but she pinned its arms with her knees before smashing it in the head with a handy rock. The scrawny form bucked violently and almost threw her off. An adrenalin surge made her muscles bunch furiously as she silently smashed the rock into its head again and again. It cracked open with a wet splotching sound and the scavvy spasmed feebly once more before lying still.

Donna looked up and listened intently, trying to determine if the struggle had been overheard. Gravel scraped nearby - something was crawling closer! She rolled the hot, foetid corpse of the scavvy on top of her, pulling its rags over the crashed head that was now leaking a slow ooze of blood and brains across her cheek and shoulder. She saw the dim blur of a face poking over the edge of the hollow.

'Shh't K'pidahn stooped,' a hoarse voice whispered. 'U gedersal' kilt.'

The voice stopped in mid-whine and Donna heard it snuffle a couple of times - the sound of mucus rattling in its nostrils. 'Thass blut,' it muttered incredulously. She was equally amazed it could smell anything over the foul stench, but apparently it could. She clutched for a throwing blade at her waist but the dead weight of the corpse impeded her. The scavvy must have seen movement because it raised itself up at the lip for a better look and was momentarily silhouetted by the floodlights on the stockade. It was a stockier creature than the last one and it had a crude but functional-looking autopistol clutched in its fist.

Donna froze and watched in fascination as a bright little bead of red light suddenly appeared on the scav-vie's head. The red bead wobbled there for a moment steadied. There was a flash and the head exploded sideways in a crimson spray. A split-second later the hiss-crack sound of a long las-shot came from the direction of the stockade. The overly inquisitive mutant throwback dropped as if it had been pole-axed. Donna muttered a little prayer of thanks to her unknown and unknowing guardian. She carefully moved as far as possible down the hollow from the two stinking carcasses and settled to wait, keeping her head down out of respect for the unseen sharpshooter.

DONNA CAME ALERT to the sound of the first shot. How long had it been? An hour maybe? She had rested and now listened to the rattles and scrapes of the scavvies creeping towards the gates again. It sounded like they were mostly massing to her right, between her and the Abyss. Evidently the sight of a sniper-shot body lying in the open had persuaded the others to try different routes. At any rate she was undisturbed in her hiding place. Hoarse shouts and more shots sounded out but she waited

until she heard the returning hiss-crack of las-fire before poking her head up.

Same story, different angle. A hoard of the stupider, lesser-armed scavvies charged at the gate to draw fire while the smarter ones hung back and sniped. Now Donna had to work fast. She turned her attention to the floodlights nearest her on the stockade and shot out a couple rounds before ducking back down. She crawled along a little from the spot where she'd fired and then scrambled over the lip into a half crouch. All attention was on the gate and shots buzzed angrily back and forth punctuated by screams. Her little contribution had gone unnoticed. Donna was up and mnning towards the patch of darkness she'd created even as the first grenades exploding by the gate indicated the fight was getting serious.

Now it was all down to luck. Luck that some gun-scum on the stockade didn't send a barrage of shots her way. Luck that she didn't hit some booby trap or deadfall. Luck that the scavvies didn't spot her and shoot her in the back.

But she had loaded the dice. Darkness and chaos were on her side. Even if anyone saw her she was just one running figure; a waste of ammo when there was a firefight going on. Her bionic's thermal vision didn't pick out any tripwires or pressure plates, but then she saw a trench at the base of the stockade at the last second. Wire weed confined inside it thrashed ineffectually as she leapt across. She caught a support girder and flipped an effortless somersault onto the rampart above. She didn't register anyone close by but she didn't stop to look. Mad Donna's boot heels had barely rang on the grille of the walkway before she darted off into Dust Falls.

DUST FALLS WAS usually one the liveliest settlements in the Underhive, full of the very best readying themselves for a trip into the Abyss and survivors who have come back to celebrate their success and new-found wealth. Not many came back at all, of course, but that made the plaudits all the louder for those who did -everyone loved a winner.

Now the streets were quiet. Throughout the jigsaw puzzle of sheet-built huts and plastic shelters that made up Dust Falls, doorways were shuttered and window meshes were down. Stray chinks of light showed here and there but otherwise the only illumination was from the stockade, the lurid

lanterns of a couple of slop shops and the cold, bright floods surrounding the Dust Falls Administratia. Calling it a civic office was a bit grandiose; in truth it was an old bulk-shipping container that had been swept down from frik-knows-where during the floods. But, with some floors welded into it, and some doors and windows cut in the sides with a generator installed, it was a veritable mansion by Underhive standards. It served as city hall, courthouse, jail, armoury, safe storage and citadel for all that passed as authority at the top of the Abyss.

Normally the area around the old container would be thick with buyers, beggars, traders, hawkers and gawkers, but the scavvy problem had pushed them all indoors. There were a couple of bored-looking guards on a gantry around the second storey and that was it. Donna waited until they had paced out of sight before gliding over to a little-used hatchway in one corner. The hatch was one of the originals and gave access to an internal crawlspace intended for checking cargo distribution levels inside the container. A single-minded machine spirit still faithfully kept the hatch sealed, the one purpose in its long half-life was to deny access to anyone who didn't input the right clearance code.

What few in the Underhive would appreciate was that once, before its long plunge below, the container had belonged to House Orlock. House Orlock was famed for many things in Hive Primus; primarily it was known as the House of Iron whose miners supplied much of the other Houses' ferrous metal requirements. Only slightly less well known was their bold and aggressive seizure of the fantastically lucrative Ulanti contract from House Delaque, an action which started a bitter vendetta between the two houses that raged on to this day.

Donna removed her glove and pressed her thumb against the reader. Scanning for a geneprint, the machine spirit correctly matched it against one of the many potential overrides to its encryption protocols. It was an Ulanti privilege. An icon flashed green and the hatch obligingly popped open. If it had been given a voice, the machine spirit would have simpered. With a cynical chuckle on her full lips, Donna slipped inside.

Inside, the container's remodelling had turned the crawlspace into a narrow stair running up all three levels. The internal volume of the container was blocked off with walls, floors and ceilings of a variety of

materials. Many areas were simple cages to cut down on their weight, others were more substantial office-like blocks of flak-board and cement.

As she crept up the stairway, Donna could see shadows moving and caught snatches of conversations that indicated a number of people were around and involved in eating, sleeping, tending the injured or repairing weapons. She stopped bothering to sneak; it was only going to make her stand out more. She walked blithely into the second storey entry of an ugly looking block with bars on the windows, acting as if she had every right to be there.

Once inside she travelled down a short corridor with two doors off it before coming to a stairwell at the end. She tried the door on the left and found it open. Slipping inside, she found a darkened office with worn furniture covered in teetering piles of parchment. A brass-framed baseline cogitator burbled quietly in one corner, its bone keys ticking out a slow rhythm. Hearing footsteps coming up the stairs and voices in the corridor, Donna stepped smartly behind the door as they stopped outside.

'Yes, and the fact remains that there's nothing that can be done while we're besieged, warrant or not. She's not going to show up here anyway.' This in a tired-sounding baritone.

'You can at least post warrant fliers, Hanno. As chief watchman I'd have thought that was your job.' a sneering whisper replied.

The first voice turned cold. 'I'll not dance to your tune, Bak. I've got bigger fish to fry as you well know. If you want some help, go down to the slop shops. There's plenty enough gun-scum there too precious of their hides to risk them on the rampart. Go form a purge if you want. You can start right outside the gate.'

'Shallej will hear of this!'

'Well, tell him he can come right down and we'll discuss it man to man if you like. No? Then you better get going. I'd offer you a drink but I don't really like you, so get lost.'

Footsteps retreated, the door opened and a man came in, dropping a heavy-framed pump shotgun on the desk. He rubbed a hand over close-shaved grey hair and massaged his thickly muscled neck before reaching for a bottle on the desk. The hand had a blocky, black Aquila tattoo on the back of it, and a number.

'Same old sins, Hanno? I'm disappointed in you,' Donna said in her most seductive tones.

Hanno dropped the bottle and half-whirled around, grabbed for the bottle in mid-air, caught it, juggled it and finally caught it again after slopping some. He glared at her.

'Damn it, harlot, you almost cost me the last liquor this side of Slag Town.'

Mad Donna laughed out loud for the first time in days. 'I need your help, and it sounds like Kell has rather nicely just filled you in on the details of why.'

His hand was on the butt of his well-oiled bolt pistol. 'You've got some nerve coming here,' Hanno sounded angry. 'It's my sworn duty to protect Dust Falls from people like you and Bak: outlaws, bounty hunters and anyone else who thinks they can shoot the place up or settle a score here and breach the peace. Well, not on my watch.'

A bolt pistol was great for a firefight but was a liability in a fast draw where its heavy magazine made it difficult to pull cleanly in a hurry. Really slick operators learned to overcome this by hip firing -simply angling the pistol in its holster to let off a first round before drawing the gun. You could spot practitioners by the way they strapped their gun high on the hip with an open-toed holster. Well, practitioners and posers anyway. Hanno strapped his bolt pistol high on the hip, and he wasn't a poser.

'Hanno, if you point that hand cannon at me, I'll have to take it off you. You know you wouldn't like that,' Donna shifted slightly and there was an almost palpable aura of menace in the movement.

Hanno froze and then relaxed his grip slightly. 'I can't have you running around in Dust Falls right now,' he said, his voice calming to stern disapproval. 'Not now.'

'Yes, I met the new neighbours on the way in. I can't say I like them much.'

'If you were sneaking around on your own out there you're lucky to be alive. So far we've had to listen to them skinning and cooking four men who thought they were savvy enough to sneak out,' Hanno shook his head and took a pull at the amasec. 'Some people are born stupid and they die stupid.'

'I can look after myself.'

Hanno put the bottle down, realising it gave away the fact that his hands were shaking. He asked her bluntly, 'What will it take to get you out of here? You know that by rights I have to report your presence to the bounty hunters, unless you're prepared to kill me to keep quiet.'

'Don't think I haven't considered it, especially 'cause I heard you talking to Kell Bak. When the hell did that bastard show up anyway? I nearly broke a nail myself getting here this fast.'

'Just over two shifts ago he came in with a couple of ratskin scouts. The word is they set out from Glory Hole with two pack slaves as well, but they didn't make it through. Knowing Kell he probably sold them to the scavvies.'

'They didn't try to stop him getting in?'

'They let any extra warm bodies in - more mouths to feed, see. They just don't let anybody out.' He looked at Donna, seeing her as if for the first time. Throne, you're a mess. You look like you've been dipped in the sump. Is that blood?'

'Some of it, not mine. And brains, also not mine. And a lot of stings too, which are mine and I wish they weren't.' She tilted her head coquettishly 'Forgive me for not bathing acceptably before presenting myself, noblesir Hanno, but I was breathless to be by your side.'

Hanno pulled a sour face and was about to retort but he refused to be baited. 'Why are you here, Donna?'

'I need to take a quick peek at your guilder manifests.'

Incredulity cracked Hanno's shaky self-control like breaking glass. 'I knew it. Like there isn't enough trouble here, you want me to make more by letting you assault the guilders.'

'Look Hanno, all I know is that a guilder contacted me in Glory Hole and arranged a meet. When I got there I found Kell and Shallej waiting to jump me.' A slight distortion of the truth, but it would have to do. 'I hightailed it over here as fast as I could because, after Two Tunnels, this is the best place in the Underhive for checking up on guilders.'

Two Tunnels was a sprawling settlement at the bottom of the most well-trodden paths down from Hive City. At some point the wares of most guilders passed through there on their way up or down. Dust Falls occupied a similar position in relation to the Abyss; any guilder caravans

moving up or down it came through there. Sump Lake and its surrounding strata of compacted scrap held some of the richest prizes to be found in the Hive Bottom, so much so that even though it remained almost completely uncharted and extremely dangerous (even by Underhive standards), no guilder could stay away from it for long.

'You're an outlaw D'onne. You chose to walk that path. Bounty hunters will come after you wherever you go.' Hanno was consciously trying to reassert his control of the situation. He obviously didn't like this talk of guilders one bit.

'Frik you, Hanno. That pompous crap isn't true and you know it. You're just hiding behind a watchman's badge. Even when daddy dearest had the whole of the Underhive posted with my name and face the guilders stayed out of it. They never get involved in family feuds. It's like a rule to them.'

Hanno was looking stubbornly determined. He laid his hand back on the butt of his pistol. 'No dice, Donna. I'm taking you in this time. Your personal vendettas will just have to wait.'

THE OUTER GATE rolled back smoothly, and warm, foetid air washed in. D'onne almost fainted. It was like the worst body odour she had ever smelled multiplied by a million, but also suffused with streaks of sulphur, machine oil, faeces, smoke, plus a hundred other obnoxious taints.

She remembered the filter plugs Lars had given her and suffered the indignity of shoving the soft little cylinders into her nostrils. The discomfort of wearing them was definitely worth it. At least D'onne now felt she could breathe in without gagging, as long as she kept her mouth closed.

Outside the gate it was hazy, and a dull mist crawled over an iron walkway leading to a road lit by the yellow glow of overhead lamps. It was hard to focus her eyes with the flashes of memory that kept replaying in her mind: the sprawled bodies, the Count...

She swayed and almost fell. A figure stepped out onto the walkway, the sinister black silhouette seeming to tower above D'onne.

'Nobledam, are you all right?' A voice crackled from a vox-speaker mounted in the figure's armoured chest. Its helmeted head turned suspiciously from side to side as if looking for an assailant.

'No, I-I am perfectly well,' she hazarded a guess, 'enforcer! Opening her mouth to speak allowed the foul

vapours to rush in once more and she stifled a cough at the noxious taste.

'You have no entourage, nobledam' The flat effect of the vox rendered the speaker emotionless, but to D'onne's etiquette-trained ears, the cadence of the words relayed a level of surprise verging on incredulity.

She shook her head. 'Kindly direct me to House Escher,' she rushed out in one breath before clamping her mouth shut again.

The figure stopped and regarded her for a moment, as if truly seeing her for the first time.

'House Escher.'

She nodded imperiously in response, determined not to let any more of the stench into her mouth.

'Please wait one moment!

The figure stepped back out of view and she heard a clipped snarl of comm-link vox chatter go back and forth. The seeds of doubt in D'onne's guts started to take root in earnest. She was never going to get away with this. Imagine that she could just walk out of the Spire and no one would stop her! After what she had done every enforcer in Hive Primus was probably looking for her by now.

The enforcer reappeared carrying quite the biggest gun D'onne had ever seen. Her shoulders slumped in defeat as she looked at the man blocking her way to freedom. He was alert, armed, and just about fully armoured head to foot with smooth black plates of ceramite, including a full helmet. D'onne fancied she could just about see his chin and make out where his eyes should be beneath the tinted visor. The pistol tucked into the small of her back felt icy cold against her flesh.

The enforcer turned his back to D'onne and started clumping along the walkway.

'This way, nobledam. I have permission to accompany you as far as House Escher territory.'

D'onne blinked as the mists tried to swallow up the figure of the enforcer and then after a moment's indecision she hurried after him. For whatever reason the enforcers weren't all over Hive Primus looking for her. Obviously daddy dearest was hushing things up. Not too surprising

given that the enforcers amounted to being Lord Helmawr's official policing force and private army within the hive.

The planetary governor was known as a keen proponent of humbling noble houses on any possible pretext; 'cleaning house' as he had famously described it. It stemmed from an ancient political creed that the noble houses showed weakness by failing to keep order among themselves. The creed stated that the most powerful faction - that of Lord Helmawr - could and should take the opportunity to demonstrate dominance over the other bloodlines while coincidentally ensuring the matter was not resolved to anyone's lasting satisfaction.

How scandalous. It was a classic lever for keeping the houses off-balance, squabbling among themselves and seeking favour from the governor like lap dogs. That was something that Patriarch Sylvanus of House Ulanti would find unbearable. Centuries of his life's work could be swept away within a decade by one wayward child. His child, that was. D'onne Ulanti.

She reached the roadway thinking of the enforcer as protection instead of a threat. Enforcer armour was sculpted to make its wearer look threatening and impersonal, from the wide shoulder plates to the heavy boots. But as D'onne stood looking at the man, she also realised that it was subtly designed to show there was a man within it. The lower face was visible and, although he had heavy gauntlets threaded in his weapon belt, the enforcer's hands were bare and stark against the black metal of the gun. He had a tattoo on the back of his hand that showed an abstract, triangular eagle gripping a number in its talons.

The enforcer seemed to catch her looking and either assumed, or pretended to assume, that she was looking at the gun.

'It's a new model eighty-nine shot cannon, nobledam,' the vox crackled flatly. 'Personally, I hold best with the old seventy-fives. They were fine pieces in their day!

There was a pause as if the enforcer was thinking that he had forgotten himself and had spoken out of turn.

'Sadly necessary around swing shift, nobledam,' he continued gruffly. 'The proles are apt to get a little antsy as they come off the lines. I've summoned a felucca for you. It should he along presently!'

With that he obviously decided to shut the hell up. D'onne considered for a moment. He must be burning with curiosity as to why a noble woman, a mere girl really, would be going into Hive City alone. Such things were almost unprecedented. But he was constrained by the laws of obeisance not to enquire after a noble's affairs without due cause and empowerment. He was probably sticking with her to spy for Helmawr, but had a quite legitimate claim to be protecting her in Hive City, which was perfectly within his jurisprudence.

D'onne decided to use the arrival of the transportation vehicle (she presumed that was what a felucca was) as the opportunity to politely but firmly send the enforcer back to his post. Then they would see whether the man in the big armour had the balls to argue with a noble, no matter how young she looked. She decided to start laying groundwork now to better assert her dominance later.

'Whatisyourname?' she managed.

'Enforcer Hanno, nobledam!'

Ah, that was interesting. He didn't just reply 'Hanno'. He reasserted his office at the same time, as well as acknowledging and downplaying hers. It left the none-too-subtle implication in her shapely ears that no one, not even nobility, was above the law. She smiled inwardly as she imagined him practising saying it in front of a mirror every morning.

Enforcer Hanno, noblesir.

Enforcer Hanno, nobledam.

Enforcer Hanno, citizen.

Enforcer Hanno, scum.

He certainly had the timbre just right to communicate the full force of the law at his command. Still, she knew his name now and he didn't know hers. And she knew he was clever.

Oh, and she knew he was vain.

UNWELCOMINN

MAD DONNA AND chief watchman Hanno were facing off, eyes narrowed, hands over their guns, both ready to draw and fire in an eye blink. They were poised like statues, knowing the slightest twitch could be a prelude to an explosive gun battle at all of two metres range. With two fighters this deadly, it was guaranteed neither of them would be walking away from it.

Mad Donna spoke first, saying quietly, 'You're forgetting, Hanno, I know who really pulls your strings.'

'That's not-'

'Fair? True? Perhaps, but if the folks around here even dreamed you were in the Cult of the Redemption, you'd be as dead as Hagen.'

'The path of the Redemption is the path of salvation for us all, D'onne,' growled Hanno.

'Don't waste your dogma on me. You know I'm as irredeemable as the rest of the scum in here or out there.' Donna nodded towards the stockade outside, implying the whole of the Underhive. 'You also need every fighter you've got, otherwise those scavvies are going to be here to stay'

Hanno's eyes flickered uncertainly at the mention of the scavvies, which was weird because someone like him shouldn't be frightened of them. Donna suddenly began to understand what was really going on in Dust Falls.

The Redemptionists were an extremist cult that believed in redemption through fire and penitence, that only through the mortal purging of sin in all its forms could man be pure enough to meet his maker. Sin took many forms, including drinking, gambling, fornication, shooting people - all the fun stuff basically. But it was the heretics, mutants and psykers that really brought out the mobs and whipped them into a fever pitch.

The Cult of the Redemption was a force to be reckoned with in Hive City. They had devotees and converts in every house, and virtually ran House Cawdor in its entirety. But in the Underhive, they were far less powerful, and their sympathisers were few and far between.

The Redemptionists came into the Underhive for only two reasons. Most settled in their own heavily armed and tight-lipped little communities to be away from the sinful temptations of Hive City or any other settlements. The others were the worst psychos, bullies and fanatics in the cult; men whose views and methods had become too extreme even for the ruthless Redemptionist hierarchs. These hardened few were sent below on 'Crusade', or given a holy mission to enter the den of corruption that is the Underhive to scourge and purge every sinner that crossed their path. Redemption crusaders persecuted mutants unmercifully, especially scavvies.

'You've been using Dust Falls as a front to arm the Crusaders, haven't you, Hanno?' He looked shocked at that. Bullseye! Donna sensed weakness and pushed harder. She held up an elegant finger and ticked items off an imaginary ledger. 'Caches of weapons buried in the Badzones, a little promethium for the flamers, some food at sympathetic holesteads, and all of it nice and handy to pick up before going down into the Abyss. I'll bet you've made their purges a lot more successful of late.'

Donna shook her head sadly.

'scavvies aren't all that smart, but they can work out when their enemies are getting more ammo and weapons. And if they can work that out, they'll figure that you're getting them before going down the Abyss - that you're getting them from the settlement at the top!'

Hanno was defensive. 'It isn't that simple. King Redwart's been stirring up the clans, and those from outside have been yelling that he was coming with an army to burn the place. That devil Valois has been at work too. Plague zombies have been seen all the way up in the Looming Halls before the siege even started. These are evil times, D'onne.'

'Yes, there's a world of sin out there, Hanno, but you're ready to draw down on me because I've come by with an inconvenient request? Shame on you.' She was hammering unmercifully at his one big weakness - an overdeveloped sense of justice - and she knew it. Hanno was looking

doubtful, which was a definite improvement over his stupidly determined face.

'Look, Hanno, just let me see the register and I'll be gone. No one needs to know I came here. When I get out of Dust Falls, and you know that I will, I'll tell the Watchmen - Throne! I'll even tell the guilders - what's going on so they can send help. You're not alone, you know. There's over five billion people just a few sewers away'

Hanno smiled a little at the wan joke and some of the weight seemed to lift from his shoulders. 'You're right, of course. I'm acting like some medieval Baron and seeing Dust Falls as a tiny light amidst the encroaching darkness. Others will come to our aid.'

Donna laughed cynically. 'They'll come all right, if only to stop the scavvies before they get a success under their belts and become ten times as nasty.' She reached out and snagged the bottle of amasec and swigged some, savouring the slow release of tension as the stiff liquor tickled her palette. Hanno had, more than likely, left the idea of locking her up far behind and now she had become a potential ally in a time of need.

'You seem to be creaming them out there,' she observed. 'They're losing a dozen at a time rushing the gates.'

'But two or three dozen more scavvies turn up every shift, and they're chewing through our ammo faster than we can make more. I've had to limit firing to las-guns unless the scavvies are threatening to breach a gate. We've only suffered a few deaths so far, but they're starting to mount up.'

'Do you think King Redwart's coming with an army?'

'No. I think the army is already here.'

'His NAME IS Theodus Relli?'

'That's right.'

Hanno's old cogitator rattled and ticked for a while before lines of lurid green text ghosted into being across its window.

'Here we are. Nothing came this way from him in the last six months.'

'Where does he ship from?'

Hanno spun a small cog at the side of the window and the words retreated up the glass. 'Down Town. He has a manse there registered as his shipment address, and seems to receive shipments of scrap, archeotech, stinger mould and lapweed. He also deals in weapons, ammunition, bionics, survival gear - all the usual stuff.'

'But he's done no trading of any kind up the Abyss in six months? That's weird.'

'There are some additional notes in the registry but they're locked. I'll see what I can do.'

'Want me to try?'

'Please, D'onne, remember who taught you to tickle a cogitator in the first place.' Hanno's gnarly fingers flew with surprising delicacy across the dirty bone keys of the cogitator, the eagle tattoo on his hand swooping and diving like its living counterpart.

'Isn't doing this for me a sin, too?'

'Technically, it's a sinful theft, but the guilders are self-serving agents of corruption and hence it is permissible to use any means against them, so sayeth the lore.'

'I never knew Redemptionists considered guilders the enemy. They are purveyors of moral turpitude perhaps, but not really on a level with mutants and Wyrds.'

'There were some... incidents a while back that led to the guilders outlawing all Redemptionist Crusaders. They've even posted bounties on the Arch Zealot, The Redeemer and Father Kaminski. They're complete fools. The worst fanatics now have no restraints at all and those genuinely trying to protect us are hunted men. The guilders made a mistake aligning themselves against the righteous.' Hanno's brow furrowed and the tapping of the bone keys doubled in speed. 'Now be quiet a moment. I need to concentrate.'

Donna wandered across to the small barred window in the office and peered out. She could see the halo of light from the stockade, and fancied she heard the distant snap of weapons fire. The chalybeate roofs of Dust Falls seemed to huddle close below. Among them she caught sight of a lit sign of a slop shop in the next street. Originally, it had read 'Come In!' but some wag had climbed up there with a can of paint and sprayed it to read 'UnWeLcoMinN'. Donna wondered if that was where Kell Bak had crept off to after leaving here. She craned to see another slop shop nearby but couldn't tell which was the closest.

'What are you so interested in?' Hanno asked from behind her. Donna quelled an urge to flinch.

'Just trying to see the stockade perimeter,' she lied.

'Well, I'm through the locks on Relli's register entry and there's something odd here.'

Donna came back to where Hanno was sitting and peered over his shoulder. After a moment she gave up and shrugged in disgust. 'I don't even know what I'm looking at.'

'Guilders don't make their records easy to understand, it's true. Otherwise, any scum could break in and find manifests, route plans and all kinds of useful information.' Hanno was warming to his subject. He obviously spent a lot of time thinking about how to screw over guilders. 'But most of this is just simple acronyms, contractions and code numbers. See, look at this here.' Hanno pointed to a specific line on the screen and Donna looked obediently.

«.350.98/Ex./DMH@4.83x5.37x1.21/mbr.7/E.V.1293GC/ F2R/ Rclm.»

«.622.98/Ex./DMH@4.83x5.37x1.21/rnbr.14/E.V.3571G C//F2R//Rclm pen.»

'You are seriously ticking me off, Hanno. What the hell's all that supposed to mean?'

'It's what Relli's been up to in the last six months, and it tells us that he's in a lot of trouble.'

'Do tell.'

'Well, this first part is a date stamp. The next is what Relli financed on that date, and these are normally caravans or partnerships or investments. "Ex" is for expedition, which is usually sending a pack of gangers out into the Badzones looking for something.'

'Oh really? Like what?' Donna was getting impatient with the whole back to school act. Hanno blathered on obliviously.

'Could be after anything: scav, stinger mould, or even taking some Spire noble on a hunting expedition to bag spider mares.' Hanno cocked an eyebrow at Donna and her obvious impatience but she refused to rise to the bait.

'So what you're telling me is, it doesn't say,' she retorted.

'No, but the rest of the entry gives us more clues. The next part is a location index, and it's one I'm not familiar with so that tells us it's well out of the way. I can tell you that it's pretty deep down, almost at Hive Bottom. Also, both expeditions were heading to the same place, and the little "at" mark means they didn't have a precise fix on the location.'

'Now that's intriguing.'

'Oh, it gets better. The next two parts are about the expedition itself: the first one had seven members, and the second one had fourteen. The EV-number-GC part is the equipment value of the expedition in guilder credits. The first was pretty well-equipped, and the second even more so.'

'So what does F2R mean?'

'Failed to return.'

Donna felt a chill down her spine. Relli had sent twenty-one people to an untimely grave in some corner of the Badzones. What could possibly mean so much to him? And more importantly why had he sent a message to her? She wished she knew who had been on those expeditions, whether any of them she might have counted a friend. She hoped not.

'So is that why you said Relli's in trouble, because of all those people lost?'

'Oh, Donna. You still don't understand what hivers are really like, do you? Especially guilders. People count for nothing. The reason Relli is in trouble is because the two expeditions have put him almost five grand in the hole with no return on his investments. "Rclm" means he reclaimed the cost of the first expedition from the central guild funds, as guilders are entitled to do when they take a loss. But the second claim is pending and the other guilders are likely to ask a lot more questions about sending two expeditions to the same place and losing both of them. Once, you can put down to misfortune, twice will be read as incompetence.'

'So why's he gunning for me?'

Hanno rolled his stool back from the cogitator. It sighed contentedly as it closed its window, safely forgotten and free to pursue its matriculations again. The watchman went to his desk and pulled out two dirty glasses. He frowned at them and gave them a guilty rub before deciding that alcohol would kill off any germs, far more so than his sleeve anyway. He poured a measure of amasec for each of them and sat back down.

'I don't know, D'onne. Have you considered he might not be gunning for you at all? Shallej and Kell are smart, and they might just have intercepted the message and decided to be opportunistic with it.'

'And croatalids might fly out of my butt. Coincidences like this don't happen in my life.'

'It's true that everything happens for a reason, like when we met for the first time. Meeting you began a chain of events that convinced me to give up everything I had in Hive City and come below, because I discovered that I was needed down here more than up there.

'All I'm saying is that Relli may not be out to get you,' Hanno continued. 'It's more likely he wants something from you. You may not know it, but you could have information about those lost expedition members, or where they went. It's well-known you frequent the Badzones more than most.'

Donna pondered this. Had Relli sent the hunters to catch her for interrogation? Had he sent the hunters after her at all? Since Glory Hole, she'd not had long enough to think things through, and information on Relli had been next to non-existent. He'd proven only to be a successful behind-the-scenes villain with the Baks as his brutish henchmen up front. Hanno was right. It could be, and most likely was, far more complicated than that. Relli had his own concerns, otherwise, no matter what his underlying motives, he never would have been desperate enough to contact Donna in the first place. There was only one sure way to find out.

'AH right then, I'm going to find him in Down Town. He can tell me himself.'

Hanno's eyes bugged out slightly and he said, You never did take long making your mind up about things, did you?'

'Oh, I take forever when it comes to what to have for dinner or which lip gloss to wear, sweetheart.'

Hanno laughed in spite of himself, shaking his head again. 'You may be a raging psychopath at heart,

D'onne, but you always knew how to put people at ease and get them on your side. If you could just be responsible about it you would make a great leader.'

Donna's tone was instantly scathing. '"Saint D'onne of the Redemption?" I don't think so.'

'You know you could do a lot of good. You could turn your past into something positive for a change, instead of hiding from it down here.'

Donna threw back the last of her amasec and favoured Hanno with a withering glare that sent his gaze skating elsewhere. She got up and headed for the door. Hanno started to rise and said, 'Wait, D'onne-'

Donna turned on him and cut him off furiously, her words coming in a rush. 'No, Hanno, you wait. I cut you a lot of slack because of what you did for me. But...' She fought for calm, trying not to scream at him. 'I am not going to have this argument with you. You're stubborn and I'm mean and I like you too much to want to end up shooting you again.'

She pushed him back down onto his stool and kissed him on the cheek, turning away quickly so he wouldn't see her tears. She was pleased with herself for not slamming the door on the way out.

BEFORE STEPPING OUTSIDE, Donna took a deep breath to calm herself. She shook out her dew sheet and wrapped the plastic fabric around her head and shoulders. With the filter can dangling down at the hip, a dew sheet made a decently improvised burnous, and it was common to see them worn in the Underhive. They also hid your face and hands pretty well, so they were popular for other reasons, too.

Donna made her way to the UnWeLcoMinN to start looking for Kell. What she hadn't pointed out to Hanno was that the easiest way to find out more about

Relli was to track down one of the bounty hunters. With suitable encouragement, like a gouged eye and a few lost toes, Kell would be willing to spill his guts figuratively because he wouldn't want to do it literally.

Hanging lanterns and crackling neon tubes lit the front of the slop shop. It was a low, shed-like building that ran between two alleys with an entrance at each end. Pushing open the door, Donna was met by a wall of smoke, body stink and noise from inside. The place was full to capacity and the atmosphere was plain ugly.

Donna moved through the crowd cautiously, trying to get a feel for who was there without obviously staring. Most of the patrons were gang fighters or juves from different houses. She saw hulking, muscle-bound Goliaths with shaved heads and industrial piercings, hooded Cawdor in pseudo-medieval sackcloth, and long haired, leather-clad Orlocks. Different gangs had staked out various parts of the bar for themselves and were spending most of their time eyeing each other murderously. The slop shop's barkeep and his flesh-girls looked harried. They were constantly

moving between the different groups, trying to keep everyone happy and not provoke any jealousies.

There was a barely suppressed undercurrent of violence. Evidently, the siege was wearing on everyone's nerves. These were all members of successful gangs; they were tough, well armed and experienced. They had come to Dust Falls to go down the Abyss and seek their fortune, but instead they found themselves bottled up with the very gun-scum they should be competing with (which is to say shooting at) in the Badzones.

It was a testament to Hanno's ability as watchman that they weren't already at each other's throats. It was also worthy of note that gangers from the most antagonistic houses - the Goliaths and the Escher, the Orlocks and the Delaque - had evidently been separated between the two slop shops in Dust Falls to keep tensions down. Donna couldn't see a Van Saar, a Delaque, or an Escher in the whole place.

That was with one obvious exception. With his long, black coat and pallid, shaven head, Kell Bak stood out like a stick of charcoal in a box of crayons. Donna spotted him in the far corner talking to a disinterested-looking bunch of Goliaths. Two ratskin scouts were lounging nearby at the bar and drinking heavily. Donna edged in closer so she could overhear what was being said.

'It's easy money,' Kell was saying in a scratchy whisper. 'We link up, blast a way clear, find the bitch again and take her down. Suddenly you're a hundred credits richer and you're out of Dust Falls.'

The Goliath leader was a huge brute of a man with steel bolts threaded through his bulging biceps and pectorals. He talked in a slow, bass ramble like tectonic plates grinding together. 'Yur gonna need more guns than uz, and no skank's gonna fire up alia dese boys for a hunnerd stinkin' creds.'

'You're not confident of beating a ragtag bunch of scavvies?' Kell was trying not to offend the Goliath but it still came out as a sneer.

The big Goliath grinned nastily before continuing on as if Kell hadn't spoken. 'Ye see yur scavvies're no good when yur can chase 'im down and kick 'im, but inna open they'll jest run and keep shootin' yur ass from the dark. Needs a hole buncha guns ter keep lookin' every which way. Nobodie's riskin' that ran out when da uwers are stayin' behind nice an' safe.' The leader swung a meaty fist around at the bar expansively before swigging back his stein. 'Everywun goes or everywun stays, no crap

bounties gonna be worth get-tin' messed up fer on yur own.' He banged the stein back down, indicating that his final words of wisdom on the matter had been dispensed.

Donna caught one of the ratskins looking at her strangely and then none-too-subtly whispering something in his neighbour's ear. She tensed up, ready for action, expecting the two to alert Kell of her presence. To her surprise they both got up and trotted out of the bar without a backward glance. Kell didn't seem to notice.

'But Mad Donna is easy meat; all rep and no action,' Kell wheezed, still trying to elicit some interest. 'Just Shallej and me was all it took last time and she had help getting away. Didn't she skin a member of your gang once? Don't you want payback on that?'

That seemed to rekindle the Goliath's interest. His jaw stuck out menacingly. 'You sayin' Goliat's is weak? Izzat watcha sayin? That Donaz badass, man. Mean as they cum. Couldn'a taken one of uz otherwise.'

'Badass? She's just a spoilt little uphive bitch that's been whipped once already.'

There are times in life when looking back at your actions, you find them hard to fathom, or indeed even believe. Donna's plan was to trail Kell until she could get him alone. But hearing him crow about running her out of Glory Hole made her blood boil, and she couldn't let it go unchallenged. The plan went out the window. She flung back her cloak, stood up straight and magnificently with hands on hips for all to see.

'Hey Kell!' she challenged in a loud, clear voice. 'Want to try whipping me again? Or should I wait here until you fetch your big cousin and half a dozen pit slaves?'

The unmistakable timbre of her uphive accent cut across the packed bar like a knife, grabbing everyone's attention. The gangers nearby hooted appreciatively and shouted crude encouragement. Kell spun around, shock written all over his toad-like face, his hand darting for his pistol.

'No guns!' the barkeep shouted desperately. 'Order of the watch!'

Kell froze, his eyes flickering to the giant Goliath for support. The gang leader spat and then grinned again, showing off steel-fang incisors as he rumbled, Thass right, boy. First one shoots a gun gets stripped an' thrown to the scavvies. We's all swore uselves to it.'

Suddenly the brute stood up, towering over the bounty hunter. He turned to the gathering crowd and raised his voice in a stentorian bellow. 'We seddle ur fights like men!' There was an answering roar of approval from the assembled gangers, all their enmities temporarily forgotten (apparently along with the fact that Donna wasn't a man) at the prospect of some bloodletting.

'Faceter-face,' he shouted before pausing dramatically and peering down at the faces of Donna and Kell.

'Hand-ter-hand,' the giant bellowed once more, turning away with arms spread impossibly wide. That got another, louder cheer.

'To the death!' That nearly raised the slop shop's roof. Bets were already being laid and credits changing hands. Even thinking about backing out now would mean being lynched.

So much for the plan.

IN SITUATIONS LIKE this, keeping your poise was everything. Showing fear or uncertainty in front of a bar full of bored, restless gangers was like swimming among ripper fish with an open wound. Donna's opponent was strutting back and forth full of false bravado, assuring anyone that would listen that he was a deadly hand-to-hand fighter. She simply rolled her dew sheet back into its can, drew out Seventy-one, and waited silently while the tables were dragged aside and the crowd drew in to form a rough, jostling circle around the pair.

The giant Goliath, who someone called Krug whilst betting, had taken it upon himself to be master of ceremonies. He announced both of the combatants with mock formality, raising a lusty cheer for Donna and a lot of pantomime booing and hissing for Kell. He then proceeded to announce the rules.

'There's no rules!' he bellowed triumphantly. He stopped as one of the other Goliaths muttered something in his ear. 'Oh yeah. There's no rules 'cept no guns!' That got another halfhearted cheer but the crowd was getting bored of the showmanship now -they wanted action. Correctly reading the mood, Krug surrendered the impromptu ring of sweaty, yelling gangers to the two contenders with a final theatrical bow.

Kell stepped forward and took a few experimental cuts in the air with his blade. It was an unusual weapon, a short but heavy looking chainsword formed like an espadon with two cutting edges and a needle-sharp serrated blade at its tip. Most chainswords had a single cutting edge with the return edge of the blade inset for around two thirds of their length. This was because fighting with one chain weapon against another was nasty, dangerous work; the contra-rotating teeth could bind and spit each other back with surprising force. It was all too easy to have a chainblade rebound into you after a messed-up cut or parry; hence the protective cowling. The bounty hunter had to be supremely confident of his skills to wield a weapon like that.

Donna thumbed Seventy-one into life and darted forward, intending to distract Kell by edging him back into the crowd. Kell held his ground and thrust at her as she closed in, his blade licking out like a serpent's tongue. Donna caught his attack expertly with Seventy-one and flung it aside with a flick of her wrist. The standard circular parry almost cost Donna her life, as Kell whipped his shorter weapon back across to make a left-right slash at her before she recovered to a guard position. She skipped backward to avoid more slashing attacks, but received a long scratch on her forearm from the serrated point. The pack of gangers cheered, groaned, leered and whistled all at once with every single attack and counter-attack.

The bounty hunter was grinning like the fight was already won, which was disconcerting. Donna circled more cautiously and tried out a few exploratory feints to see how Kell would react. She learned quickly that he wouldn't be drawn to attack. He was seemingly happy to bide his time and, like all members of House Delaque, Kell wore dark goggles to protect his eyes (due to a photophobic bloodline disorder which just made the Delaque all the more creepy). Because Donna couldn't see his eyes, she couldn't predict his moves very well and had to fall back on the less successful technique of reading his body movements instead.

The gangers weren't interested in a display of fancy swordplay, they wanted flesh hacked off in bloody chunks. Boos and catcalls followed every dodge or parry. The circle of gangers started pressing inward, forcing the duellers toe-to-toe. Jumping back to avoid a blow, Donna found herself being jostled and pushed forward.

'Frik this,' Donna mumbled to herself and swung Seventy-one in a wide figure eight. It was aimed vaguely at Kell but meant really to shoo the gangers back and get some elbow room. Sure enough, Seventy-one screaming past their faces worked like a charm and the space around her cleared as if by magic. The downside was that the bounty hunter had a ready opening to exploit and Donna knew it.

She was ready for his rush but it was oddly halfhearted when it came and she beat him back easily. It dawned on Donna that Kell was what her old dancing mistress would have called a lead foot', or someone who couldn't shake the habit of always stepping off on the same foot.

She tried a couple of looping attacks, one overhead and one uppercut. Each time Kell's footwork was poor. He still seemed supremely confident though, as if he didn't need to strike at Donna again. Amidst their circling and sparring her brain churned out the answer with sickening certainty - Kell's blade must be poisoned!

The shock must have shown through on her face because it made Kell crow, 'Feel it now? Just a little scratch or less and this sludgejelly venom can paralyse you.' Donna could indeed feel a tingling sensation spreading up her sword arm from her small wound. Kell laughed and pressed on with his attack.

She fell back, Seventy-one wavering in her hands as if it suddenly weighed twice as much. The gangers scattered as she lashed out drunkenly to keep from being cornered. Kell came forward, his heavier blade snarling and darting at Donna's weakening guard. He didn't try anything fancy, just battered away and forced her to parry again and again. Presently Donna felt the hard plastic of the bar against her back and slumped against it, straggling to keep her blade up. Kell paused to gloat.

'Shallej is going to be pissed that I got you first,' he said. 'Of all the dumb luck, catching you here.'

'Wherezeeat?' Donna managed to slur.

'He went to Two Tunnels. He swore you'd run there. Guess I was right and he was wrong.' He leered at Donna's inviting curves. 'I don't mind telling you, it's going to be a fun trip back.'

'Oil' bellowed Krug from the sidelines, 'No pansy stuff. Kill 'er or we kills yer both!' Angry-sounding gangers assented. Most of them had bet on Donna and were not at all pleased by the performance so far. It was

questionable whether they would let Kell get out alive after robbing them of their sport.

Kell seemed oblivious. He shrugged, pulling back his sword. 'Dead or alive makes no odds to me,' he whispered. 'Still plenty of fun to be had later.'

With that, Kell unleashed a killing thrust aimed at Donna's heart.

FALLING. NO HIVER was really afraid of heights; they lived their lives as much on the vertical as the horizontal. Sheer drops and dizzying ledges were part of their daily environment, no more remarkable to them than giant rats and toxic pools were to the people of the Underhive. Nonetheless, hivers do have a peculiar horror of falling. For them it's one thing to have your life in your hands in battle, hut it's quite another to lose your grip on a ledge and fall. Perhaps it's because 'impact trauma remained one of the most common causes of death among the notoriously short-lived denizens of Hive Primus. According to the hive census, it accounted for thirty-eight-point-two percent of reported fatalities, putting it ahead of gang violence, carcinogens and industrial accidents on a daily death toll that counted in the millions. Of course, that bland statistic covered a multitude of causes ranging from suicide through to carelessness and neglect to outright murder.

House Ulanti possessed a sweeping esplanade around its outer quadrant on the Spire that was actually open to the skies. It was one of the many fantastic indulgences that D'onne always took for granted whilst she still lived up above. In fact, D'onne didn't like the esplanade much at all. It was a bright, harsh place beneath stratospheric clouds by day and limpid, hazy stars by night. What made it worse was the power field that enclosed it, creating a constant stink and an accompanying faint buzzing sound that was enough to set your teeth on edge.

D'onne's sisters had made up a game to play on the esplanade long before she came on the scene, and it remained a firm favourite of all ages. It was very simple; the girls would line up along the baroquely carved guardrail and hang over it to gaze down at the flank of the hive below. It was perhaps the only time D'onne ever saw Hive Primus from the outside, from that buzzing esplanade.

What they could see was a craggy metal mountainside that disappeared into roiling clouds miles below them. The hive surface was etched with dishes, platforms, landing areas, antennae, hoists, towers, exhaust ports, pylons and a million other oddities. There was constant activity across the surface of the hive, making the name seem very appropriate. Day or night there were streams of sub-orbital traffic etching their contrails up and down in lazy spirals or straight ascent burns. The interhive carriers with fat wings flew lower and slower, and a multitude of lifters and shuttles buzzed around the hive constantly like bees vainly looking for pollen. The traffic never stopped.

The eldest sister present would act as judge. She would secretly pick a colour and a number and the rest of them would vie to see who could guess the right number of craft of the specified colour first, shrilly shouting out: 'Gold: five!' or 'Red: twenty-two!' At a nod of approval from the judge, the delighted victor would then take her prize by shoving the other observers one by one so that they flailed at the edge of the balustrade over miles of sheer drop. That delicious sensation of terror before being caught and held by the warm embrace of the power field caused the sisters to scream at the top of their lungs. If the sister judging believed that the cry had gone up too soon, she would shake her head and all the other players would shove the would-be victor.

Because she was the youngest, it took D'onne a long time to understand what the game was really about. She eventually realised it was actually all about authority and favouritism and had very little to do with spotting flying vehicles. The elder sisters used it as a way to test their subtly shifting allegiances with each other and establish their authority over the youngsters, and the youngsters used it to establish a pecking order among themselves. It was also a test of nerves. To wimp out and jump down from the balustrade was to give in to a social death which lasted several days. It was a vicious little children's game they innocently played that trained them in the skills they would need so much in later life: ruthlessness and domination.

One night soon after the artist completed their potrait, D'onne had caught three of her elder sisters - Corundra, J'ustene and Loqui - sneaking off to the esplanade. She had been looking for someone to comfort her because she was frightened by a storm raging outside; one of those

statistically irrelevant seasonal variations man had supposedly mastered on Necromunda. She saw them stealing along a hallway, their white gowns glowing eerily as lightning bathed the scene. Not knowing what else to do, she followed them.

They had almost reached the esplanade before Loqui noticed D'onne tagging along behind. Loqui looked angry when she saw her and said something to Corundra, the eldest of the trio. Corundra was dark-haired and statuesque, almost old enough to marry. J'ustene and Loqui were both willowy and blonde, and indeed sometimes they were hard to tell apart even though Loqui was the elder by almost a year.

Corundra looked at D'onne and favoured her with a strange smile before saying, 'Let her come. She may actually learn something useful!

Outside, the esplanade felt surreal. Thanks to the power field, lightning flickered harmlessly only metres away from them and storm-force winds seeped through only as scant breezes. Crackling static showed where the edge of the field started a hand-span from the railing, and it was the first time D'onne had ever seen the field defined. Beyond it, clouds churned and roiled with fast-forward motion, twisters writhing between the layers and the constant flare of lightning arcing against the hive.

J'ustene and Loqui went to the edge, J'ustene reluctantly it seemed and Locjui confident. D'onne took a few trembling paces forward but as lightning skewered the skies again before her she gave a yelp and fell to her knees, the wind blasting icy fingers across her body. She wanted to run back inside, convinced they would all be killed if they stayed, but her legs had turned to jelly. She could only kneel there helpless with terror and watch what happened next.

Corundra calmly announced over the crash of thunder and sighing winds that she had chosen a colour and a number. D'onne couldn't see how they could spot anything in the storm. Long seconds dragged past as her sisters at the balustrade counted ships.

'Red: twenty-two!' Loqui shouted. It was a common choice, so common that the game was often called 'Red: twenty-two', or simply just 'Red'.

Both J'ustene and Locjui looked at Corundra, and another actinic flare of lightning etched out her impassive features like an alabaster mask beneath the dark foam of her hair.

Corundra shook her head. Loqui screamed as J'ustene tipped her over the edge.

Afterwards they told her it was an accident; a childish game that got out of hand and ended in tragedy. How could a child understand that lightning could make the power field fluctuate for an instant? And how could a child know that the air outside was so thin it was almost a vacuum and could suck things through? But D'onne was there, and D'onne saw and knew that the timing of the push was deliberate.

The horrible thing was that Loqui flew upwards at first, arms and legs flailing, the open pit of her screaming mouth made silent in the winds. Then she was swept outwards and away, shrinking into a spinning speck in the distance that fell forever towards the distant cloud base.

J'ustene watched her fall. Corundra turned towards D'onne and laid one perfectly manicured index finger against her lips to warn her to silence. At that moment, D'onne's world had spun and turned black.

When she awoke she was in the tower.

PENUMBRA

A depth, a breadth,
A place so steep, a hole so deep.
Beyond edge of sight, tipped into night.
Down.
Down.
To velvet lake of phosphor shrouds,
Of twisting heat, of burning clouds.
To where the spider mares abound,
Down to where my dreams are found.

— Excerpt from *Abyssa Obscura and Other Visions, the collected works of Scelerus Greim,the spyrer artist, poet and anarchist.*

IN THE LAST frozen heartbeat between life and death, Kell's snarling blade was narrowing towards Donna's breast.

Seventy-one was a blur in Donna's hand as it came smashing down on the thrusting blade with stunning force. Both chainswords shrieked defiantly as their spinning teeth struck, binding together for a fraction of a second before being flung violently apart. Donna recovered her guard position with a practiced flick of the wrist. Kell's heavier blade swung wildly and gouged a bloody furrow across his thigh. The bounty hunter shrieked a curse and staggered backwards. The crowd roared its approval at the unexpected comeback.

Donna straightened up from the bar and let Seventy-one idle quietly for a moment. The watching gangers all fell silent, enrapt by the unfolding drama.

'Y'know, Kell,' she spat through gritted teeth. 'Poisons are funny things. Not four shifts ago, I was stung by sludge jellies, in the sword arm no less, and it feels just fine now. I guess it's been poisoned enough already'

That was a lie. Donna's forearm felt afire as if it had been dipped in bowl of biting insects, but it certainly wasn't paralysed.

Kell was trying to clamp the flow of blood from his thigh with one hand while keeping his blade up with the other. The more he bled out the weaker he would get, so now it was Donna's turn to gloat and let the shock set in for a moment. Besides, Donna had a lot of frustrations to exorcise and she wanted to savour the moment. She stalked towards the bounty hunter with a murderous gleam in her beautiful blue eye.

'I've had bounty scum like you on my ass ever since I came down here.'

'And what a great ass!' some wag shouted from the audience. Normally she would have maimed whoever said that on principle, but right now she barely even noticed it.

'And if there's one thing I hate about all of you,' she continued, 'it's that you're not in it for money, like you claim, or for justice or protecting hivers'.

She fired up Seventy-one again, its low snarl accentuating her words.

'No, you do it for the glory. You do it so you can strut around and pretend you're better than the scum you're hunting. You do it so you can hurt people and claim you had to do it, that you had no choice. Well, we all get to make choices. You made yours, and now I'm going to show you mine.'

Donna advanced with her sword held loosely at a low guard.

'I'm going to leave your arms and face until last, Kell, so you can keep fighting for as long as you feel like,' she told him, and took a lazy cut that forced him to limp backwards. She circled like a merciless predator.

'Trying to ambush me in Glory Hole was enough reason to kill you on its own, but the crap you've been spouting tonight...' She shook her head and her long dreadlocks swayed with the motion. Her voice became a husky tocsin of utter menace. 'For that I'm going to carve you up first.'

Donna leapt into the fray, bellowing a murderous shriek and whirling Seventy-one like a dervish. Kell presented a parry but Donna's first move

was only a feint. She whirled around him at the last instant, making a straight-armed cut at his backside.

Her chainblade struck home, ripping through the heavy material of Kell's flak coat and its lining of mesh armour like paper. The bounty hunter howled as the relentless teeth chewed off a meaty slice of haunch and upper thigh before glancing off his hipbone. The blade splattered crimson rain across the bar and the spectators cheered again with bloodlust. Kell slid awkwardly onto one knee in a spreading pool of his own gore.

Donna was still moving, slamming Seventy-one down like a guillotine on Kell's exposed foot. The chainsword Donna called Seventy-one became Seventy-Six in that instant, tearing through boot, tarsi and metatarsi to send Kell's five toes rolling away like fat, wriggling maggots.

Donna spun away with a pretty dancing step she had been taught when she was six. She pirouetted around her prey forcing Kell to drag his mangled foot over hard-packed dirt and broken glass to keep facing her.

Kell alternated between blubbering incoherently and screeching as Donna dodged in with her blade biting again and again. He tried to lunge at her, so she took an ear and left it dangling by a scrap of scalp.

Donna laid open her opponent's shoulder so that the glistening bone of his scapula could be seen peeking out. She carved through ribs and into a lung to make a wound that blew out pink froth in time *with* Kell's ragged breathing. A dozen other nicks and gouges marked his quivering body as she teased and caressed it lovingly with Seventy-six.

She was making Kell into her fetish doll, venting her pent-up anger and frustration on his wretched form. She spun round faster, wilder. Even hardened gangers blanched and turned away as she stripped Kell's flesh from his bones. He could barely stay upright now, swaying and gurgling as his life-blood leaked out of torn flesh. The blade clattered from his nerveless hand.

Somewhere in Kell's wrecked body a spark of defiance still burned. He clawed at his holster, painstakingly dragging out his bolt pistol.

Donna laughed. 'Come on Kell, last chance!' She stopped and posed for a moment, letting him raise a shaking arm to take aim. Gangers scattered from the line of fire behind her. Kell pulled the trigger and sent a bolt

round roaring off to explode against the bar. Naturally, Donna was no longer there.

A flesh girl started screaming shrilly. Donna leapt behind Kell and jammed her own gun against the back of his bald skull. Another bolt round roared off from his pistol, this time exploding in flesh with an obscene smacking sound.

Donna felt an almost orgasmic sense of release as she pulled the trigger, spreading Kell's brains out across the dirt floor of the UnWeLcoMinN. The shot was a shout of ecstasy in her ears; the bolt was her incandescent euphoria as it burned his hated skull to ash.

In the momentary warm afterglow, Donna looked down and found to her surprise that she had shot him with the Pig. There wasn't much of Kell left that wasn't charred and smoking.

The whole bar erupted with gunfire. For a split second Donna thought they were saluting her somehow. Bullets came zipping past close enough for her to feel. No. They were shooting at each other. As she dived out of the firing line she found that they were shooting at her, too. Autopistol rounds tracked holes in the bar next to her as she ran, and a shotgun blast kicked up an eruption of dirt at her feet. Bodies were dropping everywhere, arms jerking and flailing as they were hit.

Donna ran for an exit amidst scenes of unmitigated mayhem. Gangers flipped tables into barricades and went at it even as their friends and enemies got blasted into meat puppets around their ears. Vicious hand-to-hand brawling and point-blank shooting was quickly defining three groups - the Orlocks were congregating at one end of the bar, the Cawdor at the other, the Goliaths (and Donna) in the middle and a lot of twitching corpses in between.

Donna had no hesitation running for cover with the leather-clad Orlocks. They whooped and waved her on, putting down a creditable covering fire. It was an easy choice for her to make, since the Goliaths would have skinned her in an instant and the Cawdor would no doubt burn her for being a she-harlot or something. Orlocks, on the other hand, hated Delaque like Kell with a passion, and also they just liked to have a good time. She cracked a Goliath's shaven skull as she ran towards them to return the compliment.

'Thanks, boys!' she cried, bounding behind a table.

It was quite intimate in there, with about twenty Orlocks wedged in behind five tables. They were grinning happily and blazing away. Hot, jingling shell-casings rained everywhere. The mad release of tension Donna had felt seemed to be contagious; the Orlocks were working out their frustrations with firepower too. The Orlock nearest her turned and shouted something but Donna couldn't hear a word of it over the constant rattle of autofire. He nodded at the door. Donna saw that the Orlocks were moving off, dragging their wounded out the exit first.

Donna checked the Pig. It was out of juice just as she'd feared. Holstering it, she unsheathed her laspistol and stood, snapping off a couple of shots. She only half aimed since the shots were meant to keep the Orlocks sweet than actually do any damage. The first shot, however, took a Cawdor smack in the forehead, putting a smoking third eye through his penitent hood and straight into his brain. The second hit was equally miraculous, taking down a Goliath with a solid body hit at the other end of the bar. The Orlocks whooped and yelled even louder, battering her with comradely punches as she ducked back down.

A frag grenade went off in the bar as Donna was crawling for the door, and the indiscriminately scything shrapnel signalled a general exodus for all parties. The Cawdor poured out of the other exit and the Goliaths forced their own way out through a wall in typically brutal fashion. The pitched battle inside turned into a running battle through the twisting alleyways outside. Every door and corner seemed to be lit with gunflashes. Gangers darted everywhere, loosing off shots at half-seen shapes in the darkness, and smoke and flames billowing out of the bar gave the scene a ruddy, hellish quality. Anarchy was running naked through the streets of Dust Falls with all guns blazing.

DONNA AND A pack of maybe a dozen Orlocks from different gangs rallied in a nearby street. The Orlocks seemed to have latched onto Donna as a lucky charm in the confusion. Her height and swinging mass of stained, blonde dreadlocks made her nice and easy to spot in the dark too, she thought ruefully. She was still wondering how to get rid of the Orlocks when Hanno arrived on the scene.

Even in the dark, and from the other end of the street, Donna could see that Hanno was about ready to burst a blood vessel. He had a gang of watchmen with him, all armed to the teeth, and a trailing crowd of Escher, Van Saar and Delaque from the other slop shop. Hanno spotted Donna and started striding forward with a face like thunder.

At that moment a group of Goliaths appeared out of another alley and let fly at the Orlocks, who retaliated in kind. The watchmen intervened, loosing off scatter rounds at both gangs. All sides went diving for cover and another gun battle erupted in earnest. More gangers were drawn to the noise and the fight soon crackled up in intensity like a flash fire.

Donna saw Hanno leading the watchmen forward by bounds, determinedly trying to force apart the warring factions with shotgun blasts and gun butts. She certainly didn't want to be around by the time he reached her vicinity.

'Time to go, boys. It's been real fun,' Donna called to the Orlocks, and then ran off down the street.

To her dismay, the Orlocks took this as a piece of sage tactical advice and ran straight after her. The Goliaths chased the Orlocks, the watchmen chased both groups, and the gangers followed the watchmen. Donna had no clue where the Cawdor had gone until she reached the stockade and found the gate was wide open.

The zealous bigots of House Cawdor had decided to go out and start their own ugly little war with the scav-vies. They hadn't gotten far. The rubble outside was littered with Cawdor and scavvy bodies. A knot of diehard hood-heads was making a last stand in the lee of a large slab out in the waste zone. They were surrounded by at least ten times their number of scavvies and going down fast. It sounded like they were singing psalms.

Donna, the Orlocks, the Goliaths, the watchmen, and then everybody else careered out of the gate and into the fight with all the subtlety and tactical acumen of a blinded milliasaur. They hit the back of the scav-vies and killed a score of them before the ragged horde realised it was being attacked from two sides at once. The Cawdor immediately rallied and started forging a path through the scavvies with fanatical fervour. The anarchic battle that had started inside Dust Falls now engulfed the waste zone outside, and shots flew like hail.

Donna was never sure how she survived the encounter. The scavvies were a threat to all but beyond that it was every gang for themselves. There were over two hundred fighters around her, duking it out with everything from sharp rocks to plasma cannons. It became one of the larger gunfights in Underhive history and it certainly was the biggest, most chaotic brawl Donna had ever seen.

She weaved through the fight, loosing off shots at the scavvies and slashing at them in her path. She needed a way out - any way out - but all around her were brawling gangers and darting mutants. Bullets whined about her and las-rounds hissed back and forth in a deadly crescendo underscored by the throaty bark of bolter rounds and the wild rattling of autoguns. There was no shelter. Every rubble pile or shallow trench was fiercely fought over with its own knot of besiegers and besieged.

It was a measure of Donna's desperation that she found the safest place to be was actually fighting the scavvies in hand-to-hand combat. If she was being shot at, the scavvies were just as likely to hit her opponents as herself. She kept ducking and diving, trying to work her way towards the Abyss through the seething ebb and flow of battle.

That was working fine until she ran up against the scavvy giant.

Who knows what Badzone rad-hole spawned that monstrosity, or what random mix of chemicals and poisons conspired to throw up a chance mutation like that? But life always found a way to survive and thrive, no matter how ugly the results were.

This was the stuff of childhood nightmares. Its bullet-shaped head and slab-muscled shoulders towered above Mad Donna. Spade-like claws and a thickly scaled hide completed its inhuman appearance. Incongruously human-looking mismatched eyes, one green and one blue, were the only things betraying its true parentage.

It looked far from human when it tossed aside the broken body of a ganger and lumbered towards Donna, its slit mouth bellowing a wordless challenge. Ducking under a reaching claw, she slashed at a wrist thicker than her thigh, but Seventy-six skidded off its iron-hard scales. The giant chuckled as it sent her reeling with a casual backhand.

Donna's ears were left ringing by the glancing blow. The giant was slow but one hit was all it needed to snap her bones and incapacitate her. She could see more scavvies closing in out of the corner of her eye, taking

confidence from the fearsome presence of their bigger brother. Donna desperately needed an edge to even the odds, but the Pig was already out of juice and it was her only weapon capable of taking down something so big.

Scurrying backward over the treacherous rubble, she saw that she was being forced closer to the edge of the Abyss. She made a snap decision and ran straight for a spar jutting over the dizzying gulf with the scaly giant lumbering right at her heels.

Flakes of rust and chunks of rubble fell from the rotting spar as she ran out onto it, and the whole thing vibrated alarmingly in time with her footsteps. Donna sheathed Seventy-six, turned, and faced her foe with the inky void at her feet.

The gigantic mutant hesitated at the brink with almost comic uncertainty written on its bestial face. Donna felt a brief flash of hope that it might just give up and go find someone else to eviscerate. No such luck. It carefully placed one broad foot on the spar and stretched out to seize her with its ape-like arms. The metal creaked in protest under its weight.

Donna ducked beneath its scaly arms and desperately fired her laspistol into its face. The shot only singed, but that was enough to make the giant rear back, its arms windmilling for balance. She hung on for dear life as the rusting beam shook wildly, and then aimed a vicious kick at the creature's ankle.

Her thick boot heel struck bone with a satisfying crunch. The giant granted in surprise and teetered past the fatal point of no return, gathering speed like a falling pillar as it pitched sidewise into the Abyss with a disconsolate wail. Donna almost fell off, too, trying to watch him disappear into the darkness below.

Scavvies were skulking on nearby heaps of rubble. They had long muskets and bullets zinged off metal and rocks near Donna but nothing came even close to hitting her. Generally speaking, scavvies were the most appalling shots and had poor weaponry to go with it, but they compensated by making sure numbers were most definitely on their side. There was no going back that way, not for a while at least. Donna holstered her laspistol and hung off the spar with both hands so she could swing along beneath it and get some cover. As she did so, she spotted a cracked half-pipe jutting out below the edge of the dome floor nearby. It was hard to ignore the vast,

hungry gulf at her back as she clambered over to the pipe, but Donna didn't freeze and made it across before her strength gave out.

A rank stench and an ooze of old slurry flowing from the pipe told her it was for waste disposal, but she wasn't fussy It was this or go back into battle, and Donna reckoned she had seen her fill of fighting for this shift. She decided that she definitely would rather crawl away down a pipe full of effluent.

A CRACKLING SOUND and a shower of sparks over on the roadway caught her attention and distracted her from the earnest Enforcer Hanno. At first she thought there had been some kind of accident among the lines of moving vehicles, hut then she looked more closely at the roadway and realised she was mistaken. It wasn't a solid road at all. It was a wide, grid-like mesh of thick rails that fizzled and spluttered with vagrant electricity in the cloying mist. A vehicle breaking away from the steadily moving traffic stream had caused the sparks. It had jumped onto different rails that curved over to the walkway where she and Hanno stood.

As the vehicle drew closer, Donna saw a blank-eyed servitor at the controls. It was severed at the waist and attached to a turntable at the prow. A long, narrow hull covered by a grimy plastiglas cabin stretched back behind it, large enough to carry perhaps twelve. At the rear of the felucca, a larger turntable bore what looked like a huge crab claw, but instead of gripping the rails it only touched them with its two points, seeming to stick there and carry the whole weight of the craft. The arcane sciences of electromagnetism were at work.

D'onne waited for Hanno to open the door for her before going onboard first, intending to turn at the threshold and send him away. She was so shocked at what she saw inside,

However, she completely forgot about him for a moment. The narrow bench seats inside the felucca showed that it was intended for transporting at least forty or fifty people, with overhead rails for others to steady themselves while standing. D'onne was mortified at the idea of so many people crushing themselves into the filthy vehicle and was glad that the nose plugs kept out the stink of the unwashed. Although the felucca was

only half full at most, D'onne stood and gripped a rail; she couldn't face sitting on one of the hard plastic benches amid the filth.

Hanno stepped neatly aboard behind her and slid the door shut. Without further delay the felucca swung on its turntable and started picking up speed in the direction of the main traffic flows.

D'onne suddenly saw that the streams of vehicles hung both above and below the rails. Weaving, splitting and rejoining, their head and tail lamps made knotwork traceries in the mist. Buildings swirled past: great slabs like tombstones pierced by roads at different levels, skeletal towers covered in lights, squat-looking steely ziggurats. All different, all ugly.

Enforcer Hanno took off his helmet and regarded her levelly as if about to say something. He had cropped hair that was greying at the temples and a craggy, not displeasing countenance D'onne would have labelled 'honest' if it weren't for his eyes. They were pale grey and all-too-sharp, glittering from his otherwise impassive face like stab-lights, probing, examining, weighing and measuring.

D'onne was frankly offended and responded with a look that was withering enough to send Enforcer Hanno's gaze skating off elsewhere. She pointedly turned back to watching Hive City slide past. They were descending between two towering blocks inter-connected by a multitude of bridges, or it might have been a single block cloven through by the road. It was hard to be sure.

Without warning, the felucca juddered to a halt, almost throwing D'onne off her feet. She looked up, expecting to see the blocks sliding past vertically as they fell to their deaths, but saw they were stationary aside from a slight swaying that may have been her own unsteadiness. Without thought she sat down on one of the benches with a bump. Near-death experiences were coming way too thick and fast at present and she was feeling distinctly weak at the knees.

Hanno creaked uncomfortably in his armour and tried to sound formal and comforting at the same time. 'Swing shift, nobledam. There's always a power drop so they clamp off the road net temporarily to avoid accidents. Here they come now!

He was looking out of the grimy plastiglas window at the bridges, D'onne realised, and all the other vehicles had stopped too, just as he had said. She looked down in horrid fascination. Where the bridges had been

all but empty before, they were now filling with the tiny dots of moving people. Thousands, tens of thousands thronged the bridges within sight alone. There were two streams on each bridge crossing in opposite directions. One stream was swift and disciplined, almost martial. The other was sluggish and meandering. One shift of proles were coming off the lines and returning to their habs, and another shift was coming from their habs and going to the lines.

On occasion the two flows intersected in violent little swirls. At one bridge in the distance D'onne saw black-armoured enforcers wading in to separate them. In another place several tiny figures fell from one bridge onto another, the tiny ripples of their impact conveying none of the carnage they must have wrought on those below. Hanno called in something on his vox at that and D'onne turned away from the sight. It was too reminiscent of a murder less fresh than the one presently in her mind, but more painful.

'Stupid!'

D'onne realised immediately that Hanno wasn't addressing her, he was watching the ritual anarchy of swing shift and talking to himself. Caught up in the moment, he had voiced his inner thoughts, forgetting she was even there. He thought swing shift was stupid. Interesting - a hit of a reformist at heart too, this Hanno - she could work with that.

A moment later they jolted forward as the traffic started moving again. D'onne felt a tiny stab of guilt as they swept past platforms crammed with proles. No doubt they were waiting for feluccas like this one to take them back so they could begin their downtime: ten precious hours in their habs before they were on the lines again.

'OFFICER HANNO, WHY do they fight?' D'onne discovered the taint wasn't as bad as she'd feared when she opened her mouth, and besides she was going to have to get used to it.

'Every reason you can come up with, nobledam. Anger, frustration, revenge, jealousy, prestige, spite, self-gratification, goods, money, men, women, drugs, even pets. There are antagonistic work-gangs on different shifts that elevate quota-rivalries to the level of house warfare. That's all

without any real inter-house conflict to contend with!' Hanno's voice was weary and edged with contempt.

'You haven't answered my question, Hanno. I asked why they fought, not what reasons they give you for it.'

Hanno looked at her shrewdly. She recognised the look of someone wanting to say something they felt was controversial and bursting to share their view with someone else.

'Because they have no hope of salvation!'

D'onne decided to dig a little deeper. 'Really? Not shortages or austerity measures or the eighty-hour work cycle?' These were all things her tutors had cited as causes of unrest.

Hanno shook his head. 'It's my belief that all these can be borne, have been borne in the past, when men have hope of a better future!

He looked back at the city outside. They were still descending, the blocks rising higher above them all the time and the felucca passing through more and more tunnels as they wormed deeper into Hive City's guts.

'Did you know that some logistician has calculated that if someone fell from those bridges every time we took a breath, then newborns in the city would replace them a hundredfold before we took another? We have made a place that makes and breaks men faster than we can breathe!

D'onne was thrilled that Hanno was so easy to draw out and now she couldn't resist going further. No doubt he had harboured feelings of disquiet for a long time and had been unable to voice them to anyone. The truth is that everyone liked the sound of their own voice. The speaker just had to believe that the listener was interested in what they had to say.

And how can it be made right? What would give them hope?'

Hanno spread his hands out helplessly. 'I... I don't know!'

Stupid! She had pushed too soon. Now Hanno had reverted back to his introverted manner instead of remaining extroverted and expansive. Her tutors would have scolded her for such an elementary blunder. To speak any more on this topic would only serve to make him sullen. It was time for a subject change.

'Is it much further?' D'onne asked in a dignified yet vulnerable voice, hoping to draw him back to his protector role.

'No, nobledam. We are almost at the border of Escher territory now, proceeding to a main interchange to seek access!' Predictably, Hanno put his helmet back on. Doubtless it made him feel more comfortable after the moment of vulnerability he had shown. Encouragingly, he left his vox unconnected for the time being so he spoke normally.

'Do you have a preferred point of entry, nobledam?'

'The closest'

'Very good, nobledam.'

The roadway was converging with many others, plunging into a conical well where the traffic's controlled procession broke up into a maelstrom of turnoffs, docks and lay-bys. The felucca came to rest at the bottom of the well beside a broad pavement of white stone. A great portcullis of glittering chrome reared above them, so baroque and heavy-looking that it had to be ornamental.

Members of House Escher were scattered everywhere but Hanno and D'onne were quickly singled out and approached by armed House Escher guards in combat fatigues. They approached the enforcer warily, but not at all deferentially. Just as the stories had claimed, every member of House Escher was female. Many were craning an ear to find out what was happening. Strangers here were obviously rare.

'What is your business here, enforcer? Why were we not informed of your arrival?' The house guards were brusque and edgy with Hanno, and they barely even seemed to notice D'onne. She stepped between them and Hanno before he could reply, ready to deliver the lines she had been rehearsing ever since she exited the Spire.

'This enforcer has been good enough to accompany me here for my safekeeping,' she said in her best Spire accent. 'I am D'onne Astride Ge'Sylvanus Ulanti, and I formally seek sanctuary with House Escher.'

THE ABYSS

Are you not men?' Mad D'onne challenged, her magnificent bosom heaving with scarcely controlled passion. 'Wouldst you let your poor women and babes be slaughtered and Dust Falls burn about your ears while you sit here drinking and gambling and hiding from the fight?'

The gangers had hung their heads in shame at that. To be scorned for want of bravery was bad enough, but to be impugned by a lady of the Spire, one who had shared the many hardships and adventures of the Underhive at their side, that was almost too much to borne. One fierce fellow, a mighty Goliath named Krug Hammerhand, spoke up for all. 'Pray tell us nobledam, how can we save the settlement? Is it too late?'

She drew her slender duelling sword and brandished it high. 'A woman I may be, but this I learned at my father's knee. It is never too late for cold steel and the fierce resolution of true men to win the hour. Come with me now to the gate and we shall see what can be done!

And such was her beauty and such was the virtue of her words that the fighters readied their arms and came willingly, where not even Lord Helmawr could have commanded them to go before.

> They marched to the walls and set about the foe with the awesome fury of true men. The battle raged ceaselessly for hours. On the one hand stood teeming multitudes of foul, tainted abominations hungering for human flesh, on the other stood the stalwart folk of Dust Falls, resolute in their faith. Shoulder to shoulder they fought, Delaque beside Orlock, Goliath beside Escher, Van Saar beside Cawdor and always D'onne at the fore. Wave upon wave of horrors were forced back into the abyss from whence they came. D'onne's mad bravery inflamed them all to ever greater efforts. Wherever the battle-line bent, she held them. Wherever the enemy retreated, she attacked, but a dire tragedy struck the gallant defenders with their victory all but won. Brave D'onne was seen battling at the brink of the abyss with a mutant giant of tremendous stature and scales of grey iron. After a titanic struggle she laid it low with a mighty blow to its brow, yet even as it fell the beast carried her over the edge and into the pit. Hearts were broken and men wept openly to see the noble lady lost so.
>
> — -Excerpt from *Tales of Terror and Adventure Chapter XXIV - How Mad D'onne Saved Dust Falls, Free Salvation Press.*

DONNA WAS SPLASHING along a sewer pipe somewhere beneath Dust Falls. A scarf across her face was failing to keep out the eye-watering stench and she was in a mood to match the stink. Every few minutes she stopped, listened and shook her head before moving on again. She was lost

in the labyrinth of pipes and had been for hours since escaping the battle. Now she thought she could hear something else moving down there. Every time she halted, the sound of splashing carried on for a second or two before stopping. At first she had convinced herself it was just weird echoes of her own progress, but that didn't explain why the sound kept getting closer.

Splash-splash-splash.

The Pig was out of juice, Seventy-six was down to a half charge. Her arm was still tingling with the aftereffects of Kell's poisoned blade. If it came to a fight she would be at a serious disadvantage.

Splash-splash-splash.

Every hundred steps or so there was an alloy inspection ladder hanging down from a vertical shaft in the top of the pipe. She had tried climbing up the first half dozen ladders she found but every one had ended at a cover that felt suspiciously like it was sealed shut by tonnes of compacted rubble on the other side. After that she had given up and had tried to navigate the confusing branches and turns of the sewers instead. She had considered marking her progress with scratches on the wall to help find her way, but now she didn't want to leave a handy trail for whatever was following her.

She consoled herself with the fact that her noble laspistol was still as brim full of power as it would be had it never been fired. She was far from defenceless.

Splash-splash. Stop.

In the distance: *Splish-splash-splish-splash.* Then nothing. The sound died away abruptly as if something else had stopped to listen. Donna wet her lips beneath the scarf. This was not good.

She went up the next ladder she came to and found it blocked like all the others. Instead of climbing back down, she wedged herself in the narrow shaft with her feet pushing her back into the opposite wall. She pried a few small chunks out of the cracked rockrete and dropped them into the sewage below to simulate the sound of her jumping back down into the main pipe.

Splash.

She waited. Minutes dragged by and her calves started to cramp up. She tried to ignore the nagging sensation and focus on the dark instead. When Donna had first come to the Underhive it had seemed a realm of inky

midnight to her. The Spire is a place of sunlight and open, airy chambers where filterglass and silvered armourplas is as common as steel and iron is below. When access to open skies becomes a statement of power and influence, every artifice and architecture is used to put it on display. Even in the inner hub of the Spire there were countless balconies, promenades and vista windows overlooking the open spaces of the arboreta.

Nothing had prepared her for the impenetrable gloom she had encountered, nor for how the yellow sodium, lurid neon and bright halogen of the settlement lights could only push it back for a space but could never defeat it. Eventually Donna made friends with the dark and began to appreciate it like all Underhivers do. Once your eyes become adjusted you start to understand that what people mean when they say 'pitch-dark' usually means little more than 'there's less light than I'm used to.'

The truth was the slightest scatter of photons would be picked up and processed by those hungry little cones and rods inside your eyes. In normal light your brain had plenty to handle without trying to utilise every tiny shred of information - it just kind of fudges it like a pict journalist does. If there was a hive quake they wouldn't show you every fallen stone and broken bone, you just got a few picts of fires and mortuary wagons and your imagination would fill in the rest. The point being, when they know there's been a hive quake anyway, human beings are curious and want to know more, but not every last detail. That's what human brains are like. As long as it thinks its got the big picture, it's not too bothered about the details.

But when your brain gets starved of its normal levels of info it pays more attention to what it has got available. After an hour or two in the dark, a human brain would start to realise it's not really 'pitch-dark' anywhere in the Underhive. A faint backwash of light from settlements and even caravans carries remarkably, reflecting off rockrete here and getting absorbed by shadow there to give a grey, grainy illumination for kilometres around, not unlike moonlight.

The hive was full microscopic fungi and lichens everywhere, giving off a faint phosphorescence that could be used to navigate through pipes and tunnels. Most old structures and machines had lamps and telltales shining out like beacons even though their long-dead masters would say that they were but dim ghosts of their former selves.

With the help of her bionic eye, Donna had found that the dark was the greatest ally a lone fighter could have in the Underhive. It became your both her cloak of invisibility and her sanctuary in one.

Peering down into the darkness, Donna saw it getting lighter in the pipe at the bottom of the ladder and thought somehow that her hunter had crept up silently enough that she hadn't heard anything. Nothing appeared in sight and she waited, fretting about how exposed she would be if whatever it was chose to just look up. Still nothing. She was about to climb down and look when she heard a whisper of sound.

Splish-splash-splish-splash.

It sounded like a group. The sewage threw what light diere was into thin pearly ropes on its surface as it rippled in response to the not-too-distant disturbance. Donna caught the faint clink of metal on stone, and the murmur of breath rasping from unhealthy-sounding lungs.

Splish-splash-splish-splash.

The light grew stronger and gained an amber colouration. There was a group coming. Donna froze, willing her calves to stop trembling for a moment. A shape appeared at the bottom of the shaft, weirdly underlit by something casting a diffuse fountain of light that was caught and reflected by the slurry. Donna mentally flipped her bionic eye to a passive thermal scan. Ethereal blooms of heat from the skin of the weird figure below betrayed its shape to Donna's enhanced vision as it glanced up the shaft towards where she was hiding.

It looked like a Delaque.

Donna held her breath as the Delauqe seemed to look straight at her. Part of her mind registered that the light beneath his upturned face was the tiny glow from a power readout on the ganger's laspistol.

After an endless moment, the black-goggled face turned away and the figure moved further along the pipe. Donna willed herself to breathe in slowly without gasping.

'Crap,' the Delaque whispered. He made a low whistle.

Others moved down the pipe: six, maybe seven in all, it was hard to be sure. It was also hard to hear their voices when they spoke. The sibilance characteristic of this particular Delaque gang was always dancing at the edge of perception. There was something about 'Ulanti bitch' and 'bounty'. It sounded like there was a disagreement going on. She heard 'back' -

which could have been about going back or a reference to the dead bounty hunter Kell Bak, or to his live cousin, Shallej. Once again she wished for a frag-grenade but knew it would probably kill her as well with the Shockwave in such tight confines.

One voice was raised above the whispers, and it held the tones of command.

'We split up and keeping looking,' it rasped. 'The bitch can't get to Relli. Those are Bak's orders.'

And that, apparently, was that. The group waded off along the pipe without another word and would no doubt start splitting up at each junction they came to. That left Donna in a prime position to descend and go in entirely the opposite direction. Or it would have done if they hadn't left one of their number behind to watch out for her in case she doubled back. The lookout was out of sight from Donna, but by the amber light she could guess it was the same ganger they had sent to scout ahead. 'Ganger' was a misnomer. He was evidently a fresh-meat juve and jittery as hell.

It was typical of these particular Delaque to send in an expendable first, one with a half-empty laspistol, and then to leave the kid behind as a back marker. All he had to do was scream or fire his weapon and the rest of the gangers would be back in an instant. Hell, he could even be bait for a trap.

The sad fact was that Donna couldn't stay hidden in the shaft indefinitely, as sooner or later the juve would get bored and start poking his nose into things he shouldn't. Juves were always doing dumb stuff - it seemed to be a rule.

Donna started to ease herself down the ladder. She planned to hook her feet over the rungs so she could swing down head first into the pipe and break the kid's neck, assuming he was obliging enough to venture into neck snapping range.

The juve was most obliging, even a little too much so. As Donna's feet reached the lowest rungs, she looked down to see the moon-faced juve was below her with one foot on the bottom of the ladder. He looked up and his mouth opened in a wide 'O' of alarm.

Donna's boot heel scrunched into his face, snapping his head back and sending broken teeth pin-wheeling into the sludge. She followed up instantly, swinging gracefully from the ladder and double-kicking his chest. His ribs were splintered into dull knives that skewered heart and

lungs as her powerful legs pistoned into him with the full weight of her body behind them.

The juve flopped against the side of the pipe and slithered into the sludge vomiting, red froth from his shattered mouth. Donna nimbly dropped off the ladder and onto his sagging chest to push him fully under the surface. He died with barely a ripple. Donna glared about her, expecting a barrage of gunfire, but all was quiet. In the distance she could occasionally hear the other Delaque splashing around through the sewers. Time to go.

She started wading back along the pipe, trying to keep quiet and look in all directions at once. She was perhaps half way back to the next junction when she heard a low whistle echoing back eerily from the direction the Delaque had taken. After a few more steps it was repeated, and a heartbeat after that Donna heard the unmistakable splashes of many men running.

Ploughing through the stinking sewage was like a waking nightmare, bent over and almost-running but moving so agonisingly slowly that she expected each step to be her last. There was a deafening rattle of shots behind her and autogun rounds whipped past as she breasted the comer. A las-bolt flashed into a hissing cloud of steam as it struck the surface of the liquid, scalding her as she dived sideways into the junction. Just as the situation seemed like it couldn't get any worse, Donna heard a distant *basso profundo* roar cut across the thunderous weapons fire. The natives were getting restless.

The firing stuttered and died away into echoes. An illusion of peace settled for a moment, but it was only an illusion. Right now, Donna knew, the Delaque would be slinking forward silently and fanning out to catch her in a net, covering the spot where she had disappeared from sight with guns alert for the first glimpse of movement.

Well screw that, Donna thought, and she kept wading until she could duck down a narrower branch in the pipes than she had tried before. Whatever monstrosity had started roaming around sounded so big, hopefully it wouldn't fit down there.

The narrow pipe gave way to a tunnel the size of a boulevard within twenty wallowing steps - so much for that plan. Donna mounted crumbling steps onto one of the walkways that ranged down either side. Now that her ears weren't filled by the sound of her own progress, she could hear all

kinds of distorted echoes in the pipes around her: continuous splashings, occasional shots or crackling salvos, more blood chilling roars, babbling or gibbering voices. Nothing was in sight; the slurry in the wide channel was serene and undisturbed, but the echoes made it sound as if the end of the world was occurring just a few steps away.

Donna was paralysed by indecision. Staying here left her exposed with no cover if anyone came out of the half dozen tributary pipes that entered the tunnel from either side. To keep moving was to risk blundering into a Delaque in the confusion, or worse still she might run into whatever they were shooting at - because it certainly wasn't her any more.

As she was standing there, her dark-adjusted eyes (real and artificial) picked up light flowing from one of the tributary pipes on the opposite side of the channel like moonlight. It was a cold phosphorescence, pallid and diffuse but it seemed unfeasibly bright in the gloom. Donna watched in horrified fascination as the light brightened perceptibly; whatever was making it was moving closer. She could hear a slithering, splashing sound coming with it that could only be made by something really, really big moving through the pipes. Little wavelets raced away from slurry pushed down the pipeway by its displacement.

The glow died away in one pipe and then started to grow in the next one. Donna heard chuffing breath and a low, throaty rumble like an engine ticking over. Was the thing was moving along parallel to the tunnel, casting about for more victims? Probably. The next pipe dimmed as it moved on. Two more pipes and it would be opposite Donna.

She had a brief internal struggle between curiosity and common sense before discovering she had no real desire to find out what it was. She selected the nearest pipe on her side and made for it, intending to put as much distance between her and the thing as possible.

Donna saw the Delaque illuminated in the tunnel mouth as he fired a single manstopper round from his shot cannon aimed straight at her head.

A scatter round would have smeared the contents of her skull across the tunnel, but the manstopper trades spread for hitting power. She was already turning and a preternaturally fast flinch meant the solid lump of lead tore a smoking hole through her dreads instead of her brain. The shock of it made Donna fall prone instantly, as though her brain was so

scared by the close call that the only thing it could come up with was to drop her like a puppet with its strings cut.

Donna wildly loosed off shots with her las - none of them even vaguely close to where the Delaque had been standing. He span away with his long coat-tails fluttering like bird's wings. He was out of sight before she recovered her aim enough to shoot accurately.

She heard him rack the slide on his shot cannon and the plop-hiss of a spent cartridge being ejected into the slurry. That sent her rolling to one side so that if he came out for a snap shot she wouldn't be right where he expected her to be. It was a standoff now with both fighters alerted, close enough to touch and with only a single corner between them. She hoped he didn't have any frag bombs.

'Ulanti bitch! You should have stayed out of the Underhive. You were a fool to come down here.' The Delaque's venomous hiss echoed from the pipe.

'What, and miss all the marvelous ambience? And the fine company?' Donna was silently shifting into a crouch by the wall and inwardly bewailing the smell of her burning hair. It was a safe guess by now that he didn't have any frags.

'Stay out of Relli's affairs or it'll be the death of you.'

She wondered what the Delaque was trying to pull, probably just covering the pipe and waiting for his buddies to arrive.

Donna caught a flicker of pallid light across her; the dim shadow she cast on the stained tunnel wall was growing. The monster!

She whipped around to see great, fanged jaws issuing from the pipe on the opposite side of the tunnel. Actually, it was more like the tunnel had grown a circle of teeth, the maw filled it so perfectly. The dull, luminescent flesh was streaked with blood and gore, tatters of skin and cloth hanging from the dagger-like fangs like grisly banners. Donna heard the Delaque snickering as he backed away to safety.

'Bon appetit, nobledam.' His whispered taunt was barely audible over the rumbling hiss of the newcomer. 'I do hope you find your dinner guest engaging.'

Donna was already running.

She didn't look back. When running for your life that only makes you trip over and lose it; your life that is. She sprinted along the walkway past

the pipe where the Delaque had been hiding. The dull boom of his shot cannon came on her heels a split second after. He was way off, and he must have been a good distance away by now, and putting in still more distance had probably become a bigger priority than covering the end of the pipe.

The analysis of the Delaque's intentions flipped through one part of her mind while another watched for broken sections of walkway or slippery patches as she ran. A third monitored the hissing, splashing progress of the thing behind her. In the corner of her eye she could see a bow wave surging along the channel after her. Whatever it was, it was big and it was fast.

Ahead the walkway and channel apparently stopped in empty air as the tunnel opened out into an inky gulf. She was cornered.

She kept running for the edge anyway. Perhaps the monster would be as dumb as the giant and just run right off it? Failing that, Donna decided she might just want to jump rather than get eaten.

As she got closer, Donna's enhanced eye could pick out that it wasn't a sheer drop, rather the channel became a sluiceway, a sheer slope at an angle of about forty-five degrees. She couldn't see if there was a walkway or steps along the side of it. Peachy.

Her ears told her that the monster was slowing down. It was smart enough to know she was trapped and it wasn't about to go charging off a concealed edge. Donna had a second to stop and take in the sluiceway before turning to confront her pursuer.

The sluiceway converged with three others into a wide vertical shaft maybe twenty metres in diameter. The mouth of the shaft was covered by a grid work of thick bars which had caught all kinds of detritus despite their wide spacing and corroded condition. Donna glimpsed fallen spars, rabble, bones, even the wreck of an old utility vehicle. It was like a huge, sagging web spun by industrial strength spiders, an image she tried put out of her mind as she span around.

The monster was regarding her with reptilian eyes from twenty metres back along the channel. From blunt snout to bladed tail tip it must have topped ten metres long, its jaws fully a third of that. Four stubby legs barely lifted its heavy body out of the slurry, but its thick, powerful tail meant it could belly-surf through the muck with surprising speed for something that weighed a good few tonnes.

Thick plates and scales covered its upper surface. Its eyes were relatively small and widely spaced, hard to hit, and as for brains - who knew? They were probably small and hard to find too. Its flesh glowed with a ashen corpse-candle light from encrusted slime or fungus, probably parasitic since it didn't look like the monster hunted primarily by using its eyes, although using taste or smell down here didn't bear thinking about.

It rumbled a challenge and scissored open its three-metre jaws to reveal rows of gleaming teeth. It definitely had the edge at close fighting - Seventy-six was quite outmatched. In fact, Donna decided, one rush and it would all be over. She had fought some big Underhive critters in her time, but never something big enough that she could stand in its open mouth and still have room to stretch her arms above her head.

She jumped down the sluiceway and immediately started sliding away towards the deceptively solid-looking surface below. The monster gave a rumbling cough of annoyance behind her and started slithering forward. She caught sight of the stumps of corroded railings to one side and kicked over towards them, stumbling onto crumbling steps at the side of the sluiceway.

Her momentum carried her forward so fast she had to skip down the rest of the steps to avoid losing her balance and going headlong. She bounded to the bottom of the sluiceway and out onto the grill over the shaft in the space of a few panic strewn seconds. Rubble dropped away treacherously beneath her feet before she had even taken two steps, but she was ready for that and neatly pirouetted to hop up onto a large fallen slab.

The monster was crawling over the edge of the sluice, using the worn old steps to slow itself down as it scraped down the slope. It looked mightily sure of itself. Donna had a sudden inkling this might be the beast's lair.

Donna kept moving, trying to reach the opposite sluiceway, but what had looked like an almost solid surface from above was a patchwork of detritus islands with gaping holes in between them big enough to swallow her whole. She had to pick her way carefully while the monster slithered forward untroubled. It was too big to even notice the metre-wide gaps let alone be impeded by them, and it was gaining on her.

She reached the bottom of the sluiceway and her heart fell. The steps on this side were completely obliterated. Climbing the slope would be too

slow - one good rear-and-snap and the monster would have her in its jaws before she got halfway up.

One of the things that had marked Mad Donna as a natural gang fighter was her ability to adapt instantly to changing circumstances. Where others would vainly cling to their plans even in the face of certain failure, she could recognise one course of action as fruitless and change to another without missing a beat. So she did here. With her retreat blocked she didn't waste a breath cursing the vagaries of fate, or attempt to climb anyway in the hope of being lucky. Mad Donna turned and levelled her laspistol defiantly.

The beast might get its kill but it was going to have to fight for it.

It crawled around the last rubble pile and lazily spread its titanic jaws wide to claim her. Donna shot it in the roof of the mouth, hoping to hit its brain. She didn't succeed in that, but she succeeded in seriously pissing it off. It hissed horribly and the jaws slammed shut with a snap loud enough to hurt Donna's ears. It lunged at her then, its four stubby legs driving it forward with shocking speed. She got off another shot aimed at its eyes but they were too small and it was moving too fast. The las-bolt creased the end of its muzzle and made it flinch reflexively back, saving Donna from being crushed against the sluiceway by its bulk. She skipped aside as it lashed its jaws furiously back and forth.

Donna saw a chance and took it, darting past the beast and towards the bottom of another sluiceway. It caught her a glancing blow with its thick tail, a flying lesson of several metres duration that left Donna braised, breathless and clutching desperately at the open grillwork so she didn't tumble through. She caught a fleeting impression of a deep well beneath her with the glimmer of sludge at the bottom stirred by restless, hungry shapes. Tearing her gaze away, she saw the monster coming for her again.

No mere flinch was going to save her this time. She aimed as carefully as she could - there was only going to be time for one shot. The tiny reptilian eyes gleamed at her with mocking intensity, as if it knew it was an impossible shot. Donna pulled the trigger... and missed. The monster opened its jaws again. There would be no reprieve this time.

Suddenly the staccato rattle of a heavy stubber filled the sluiceways with false thunder. As if the monster wasn't enough, the Delaque had caught up with her too. Sparks flew as high velocity bullets chewed up rabble and

ricocheted off the grillwork. The stream of flying lead tracked towards her and then veered into the monster. Bloody impacts stitched across its bleached flesh. Its answering roar was edged with pain for the first time.

The monster shuddered and twisted aside, crawling away through the rubble to escape its tormentor. More bursts of autofire followed its pale bulk into the gloom. A voice called down.

'Grab the line, D'onne, be quick girl!'

It was Tessera.

FORMAL SANCTUARY was a piece of law left over from the house wars of millennia ago, before there was a ruling house on Necromunda. Put simply, it meant throwing yourself on the mercy of one house in order not to be given up to another. In theory, a noble seeking sanctuary could not he ransomed off, executed or exchanged, nor held against their will. That was the theory, though it had been found wanting on a number of occasions when put to the test.

D'onne and Hanno were conducted inside the great gate without hindrance. Then they had to stand waiting while the sergeant of the guard (or whatever the Escher equivalent was) had a long, haggling vox call with their supervisor. They relieved Hanno of his shot cannon before letting him go further, although they allowed him to keep his sidearm - which was ironic considering the holstered bolt pistol he wore at his waste was a far deadlier piece than the cannon he carried.

The white paving stones outside also formed the avenue they stood on behind the gate. D'onne mused that it had been a had choice, showing its age in the millions of scuffs and drag marks on its surface. High arched ceilings and concealed uplighting gave the illusion of space, a poor imitation that left her feeling briefly homesick for the sweeping colonnades of her home.

Eventually, the guards ushered them along the avenue past lumbering cargo servitors and crowds of curious Escher who whispered in hallways as they passed. The avenue twisted and branched crazily, but they clearly took the main route throughout. D'onne realised the whole zone they were passing through was formed as part of the Escher defences in this area. The twisting avenue would disorientate attackers while its many branches

made them easy to outmanoeuvre. Doubtlessly the walls also had concealed loopholes and firing slits hidden in the stonework.

They ended their journey heading up a steep switchback ramp into some sort of communications centre that was hidden behind armoured shutters. A great pillar covered in pict screens of all sizes dominated the centre of the chamber. Maybe twenty techs were working feverishly around the pillar, making and breaking connections at its base or riding platforms to get up by the flickering panels. Servitors in the shadows quietly murmured, returning datum streams from slack lips. A raised deck to one side held a holo-globe surrounded by three women, its ruddy cast making them look like witches around a cauldron. They were the only ones paying attention when D'onne and Hanno were escorted in. Judging by their posture and dress, D'onne surmised that they were obviously ranking house members. But were they to be intermediaries or judges?

As they approached, D'onne picked up on little signs, a head turn here, a lip movement there, that all three women were speaking and listening to unseen others. Intermediaries then. It was quite possible they were just meat puppets.

'Nobledam Ulanti, welcome. Forgive the arrangements but we are at a busy time here in House Escher.' It was a formal address, polite but enquiring. The words were well measured so it seemed likely that they were the woman's own, for now at least.

However busy they were, 'the arrangements' spoke volumes about how they felt about her. They wanted to know more and right now, whatever was going on, they didn't want any political powder kegs hanging around in their halls to screw it up for them. D'onne wondered how many other senior house members were listening in. Hundreds probably.

'We understand you have requested sanctuary, nobledam, a law that has not been invoked here for centuries!

The woman paused as if listening, but it was probably to let that notion settle in for effect. She continued.

"We feel compelled to ask of you what it is you need sanctuary from, and why you feel it cannot be given to you by your own house, one that is ranked among the most powerful of the pureblood noble families!'

They could well guess what would make her seek protection outside her own family and what it portended, but they wanted it spelled out. Fine.

'My story is no easy one to tell, especially in haste. I seek sanctuary from Patriarch Sylvanus, from my father. He...'

Even a lifetime of comportment training hadn't prepared her for this. She felt Hanno's eyes boring into her, and the cool, appraising looks of the Escher were like a dash of ice water to her cluttered mind. The pause stretched out longer as everyone waited for her to continue. Gathering herself, she tried to start again.

'I am the twelfth daughter of the Patriarch Sylvanus, head of the Noble Household of Ulanti. Until age six I was brought up in the bosom of my family, among my sisters and with my mother. That all changed when one of my sisters died. No, that's not right. One of my sisters was murdered.'

'We in the Spire are taught from birth that the family will be your first loyalty, now and always, and the family's honour is your next. I was still very young when I saw that revealed as a lie. One of my own sisters pushed another to her death with the encouragement and approval of a third. Everything I thought I knew came apart at the seams that night.'

'I was placed in a narrow tower on the flank of the Spire, an ancient marvel of the lost arts with tutelage engines and exercise regulators, and machine spirits of great age and nobility. At first I believed I was therefor my protection but as the weeks passed I came to understand that I had committed some sort of crime against my family. No one came to visit me and the tower would not permit me to leave. I was imprisoned.'

'Time became hard to gauge but I think it was a year before I had my first visitor. The spirits had taught me and kept me company so 1 was happy enough, in my own terribly young way, but for the aching gap in my heart left by the absence of my family. But I began every day honestly believing things would change for the better and that my mother or my sisters would come visiting. So I was not surprised when the spirits told me to prepare myself for a visitor, just excited.'

'So imagine my shock when the lock opened to reveal not my mother or my sisters but my father, Patriarch Sylvanus, in all his finery. He berated me for my slipshod appearance and stalked around the tower for an hour, criticising me for living like an animal and being a disgrace to the family. Every time I tried to speak he angrily commanded me to silence. When I started to cry he flew into a towering rage, shouting that weakness and petty blackmail wouldn't gain me the family's forgiveness. When I

wouldn't stop crying he almost struck me. Instead he turned and left, stopping at the lock just long enough to express his own disappointment in me, all sadness now that his rage had blown over.'

'At the last he bent down to me and whispered as if he were afraid that others would hear (and the tower would, it remembered every word that was said inside it). "You must try harder, D'onne, for all our sakes." And with that he was gone.'

'Imagine the child separated from its family who hears those words - how hard does it try? With every iota of its being, with every ounce of the raw, young energy beating in its innocent heart.

'My father did not visit again for a month, but every day I scrubbed and cleansed and preened and prepared in case he might come. When he did visit again I was devastated by his criticism of my appearance once more. But this time I did not cry, and I noticed his displeasure seemed less as he stalked about the tower. He saw I had tried harder.

'This time as he left he said nothing, but as the lock slid shut I saw him give the tiniest nod. It was a token of approval I cherished to ridiculous lengths in the weeks to come.

'Sylvanus's visits were sporadic after that. Sometimes I would see him every week, at other times he would be gone for half a year. In the times between, I applied myself remorselessly to becoming a true daughter of the noble house of Ulanti. I learned how to please him, how to sense every subtle nuance of his likes and dislikes. I danced and sang for his pleasure, apparelled myself suitably for all occasions. I studied the thousand generations of our family history so I might discourse with him on something dear to his heart.

'He would stay longer if I did well, and reward me with gestures of approval and, sometimes, affection. I became the boldest of thieves, stealing a small smile or a happy nod from him with my antics, eluding his towering rages and cynical traps with my wits and cunning. I came to understand this was what he wanted from me, to be bold and clever, to be a true daughter of Ulanti, able to both please men and bend them to my will.

As I came to womanhood he completed my training as I came to understand it with arts of etiquette and romance, the techniques of wooing and being wooed, being hunter and prey... Our relationship changed through that time as I became increasingly wilful and challenging, I think,

to him. I gained the impression that he only valued my opinion when it mirrored his own. He decided the time had come and announced that I was to be married off to another house!'

As she spoke, Donna noticed the pict screens on the pillar were blinking out one by one. There seemed to be some agitation among the techs surrounding it. The Escher facing her remained serene. She mentally shrugged and carried on.

'I'm told the competition among my suitors was fierce. There were many duels and the bride price I commanded was astronomical. House Ko'iron emerged as the victors, and their eldest son was to be married to the youngest daughter of Ulanti.'

'Wait please, nobledam,' one of the Escher said. All three of them wore that distracted look again. Over at the pillar the pict screens were coming back on again one by one.

Each screen showed a new scene of violence: a transporter wrecked and broken open, its cargo strewn across the slabway; a rioting mob hurling themselves at a line of enforcers; a compound being invaded by masked gunmen; a warehouse in flames; explosions blossoming along an overpass. The comm chamber they stood in trembled slightly from distant shocks in sympathy.

'Each screen shows Escher territory,' one of the Escher women said at last. 'Incidents of violence have increased four-hundred per cent in the last twenty minutes. If our estimates bear out it'll be a thousandfold within the hour!

Donna felt her mouth go dry.

"We can safely assume none of these incidents can be traced to House Ulanti, but that they all originate there. Soon the other houses will join in to take advantage of our weakness and house war may follow.

'You cannot stay here,' Tessera had told her.

DOWNTOWN

'Burn the filthy mutants!'

— Sermons of the Arch Zealot

'HOW THE HELL did you find me?'

It was Donna's first question after Avignon had hauled her up out of the monster's lair like a fish on a line. Tessera had just looked superior and all knowing at the time so she didn't hear the story properly until she wheedled it out of Tola later. Not that it ever took much wheedling to get Tola talking; it was shutting her up that was the real trick.

It turned out that Tola and Avignon had trailed Donna after she left Hagen's Place in Glory Hole. Both of them knew Donna well enough to understand there wasn't a cat in hell's chance that she wouldn't go to the warehouse to find out more. They had followed her until she climbed down to the third tier, at which point they had to go back and pay a toll-crank to get down since neither of them fancied emulating Donna's high-wire routine.

They had arrived in time to see Donna caught cold by the bounty hunters at Strakan's warehouse. When Donna made a break for it they strafed Kell's sniper's nest in the tower while she ran inside, which went a long way towards explaining why he hadn't shot her in the back at the time - the little toad was pinned down by their fire.

Once Donna had disappeared inside, Tola and Avignon ran off and hid further around the tier. They had waited for a while and when Shallej and Kell came out empty-handed they had known that she had somehow

escaped the warehouse. That's when they hightailed it out of there to tell Tessera what was going on. Simple.

Of course that didn't answer Donna's question: how the hell had they found her beneath Dust Falls? She determined to get the rest of the story out of Tessera at the next rest stop. The gang were descending into the Abyss now, heading for Down Town, which suited Donna just fine. In truth, Donna was rather touched that Tessera had gone out of her way to find her in the first place, so she stuck with the gang out of old loyalties, secretly revelling in the chance to relax a little and stop watching her back.

They were moving through layer after layer of ancient hab-domes, access ways and waste pipes, working their way back along the well-worn paths of the Abyss. The deeper they went, the more crushed down the ruins of the old hive became, compacted beneath the weight of successive generations of demolition and construction. More often than not they followed fracture lines between the strata; an old transit rail might give a few hundred metres of useable passageway beneath its rails before giving way to a sagging plaza whose collapsed roof had left enough crawl spaces to reach a semi-intact street.

They paused at a crossroads of sorts. A cracked waste pipe breached the floor, coming in from one side and crossing their path. Tessera seemed uncertain about which way to take and Donna took the opportunity to talk to her away from the others.

To Donna's eyes Tessera was looking old and tired. Her bleach-blonde hair showed grey at the roots and blackened gums marred the smile that she flashed at Donna. Tessera's face was etched with pocks and scars from a lifetime of gang fights and hardship, but the gang leader's eyes were bright and sharp, her narrow shoulders unbowed. She pre-empted Donna's question before she had even opened her mouth.

'You want to know how we found you?'

Donna grinned back. Tessera was undoubtedly one of the smartest people she had ever met, inside the Spire or out of it. She could read people like books, which was no great skill in itself when you know the basics, but Tessera had a way of making you feel glad about it.

'I like to think I'm hard to track, elusive even, but recent events have made me seriously doubt that,' Donna replied. 'In fact, I'm seriously

starting to think I'm trailing a flashing sign that says "Donna is here" in letters that you can see from Dust Falls to Two Tunnels.'

'It was easy to guess you would hit up Hanno for info.'

Ah. Yes, it was easy when Donna thought about it, except for one thing.

'You know I've got history with Hanno, but the bounty hunters don't know about it - Hanno's always been rather... circumspect about his relationship with me.'

'Of course he has, he's chief watchman of one of the larger balls of dirt in the Underhive, and he can't afford to have his name linked with Mad Donna too often -no matter how much he would like to.'

Donna nodded, that was obvious too, really, but it was nice to hear it from someone else. At least he didn't hate her.

'How Kell and Shallej knew you'd be in Dust Falls I can't say, but I'd hazard a guess that they knew where to find Relli and they knew that sooner or later you'd show up to have it out with him for dredging up your past.'

Tessera's gaze weighed up Donna carefully. That is what you intend, isn't it? A confrontation of some sort.'

'You know me too well. Relli was singularly ill-advised to bring up my past.'

'It's been an effective way of getting your attention.'

'You mean you're not the only one who knows me well enough to know which buttons to press?'

'You were always a clever one, D'onne. So who could it be?'

"There're only two people I know of in the Underhive who know me that well: one is Hanno, the other is you.'

Donna's tone was challenging but Tessera didn't even favour her with a response. She just smiled and waited while Donna's brain threw up all the million and one reasons why Tessera or Hanno wouldn't want to make trouble for her.

'So that's not it. Someone from the Spire then?'

'And you already knew that; you just didn't want it to be true so you ignored it and ran.'

Donna shot Tessera a rueful look, feeling very young and uncertain again. Oddly, it was a feeling she cherished in a way. Tessera was right, of course. She'd bolted at the first implication that spyrers were involved and

subconsciously headed for the deepest, darkest corner of the Underhive she knew of. She was running straight for whatever was waiting for her down there, like an animal being driven into a trap.

'I think there was a noble after me at Cliff Wall but I lost him.'

Tessera raised an eyebrow. Who?'

'I'm not sure. I only saw him at a distance and I thought it was another bounty hunter at the time. But thinking back, there was just something about the way he acted with the hired help that only a noble would expect to get away with down here. Hell, it was an obvious Hive City group when I think about it - too many people and not enough combatants.' She paused, remembering the sleek chrome shape of the enforcer hound slinking out of the shadows. 'And plenty of fancy Uphive tech.'

'A noble showing up on your trail is hard to put down to coincidence,' Tessera remarked.

'Sometimes you can't bury yourself deep enough, the past comes back and gets you anywhere. Hell, I never even got out of Hive Primus so I shouldn't be at all surprised when my noble kin coming looking for me,' Donna had meant to sound determined yet carefree, but her voice came out flat and emotionless instead, barely covering her bitter resignation.

Tessera's voice was calm and reassuring in the gloom. 'It'll be all right, Donna. You're quite capable of looking after yourself as I well know, and now you've got a posse of mean-ass bitches to back you up. You're not alone in this any more.'

Donna lifted her living eye to glare at Tessera. 'I didn't ask you to come. You don't normally set foot beyond Two Tunnels, so why have you dragged your girls halfway across the Underhive to find me? What's your stake in this, Tessera?'

'Now what you're really asking is why did I drag you all the way down here in the first place. Both questions have the same answer.'

'Which is?'

'If you haven't figured it out by now, talk to one of the juves, they can put you straight.'

Donna laughed. Tessera had always given her the same response when she asked some particularly dumb-witted question, ever since she had come down to start a life as the Underhive's oldest juve. Tessera had

deflected her question, but that was good enough for now. Maybe she would just ask one of the juves.

You said Kell *and* Shallej were in Dust Falls? But Kell said Shallej had gone to Two Tunnels.'

'He must have lied. I saw Shallej with my own eyes. He was heading down the Abyss with a big gang of Delaque when we arrived at Dust Falls. I stopped just long enough to talk with Hanno and then came looking for you.'

'That makes sense. I heard the Delaque talking about having orders from Bak. He must have sent some of those gangers into the sewers looking for me. But where the hell did he go?'

Tessera shrugged and rolled her eyes downward. She was right again of course. There was only one place to go at the bottom of the Abyss. The same place Relli had his manse.

Down Town.

THE CHAOTIC DEPTHS of the Underhive gave way to collapsed and compacted ruins at Hive Bottom. This was where the hive's ancient foundation layer began, a region long since abandoned and forgotten by Hive City's inhabitants. Hundreds of metres thick, it's a domain of stagnant darkness where poisoned fumes rise from the putrid sump at the Hive Bottom to choke the labyrinth of crude crawl holes and ruinous caverns around it. But Hive Bottom was far from lifeless. Things dwelt in the darkness, spawned in the toxic waste of millennia, ruined creatures hiding from even the lights of the Underhive but still breeding and multiplying in the shadows.

Down Town was the deepest permanent settlement below The Wall. It stood in the lowest portion of the Underhive, at the bottom of the ancient effluent-worn shaft men call the Abyss. Common wisdom held that it was positioned at the deepest habitable point in the Underhive, although the scavvies would doubtless argue about that, if anybody gave a damn about what muties thought. In truth, it lay even beyond the region of domes and tunnels that comprise the Underhive itself, positioned as it was upon the shores of the toxic sump lake that lay at the very bottom of the hive.

Sometimes, things crawled forth from their holes in the foundation layer, slithering up from the blackness to feed, driven by their hunger for soft, untainted flesh and warm blood. They could be glimpsed from the watchtowers of Down Town, moving through the spoil heaps as they hunted the mutant rats that feed on the refuse there. Their luminous eyes could be seen glimmering amongst the rains as they studied the progress of a slave train, watching for stragglers and wounded. Their whimpering and snarling could be heard throughout Down Town in the dark hours of lights-out, always close by but always unseen, a sound to haunt the sleep of men.

Once in a while a hunter or prospector would bring the pelt of some strange bestial thing to Down Town. Some of them were men, or used to be men, with scabrous rotting skin and talon-like nails, eyes turned to vestigial pits covered by pallid membranes or black and staring with no visible irises. Others had only the sham of human form, scaly and vile things with dripping mouths and long red tongues. Over the far wall of the Down Town Trade Hole were nailed the skins of many such beasts, hundreds and hundreds of them. Some of the hides were rotted and eaten away by time or infestation, whereas others gleamed with green and golden scales or purple and black chitin, miraculously unmarked by chemical fogs or necrotic fungi. A few of the skins were those of savages and outlaws brought in for bounty, but most were of hunters that had become prey, a warning to the rest to stay away. Mostly they did, except when the poison fogs rolled in off the sump and the people of Down Town had to fasten their doors tight.

Few descended as far as Down Town, and fewer still stayed there deliberately to make a living, although plenty end up staying unintentionally and permanently.

The journey down from Dust Falls was long and arduous to say the least, and getting down the more commonly used paths was often a battle in its own right, with rivals, outlaws, scavvies and worse things to contend with en route. The surrounding domes through the hive foundations were crushed and compacted, riddled with narrow crawl holes and infested with evil things ready to feed on the weak and unwary.

But some of the hardiest and most desperate still went, attracted by the sump lake itself and by the things that dwell in it. In the hard land of the

Underhive, there was no tougher work than that which could be found in Down Town, but there was also none more likely to get you really wealthy or really dead. Most people that went to Down Town thought they were going to get wealthy, most of them were dead wrong.

The strongest and the quickest gang fighters went to hunt the monstrous, legendary sump-spiders on the toxic lake, the great spider mares and their kin: White Skaters, Black Leviathans, Scarlet Jennies, Orange Knees, Blue Knees, Red Knees, Tippers and Runners.

Beautiful, huge and deadly, Necromundan spiders were renowned across the stars. Their faceted eyes were as hard as diamonds and greatly prized by the jewellers of a thousand worlds for their scintillating iridescence and undying lustre. The blood spilled to gain such prizes only added to their value, with nobles and merchants vying to show how many lost lives they could display in a single trinket or ornament.

With an equal share in a successful spider hunt, a man might win two fist-sized stones or more, enough to live like a prince for a year in the Underhive, if you could avoid getting killed for long enough to enjoy it. The truth was that for every successful hunt three or more failed, and even in a successful hunt motor-skiffs were overturned and men were killed with shocking regularity. Often hunts failed to return at all, and often the skiff pilots questioned just who was hunting whom out on the slick black swells of the sump lake.

Other travellers sensibly set their sights lower and came to feed off the spoils of the hunt, to bid for the carcasses. They would haggle over tough spider pelts and chitin, boil down the beasts' nutritious fat and extract their deadly venom to sell on; no part of the spider was wasted from its fangs to its spinnerets. There were a hundred petty industries thriving upon the spiders and the lesser creatures of the lake: the skimmers, sharks, slime spawn and the other nameless beasts of the deeps. Many things lived in the sump that lived nowhere else in the Underhive, probably nowhere else in the universe, a unique collection of life forms that had somehow adapted to living on the toxic lake surface or beneath it.

Many of the Ratskin colonies believed that the sump itself was the living embodiment of what they called the hive spirits. To them it was heaven, hell and perdition all rolled into one, and it was where their spirits

would go when they died before they got reborn; a hell of a lot of them hoped to come back as sump spiders, which tells you something.

The surface of the sump lake constantly roiled with a consistency that could vary from light machine-oil to molasses and back again within a hundred yards. The gases it emitted were often volatile or corrosive and methane fires and sulphur fogs chased each other across its surface.

Falling into the sump itself would be a death sentence - you'd be lucky if the poisons killed you before the corrosives melted the flesh from your bones. Either way, screaming agony for the rest of your doubtlessly short existence would be assured.

In places around the sump, huge stalagmites and stalactites of coagulated industrial waste had formed over millennia, creating organically grown cathedrals of accumulated foulness and squalor. The layers upon layers of waste mingled and accreted into insane chemical ores that were valuable but too highly corrosive or poisonous in their own right to even approach safely without the right protective gear. Many overconfident prospectors died trying to harvest these ores, and their bones were merged into growing piles that spread millimetre by millimetre, year after year, to create macabre frescoes in their curving walls.

Donna knew all of this, all the hoary old tales of Down Town, but as they approached Hive Bottom the thing she was most impressed by was the stink.

THEY WERE HOLED up on a ledge overlooking Down Town. They had to kick some milliasaurs out of the way to get in when they arrived but no one else seemed to have noticed. When Donna and the Escher showed up the creatures stormed out of their holes to bite them without a second's thought. Dumb little friks. Bullets and las-bolts blew them apart before they even got to use their much-feared venom. Rats would at least have waited until the humans' backs were turned, but that's the way in the Underhive - it takes all sorts. Now Donna and the Escher were watching and waiting, getting their first good look at Down Town.

Questing fingers of fog rolled in off the sump to probe down the narrow alleyways below. Yellow lights showed from slit windows in the high

watchtowers that seemed to be on every building, and the trading hole was closed up tight. A line of pillars jutted out like broken teeth into the lake, each one a mooring point for a shoal of flat little motor-skiffs for spider hunting. There was also the odd sump drifter nestling here and there among the skiffs, like a fat sow among piglets, an image complimented by the bobbing motion imparted to them by the lake's swells.

One shape sitting on the lake dwarfed both the skiffs and the drifters. It squatted off to the right a little, just outside the walls of Down Town at its own mooring. The roiling mist on the sump made it blurry, but Donna's crystal eye saw all. It was a fat, teardrop-shaped craft almost two-hundred metres in length with an incongruous set of stub-wings projecting out for about a third of the way along its length.

At first she had taken it for some kind of atmospheric shuttle, but it had open decks on top and a definite keel below, so whatever it was, it had been designed to travel through a fluid medium, although probably not the sump lake. It didn't look like this particular example had travelled anywhere in a long time. The wing she could see looked pitted and crumpled, the hull was rust-streaked and peeling and the whole thing was listing over slightly at its mooring. There were skeletons of similarly sized craft dotted about, their oil-streaked ribs protruding from the sump around the moorings like giant fingers. This one looked to be the last of its kind. It was Relli's manse.

'WATCHA LOOKING AT?' Tola asked.

Donna stretched out a little where she lay on the ledge before replying, but she kept her gaze focussed on Relli's place.

'Wire weed around the mooring piers, a gun tower on the shore, two more guns on deck with at least one more I can't see. I think I'm looking at about twenty guards of which up to six are Goliaths and the rest pit slaves; it's hard to be sure. I think I'm looking at maybe a dozen more people on the boat-thing: guests, staff, flunkies and all, plus one fat merchant who's the only frikkin' person that I actually want to see when I'm onboard. What are you looking at?'

'Carrion bats eating half a rat while its front half tries to crawl away. Ooh, they spotted him! Go Halfsie! Awww, they got him after all.'

Donna looked around at Tola. The girl had borrowed (probably stolen) a scope sight from one of the other gangers and was avidly watching the life and death struggles taking place all over the refuse heaps below. The rats had taken advantage of Halfsie's distraction to pull down an incautious carrion bat in return. Behold the circle of frikkin' life, Donna thought.

'Ask one of the juves,' Tessera had said. Tola wasn't a juve any more, but she remained so girlish that Donna often wondered if she were brain damaged in some way - between environmental poisoning and gang fight injuries it was pretty likely. She was an ideal candidate for the direct approach.

'Tola, why did Tessera tell the gang you were coming down here?'

'She didn't tell us anything.' Tola looked a little confused by the idea.

'Didn't anyone complain about going down the Abyss?'

It was another unwritten piece of Underhive lore that whenever The Abyss was mentioned someone would refuse to go, quoting the hoary old tales of Down Town and predicting doom for all who did. It was just like juves being irresistibly drawn to trouble, older gangers were irresistibly drawn to avoiding it.

'Ohhh,' Tola's face brightened and she grinned. 'You want to know what Tessera told us to make us come down the Abyss after you!'

Donna swallowed an urge to slap her.

'Yes, Tola!' she said brightly instead.

'Oh, Tessera didn't ask us to come and find you.'

Donna was so surprised that she forgot to be angry. Tessera ruled her gang like a dowager empress, so her next question was born out of pure incredulity.

'Well, who did then?'

'No one.'

'So let me get this right, Tola. Tessera and the gang just happened past? "Let's swing by the abandoned sewage pipes and see if anyone's down there being hunted by monsters and Delaque? Could be someone we know!" Was that it? A chance meeting as they say?'

Tola now looked thoroughly confused and Donna had run out of venom. She thought about starting over but the very idea exhausted her.

'Never mind, Tola,' Donna said, half to herself.

Tola grinned. They decided it,' she said. The whole gang decided to come, after me and Awie told them about the fight at the warehouse. We musta told them a good story.'

Donna looked around at the rest of the gang sitting or lying around on the ledge. Some were observing the settlement like her and Tola, others were resting or playing cards. She recognised maybe half of them from her early days - Tessera, Tola, Avignon, Jen and Sara. The rest were new juves and gangers Tessera must have recruited down the years. They were a hard-bitten looking crew. One of the new gangers she didn't know caught her eye as she was looking around and called out to her.

'How soon do we go in, Donna? What's the plan?' Expectant faces turned towards her.

Donna was taken aback again. 'I'm sneaking in on my own. That's the plan. You lot aren't "going in" anywhere,' she retorted quickly.

There was a ripple of discontent from the gang. At first she thought they were getting angry or sullen but, looking around at their faces again, she concluded they were mostly disappointed.

There's no point in you all getting chopped up by Relli's guns. A frontal rush would be suicide.' she explained. For all their bravado they knew that was true, they had seen the manse defences as well.

'But we can't just frikkin' sit up here while you go alone!' Jen, one of the old school gang, stood up and faced the others. We all voted to come, we can't turn back because Relli has a few frikkin' muscleboys guarding his house.'

There were giggles and calls of assent from the gang, and Donna felt the whole situation spiralling out of her control. Where the hell was Tessera? The Escher had come spoiling for a fight and weren't about to be denied one. And what was worse, they seemed to think they were here to help her!

'Look, Jen, you're only here because you and Tessera feel duty bound to look out for me because you brought me down to the Underhive all those years ago. The same goes for Tola and Avignon and Sara, too. When you brought me down from Hive City I left my old family behind and I found a new one with you.'

That made them start listening to Donna again, which was a good start. Now to put the meat in the sandwich.

'But I left the gang because I drew too much fire. Bounty hunters knew just where to come looking for me. That's how Kristi got killed and Faer lost her arm, in stupid fights we didn't need to have, which happened because of me.'

That changed things. The new gang members were looking differently at the old guard now. Donna hoped they were thinking about the realities of bleeding out from a torn artery like Kristi, or being burned like Faer. They were also looking at Donna a bit differently, too.

'Now, I'm here to chase a vendetta, another stupid fight that's no one else's but mine. It means something to me, but it means nothing to you. I'll not have more deaths on my conscience. There're enough there already and, despite rumours to the contrary, I do have a conscience.'

The finishing joke was a bit subtle, but most of the older gangers caught it and smiled. Job done: she'd communicated her perspective to them and made them relax a little. They weren't ready to rush into a fight any more.

Donna turned and walked away along the ledge towards Down Town. No one followed her.

DONNA HAD GOT maybe a hundred metres along the ledge and was just starting to think about milliasaurs when she heard grating stones behind her. She whipped around with a drawn laspistol to find Jen coming along the ledge after her. Reliable, dumb Jen couldn't take a hint. Donna ignored the vagrant part of her brain that said, 'Just shoot her,' and waited.

Jen came and stood beside Donna, her burly tattooed shoulders making her look petite and demure by comparison.

'Nice try, Mad Donna,' Jen said. She grinned at Donna and flung an arm around her that made her tense at the unaccustomed contact. The only times Donna usually got this close to someone was when she was killing them. 'But you're wrong t' think your fights mean nothing to us. You're a frikkin' legend, girl.'

Donna shrugged to get free of Jen's bear-iike grip. 'No no no. I'm just a frik-up, Jen, an aberration, not anybody's frikkin' legend,' she snarled. The embrace suddenly tightened, pinning her closer.

'Now listen up, Donna, and listen frikkin' good,' Jen hissed low and murderously in her ear. Jen looked big and threatening close up, but old

habits ensured that Donna didn't flinch.

The words came tumbling out of Jen like she'd been thinking about them for a long time. Maybe she had. She never had been a great orator but her low, urgent voice held such passion it certainly came from the heart.

'You *are* a frikkin' legend,' she hissed, 'and I'll tell you why. People come down here because they want a new start, because they think that Hive City is frikked up and they want to be free of it and there's nowhere else to frikkin' go.

'But there's a lot more who dream of it but never make it - they're too frightened of losing their pict feed or their shower, or their two meals a day, or their friends on the line or their precious frikkin' *routine*.'

'But now... now they've got *you*, a frikkin' noblewoman from the frikkin' Spire who made the choice to come down to the Underhive and survived. *You* turned your back on all those comforts, and more privilege than a frikkin' prole in the city can even dream about, but you're still here. So now a lot of people have got to thinking that if you can make it in the Underhive then so can they.'

'I didn't have any choice-' Donna managed to interject but it sounded weak even in her ears. Jen pounced on the statement with almost feral glee.

'Yeah, you did! Yes you so frikkin' had a choice! You coulda stayed in the frikkin' Spire an' your da would've covered things up. In fact, he did as best he could from what you've said. You woulda been forgiven an' ya know it, and I reckon that's half o' why you never looked back. You didn't *want* to go back even if they'd frikkin' let you. You made the brave choice, the one with pride, to go it frikkin' alone. Besides which, I swear there's not a man in Hive Primus who doesn't treat women better because of what you did up there in the Spire. I'll bet even frikkin' Helmawr is nicer.' Jen grinned happily and punched Donna on the shoulder. It hurt.

'So, sorry girl, but you're it, and no one gives a flying, fridge-arsed frik why it happened in the first place. That's all part of the... you're like one of those frikkin' logos in church, y'know, a picture that means something because it's a bit of a story.'

'An... an icon?' Donna managed to stammer.

'Yeah that's it. You're a frikkin' icon. And we aren't going to stand around with our frikkin' thumbs up our butts while someone friks with our icon.'

SHE WOULD ALWAYS remember that morning. Every detail of it stood out vividly, no matter how hard she tried to forget them.

It was the morning of her first meeting with her husband-to-be and D'onne was as tense as a strung bow. Sleep had been elusive and she had spent much of the night studying the hereditary rolls of House Ko'iron. They revealed a house that was not exactly the brightest star in the Necromundan firmament, maintaining its position in the Spire courtesy of ownership of several ramshackle Hive City manufactoria districts and a few choice offworld charters.

Sylvanus had proudly informed her that Ko'iron had offered a magnificent bride price, fully three times that anticipated. All D'onne could think was that they must be desperate. A direct tie to house Ulanti meant family contracts and favourable supply rates, so Ko'iron could not help but prosper by it. But they must have virtually bankrupted themselves winning Sylvanus's approval. Did they really believe that their fortunes would be won through her betrothal? D'onne had realised then that she knew Sylvanus better than them, and that his plan was to swallow up their remaining assets and turn them into his puppets. She was bait.

How would he dose the trap on them? A succession of loans offered to tide them over? Sureties taken with the promise that they would never he realised? Perhaps he would use a quick and aggressive acquisition of their properties while their stock was unexpectedly weak. All ably assisted by his own spy in their camp, the seemingly demure little D'onne. Sylvanus might decide to secure the reigns of power using the old ways, the ways of blade and poison, and D'onne had trained herself for that eventuality too.

Her gown had been delivered the night before. The morning was spent with servitors jabbing her with blunt needles as they tailored it to her nubile body. It was a fantastic creation of elegantly spun metal and chromium mesh, fit for an industrial queen. It split at the small of her back to reach over her breasts and up to a high collar. Ladder-panels traced the curves of her hips before plunging down her legs to show creamy glimpses of calf and thigh. A fantastic froth of silver tracery was caught at her throat, bust and hem. The metal chimed softly when she walked or talked, adding ethereal music to her every movement.

It was also heavy, chafing, hot where it covered her flesh and cold where it left her back, shoulders and arms uncovered. D'onne hated it before

thirty minutes were up.

She had found picts of Marneus Ko'iron, eldest son the house - Count Ko'iron to give him the correct honorific. He had chiselled, granite-like features that looked to have been weathered beneath strange off world suns. His craggy nose and jaw were emphasised rather than softened by his moustache. He looked old to D'onne, although the records showed him as only four decades her senior. Kadotti's Testimonial listed his interests as hunting, metallurgical antiquaria and Saljuk breeding (an offworld ruminant, apparently).

He sounded exactly as D'onne would have expected the first son of a noble house to be. He sounded proud, pompous and stuffy, like all Spire nobility in fact. She struggled not to let her preconceptions colour her preparations for their first meeting, now only a few hours away. According to formal Spire etiquette, when the suitor and his would-be fiancee were first introduced (with the approval of both families of course) it could be at either a public function or a private one. Some scandalous public episodes in the past had influenced most noble houses towards private meetings as the first chance for both participants in a forthcoming union to get the measure of each other. So, with faux-casualness, Count Ko'iron was to come calling for dinner with D'onne Ulanti at the tower where she had dwelled alone for over a decade. Who said that romance was dead?

She had selected a light menu that she had hoped he might appreciate, all of it imported foodstuffs free of the chemical tang of local Necromundan fare. She fretted over which perfumes to wear as nimble-fingered servitors wove her hair into a dazzling cascade of gold hung with beads of blood-red ruby, topaz and yellow cats-eye agate. The art of mixing perfumes for the correct occasion had long been acknowledged as one of the finer social graces of the Spire. She desperately wanted the count to know she had studied and practiced it as adroitly as any noblewoman. D'onne chose a simple trinary arrangement in the end: dianthe as a base to give an underlying scent of freshness and sweetness; a cinnamon medium to hint at spice and sexuality; an amarylis catalyst for sophistication.

As the hour approached, she ensured that the table was correctly laid, then swept to the lock in all her finery, awaiting the count's arrival there and trying to remain calm. The appointed hour came, and then went, with

no sign of the count. D'onne paced up and down fretting helplessly, but she had no way to know what might have happened to him. An accident perhaps? Or unexpected business? She waited on tenterhooks, not knowing what else to do.

Over an hour after the appointed time the loch slid open.

'Count Ko'iron,' the tower announced laconically.

D'onne's sense of grateful release instantly dissipated as the count exited the lock. He was not alone. Two hulking bodyguards entered the tower with him, still laughing raucously at some jest the count had just made. The first bodyguard insolently eyed D'onne in all her finery and made some crude comment to his compatriot. Ko'iron didn't even bother to look at her.

She curtsied. 'Count Ko'iron, I am honoured by your presence. Thank you for coming!'

The count deigned to notice her for the first time when she spoke. His cold eyes measured her up like a saljuk that he was considering purchasing.

'Indeed, D'onne, the pleasure is all yours,' he slurred. The two lackeys sniggered. D'onne realised the count was drunk.

She fought the urge to scream at him to leave, or to run and lock herself away from this intruder. But Sylvanus had trained her too well for that; she knew she could win this oaf around and a part of her relished the prospect of doing so. So instead of fleeing she smiled and steered the count to the dining chamber with gestures and touches of his elbow.

'I've heard all about this place! he sneered as they passed along the companionway. 'Haunted they say I' He kicked the wall with an elegantly tooled boot. 'Hoi Spirits! Avauntl' The bodyguards laughed obediently with him, but D'onne's guts froze. Was he attempting to be as crass as possible? Or was the man himself really so boorish?

They reached the chamber and she ushered him inside. When the two bodyguards moved to follow, it was a measure of her anger that she stood bodily in the doorway to stop them and said, 'Gentlemen, you forget yourselves. This is an engagement for us to acquaint ourselves privately and discreetly, not a drinking club!'

They were surly but wouldn't meet her furious gaze. They retreated outside and D'onne closed the door with a snap. The count was already

poking at the sweetmeats on the table with a frown. She crossed to his side in a few quick strides, struggling to control her anger.

'What kind of muck is this?' he muttered petulantly.

'Why, my dear Count, as well travelled as you are I had hoped you might appreciate a taste from distant stars.' She tried to sound seductive and coquettish but had the uncomfortable feeling her anger edged her voice with too much sarcasm for that. The count appeared not to notice.

'I have learnt only that foreign muck is always foreign muck,' he grunted obstinately.

D'onne took a deep breath and seated herself. Hearing raucous laughter outside the door, she fretted for a moment at what the guards were doing. In truth it was only a welcome distraction from her immediate issues. Count Ko'iron was now sprawled in a chair and brazenly staring at her breasts.

'Not bad,' he muttered, 'not bad at all!

D'onne's heart scrunched up a little bit tighter, more so than she had thought possible even when Sylvanus was tormenting her. She had never felt as trapped and desperate as she did now. She tried talking to the count more, exploring his views, his personality. Each opening gambit was ruthlessly crushed, her opinions derided or dismissed on principle. Unless the count considered himself a complete authority on the subject (which he did about many things with little qualification) it was deemed an irrelevance. D'onne was to be his adornment for social functions, to fawn her appreciation of the great man he apparently thought himself to be. She was a piece of meat that would be used to breed a Ko'iron heir.

It occurred to D'onne that the count had been raised to be nothing other than her polar opposite. Where she had been taught to be cunning and manipulative, he had been trained to be obstinate and stupid. Where she knew only how to woo and persuade, he had learned only how to dismiss and belittle. She saw their life together spanning, out into the future, a life filled with eternal battles for supremacy, of infidelity and lies and hate.

DONNA'S MEMORIES LAPSED there. There were only shreds of reminiscences left, fragments wedged so deep inside her mind that she couldn't shed them entirely. She remembered playfully sitting in his lap

and picking at food with a fork. She remembered his hands on her and the hot flash of anger she hid as she turned to him. But the rest was a merciful blank.

The next thing she clearly remembered was standing in the companionway with a laspistol in her hands, looking back to see the dining chamber carpeted with the sprawled bodies of the count and his two guards. The lock cycled open beside her, making her jump, but, for the first time she could remember, no one was inside it. She ran inside without another backward glance, and a moment later she tasted a freedom she had not known she was a little girl.

Rumour had it that she dug out Ko'iron's eyes with a fish fork. Donna herself didn't know if that was true, but she had certainly attacked him - that much she could be sure of. However, if her memories of that day were true, as she always assured herself that they were, then the bastard most definitely deserved it.

THIRTY MINUTES

'Oh, poor old man your Mare will die,
And we say so, and we know so,
Oh, poor old man your Mare will die,
Oh, poor, poor old man,
We'll hoist her up to the main yardarm,
We'll hoist her up to the main yardarm,
Say I old man your Mare will die,
Say I old man your Mare will die,
We'll drop her down to the depths,
And down, down she'll go,
We'll drop her down to the bottom,
And down, down she'll go,
We'll sing her down with a long, long roll,
Where the sharks'll have her body and the devil have her soul.'

— 'The Dead Mare Shanty'

STILL WATERS RUN deep. Donna looked at the slick, roiling surface of the sump and felt a moment of sick sensation at realising that something goes much, much deeper than you thought was possible. Jen's words were still ringing in her ears: 'You're a frikkin' icon, Donna.' Here she was at the absolute bottom, both literally and figuratively, a millimetre away from the accumulated waste of a million billion trillion hivers over many, many

centuries and she still couldn't escape her rep. Instead she was paddling towards a boat full of armed men with only the vaguest idea of a plan. No wonder they called her mad.

Paddling the flat little skiff she'd stolen was hard work. The peeling flank of Relli's manse was some way off still. Sometimes the sump clung tenaciously to her keel, at others she glided silkily across the poisoned waters. The effort was making her sweat. Acid mist tingled at her skin and the rebreather mask she was wearing struggled to filter out something breathable from the air.

She'd swung out onto the lake at first, gambling that the guards would be watching the shoreline and that any denizens of the deep wouldn't be swimming this close to the settlement. But it was slow going, and time wasn't on her side. Jen's parting words had been unequivocal.

'Thirty minutes, and then we're comin' to get ya out. Thirty minutes to do ye business quiet, an' then it'll get loud.'

She inched across the surface towards the bloated behemoth with agonising slowness. If Donna got spotted at this point she was well and truly screwed, caught in the open with no way to advance or retreat.

The boat-thing looked even bigger when you got close up to it. Whatever Relli's other shortcomings, he'd obviously commanded plenty of credit at some time. Not that he would have bought deeds to this place or anything, but being able to occupy it meant having enough muscle and business sense to keep away rivals.

Right now it looked virtually abandoned, only a few portholes showing any light. It could probably house a hundred times as many people as were aboard it right now, although doubtless a lot of space was given over to cargo storage and defunct machinery.

An eternity of maybe ten minutes brought her beneath the curve of the prow. Her theory, plus what she'd observed from the ledge, seemed to hold true. Those guards who were covering that massive area thought that the sump was impassable so they barely gave it a second glance.

Now came the real fun part.

Tendrils of wire weed were starting to quest at the skiffs low gunwales; she didn't have much time. Donna unwound a hook and line, span it three times and looped it up to the deck high above. It caught fast first try. Only

speed and dumb luck would stop her being spotted now, but there was no other way on board.

Donna was still shimmying up the line when a broad, ugly face sporting an orange Mohican peered down at her over the rail and cursed. The wide bore of a gun swiftly followed the ugly face.

'Come a'board girly, yo're expected,' the Goliath guard called jovially. 'Jest keep it nice an' slow nah.'

While hanging on the line there wasn't much Donna could do. It was just too fine to grip one-handed and try shooting it out. She heard a disconsolate plopping sound from below her as wire weed pulled the stolen skiff beneath the surface of the sump. No way out there either.

'Ok, ok,' she said quickly, and rather shakily climbed the rest of the way up. She heard the Goliath call other guards from further along the deck. Donna couldn't fathom how she had so badly underestimated their alertness. While she had been watching from the ledge, the guards had idly wandered about on occasion but mostly stayed below decks. There was only one likely explanation, and it was an ugly one.

One of the Escher had sold her out.

Just why had Tessera really been missing earlier? Surely not? Donna's stomach flip-flopped at the thought.

The Goliath took a step back to let her get on the deck. Out of the corner of Donna's eye she could see pit slaves and another Goliath heading towards them. She was changing hands to grip the railing and vault over when her boot slipped suddenly and sent her teetering backwards over the hideous drop into the sump. The Goliath lunged forward with surprising speed for his muscled bulk and grabbed at her arm to save her from a painful and corrosive demise.

He seemed genuinely shocked when Donna seized his nose ring and used it to haul him over the railing. The Goliath made a piteous shriek before hitting the sump, where he was reduced to hideous gobbling noises as toxic sludge rushed into his open mouth. He was still trying to scream when the wire weed pulled him under.

Donna snorted derisively and vaulted over the railing without a backward glance. The other Goliath started spraying lead at her, the bullets striking sparks and ricocheting wildly along the deck. Donna replied with plasma. She was well past the point of screwing around any more.

The Goliath saw the white lightning gather about the Pig's muzzle and dived aside but the pit slaves were not so lucky, their smoking cybernetics and charred flesh hissing into the sump in a molten cascade, as a survivor fled screaming. The Goliath pounced out of cover to catch Donna defenceless with the Pig discharged and still smoking in her hand. She shot him in the eye with the laspistol in her other hand.

'Where's Relli?!' she yelled. 'We have some business to discuss!' No point in being subtle now. She found herself laughing wildly.

It was an act of mad bravado. She could hear boot heels ringing on the decking all about her. She jumped up and caught the railing to a higher deck tier, intending to swing up to it and gain some height advantage. A hammer swung down at her with piston-driven force - she ducked aside and it crumpled the heavy railing instead of her skull. The transferred shock alone was enough to numb her hand and make her drop back down. There were people waiting for her.

'Alive!' she heard someone shout as they rushed her.

Donna grinned happily. That one got them killed every time. She disappeared beneath a rush of sweaty bodies and grinding bionic limbs for a moment and rolled clear a second later, leaving one dead and two injured behind her. She darted off through an open hatchway while her attackers struggled to disentangle themselves.

Rusting corridor panels flashed past her as she ran along the narrow space beyond the hatch. She came to a ladder and fired off two shots behind her to discourage pursuit before sliding down it. At the bottom she found more narrow corridor, with doors banging and sounds of pursuit all around and closing in. Not enough time for choices and nowhere to hide, so Donna kept running blindly through the guts of the boat.

Inside it was like a maze, a run-down labyrinth of peeling bulkheads and stained floors. Shots splattered the corners as she ran; she was only a turn or two ahead of her pursuers at best. She was fleet of foot but they knew their ground better and kept corralling her into an ever-tighter area, drawing their numbers in around her like a noose.

She ran into a corridor and saw a cluster of figures coming towards her from the opposite direction. Shots started flying in both directions as the ones behind caught up to her again. Donna was soon pinned down in the crossfire and forced to duck into a hatchway for cover.

It was a trap. The room beyond was for storage and had a hatch in the roof as the only other exit. The roof hatch started cranking open, its two halves folding back to allow light to spill in from the deck above. It wasn't a promising sight. Armed figures stood silhouetted in the lights and one of the deck guns, a quad heavy stubber, was pointing menacingly into the hold. If they let fly with that thing every square inch of it would be filled with flying lead in an instant.

'Well, well. Mad Donna.' A familiar whisper floated down mockingly from above. It was Shallej.

Donna leapt towards the hatchway through which she had entered, but it was slammed shut in her face. Derisive laughter came from above.

'Our guest at last.'

Donna tried to see Shallej, but he was staying well hidden.

'That's correct, Shallej, well done, very well done indeed.' This was from a new voice, one high and obsequious but full of faux culture and superiority. Relli.

'What the hell do you want, Relli?' Donna shouted. 'You wanted my attention, well you've got it now! You've got three seconds to explain before I blast my way out of this tub of yours and send you all to the bottom of the sump.'

Shallej snickered.

He could snicker all he liked but it wasn't false bravado this time. Donna reckoned the Pig could eat its way through the deck and down far enough to sink this damn thing before they could finish killing her. Under the circumstances she felt quite prepared to try her theory out.

'No! Nobledam, wait!' Relli squawked.

Well, that was gratifying.

'One!' Donna called with devilment in her heart.

'Nobledam, I was engaged by one who sought to find you, who wishes you well, a friend whom you know from the Spire!'

'I have no friends in the Spire. Two.'

'He said you would be recalcitrant but he bade me... he bade me speak his final words to you from the last time you met. They were: "Remember this moment always, D'onne, for you stand at a threshold few would ever dare pass." And that would tell you all you needed to know!'

The word 'three' died on her lips. Lars was behind this, and with that her last hopes of any good news from the Spire shattered into a million pieces. The fool had followed her down. She felt suddenly very tired and alone.

'Is he here?' she asked quietly.

'In my quarters, nobledam, awaiting your pleasure.'

IT WAS QUICKLY evident that Relli's personal domain was a very different realm to what Donna had seen in the rest of the boat-thing. It lay at the top of sweeping stairways up a central atrium that accessed the upper decks. Here the carpets were clean and the smell was chemically fresh. White painted walls showed artfully chosen paintings (not picts) and no hint of rust, bright lumen bulbs casting a cheery glow over it all through crystal chandeliers high above. Only the occasional creak of the boat's hull or whiff of the sump broke the illusion of quietly palatial splendour.

Shallej and his posse had disappeared below deck again with a sardonic parting bow. The four surviving Goliaths were Relli's personal retinue and had remained. They disarmed Donna (or so they thought), and then marched around, boxing her in at all times. Donna felt creepy knowing that snake Shallej was around and not in plain sight but right now she had more immediate concerns. Judging by their scars, Donna guessed the Goliaths had been working with Relli for a long time. They were certainly pissed at Donna for killing two of their number. They kept jostling her whenever they thought Relli wasn't looking, or drawing their fingers from ear to ear in silent threat of what they would do as soon as they got the chance.

Donna noticed they all had tattoos on their necks that depicted crude, gnashing canine teeth. They were Dog Soldiers. The Grand Dog had been kicked out of the settlement of Filth Pond a long time ago, but his Dog Soldiers still showed up in the most unsavoury parts of the Underhive as guns for hire. These had sunk pretty low if they were working for a guilder, the Grand Dog had always taken a dim view of The Merchant Guild, seeing it as more of a resource to be harvested than a force to be reckoned with.

'Sorry about your two brothers,' she whispered to them as Relli fussed over a door lock. No pit slaves were permitted inside Relli's sanctum, just the Goliaths and a few chosen lickspittles. Obviously Relli was scared that his pit slaves might take it into their heads to kill him and go outlaw.

'Just a case of mistaken identity,' continued Donna. That seemed to mollify them slightly and some of the bunched up tendons around their jaws relaxed slightly. Relli opened the door.

'If I'd known you were Dog Soldiers I would have killed them more slowly,' Donna stage-whispered to them. The Dog Soldiers' eyes glared psychotically and their thick fingers spasmed into hammer fists. Donna stepped through the doorway, laughing at their impotent fury.

The doors opened to reveal a vast hall with arched windows along one side. Donna's mind skipped for a moment as she gazed at the view outside. Streams of high liners and shuttles snaked about the flank of the Spire, etching the skies with their contrails. Thunder-heads roiled out from below their feet to the horizon, carpeting the perfect blue vault of the heavens with coarse, black wool. She was back in the Spire.

'Impressive, is it not?' Relli's unctuous gloating was obscene. 'This ekranoplan was outfitted with luxuries fit for the Spire in its time.'

A trick. Holo shutters showing a Pict recording. It made Donna realise how long it had been since she'd seen such a trick. It also made Donna want to kill Relli there and then. She didn't need her blade, she would do it with her bare hands and take pleasure in snapping his fat neck. A warning rumble came from behind her. The largest and ugliest Dog Soldier had entered the hall too. Ironically enough, he was the one carrying her weapons. Even if Relli didn't realise that he stood at death's door the Goliath certainly did, and his truculent gaze challenged her to just try it. Donna smiled sweetly at him instead.

An ekranoplan? What's that?' she asked Relli smoothly. The Goliath's eyes rolled fractionally upward at the query.

'It is a hybrid of ship and aircraft, nobledam, one which is able to skate across flat surfaces at fantastic speeds. The skill of building them was sadly lost many centuries ago. Now this may be the last example of that wondrous art on all of Necromunda!' Relli's words tumbled out bloated with excitement and immodesty. It was obvious the boat-thing was the

guilder's pride and joy. Donna made a mental note to sink it before she left.

'You've been restoring it, I see,' she said. 'It's very impressive.' How easily the lies came, Donna thought. The sight of the Spire-view had obviously brought back old habits.

Relli's face dropped. 'Well, I have had to suspend work for the present, nobledam, which rather neatly brings me to the subject of our current venture.' They were approaching an ormolu door at the end of the hall. 'I have in fact not one, but two noblesires anxious to make your acquaintance...'

Donna had sudden misgivings as Relli reached for the door handle. 'What the hell do you mean, Relli?' she snarled. Who else is in there?'

'Ah, he felt it would be best to make his own introductions.'

The door swung open.

Donna wanted to run when she saw who was inside.

AN OVAL TABLE made of crystal that was the colour of oily smoke dominated the centre of the chamber. Four ornate chairs stood around it, two of which were occupied. Donna's eye was instantly drawn to the figure seated on her right. His white armour seemed incongruous in the opulent setting, but his bearing was eminently suitable. He sprawled indolently in the chair as if it were a throne. A cloaked figure stood at his shoulder and was bending as if to whisper in his ear as Donna entered. She could only see the man's face in profile but the sight struck a chill in her heart. It was

Count Ko'iron, the man she had murdered in the Spire, back from the dead.

'So the bitch-queen finally showed up! Well done, Relli.'

The voice was wrong, younger and less assured. As the face turned towards her Donna saw that was wrong too, a crease here and an angle there - similar for sure but not the same. She saw that the cloaked figure wasn't whispering at all, in fact it had skeletal metal fingers like hypodermics inserted in the mans neck. He seemed oblivious to their presence as he addressed her.

'You've caused an intolerable amount of harm, D'onne Ge'Sylvanus, but your little jaunt is over now.'

'Ah,' Relli said. 'Forgive me, noblesir, but please recall our agreement.'

'Quite right, Relli, say your piece and get on with it then.'

The figure slumped back in his seat, the skeletal hand at his neck faithfully following the movement. Donna's scattered thoughts realised that it was a medicae unit, a dedicated nurse, doctor and surgeon rolled into one. The count was being treated for something -an injury or poisoning perhaps? She suddenly remembered the other person at the table.

Lars was looking not a day older than when she had seen him that day in the arboretum. He at least was dressed for dinner in an immaculate chequer coat and cravat. He smiled at Donna uncertainly and she suddenly realised how different she must look to him. He probably barely recognised her at all.

D'onne had seemed petite and demure; Donna had grown tall and imposing like some barbarian queen. D'onne had been a broken, frightened girl; Donna was a fearless gang fighter grown used to life on the knife's edge. Shock was written all over his face, but he looked her resolutely in the face (no doubt with his guts squirming at the sight of her bionic eye) and said, 'I told you I would find you again one day, D'onne.'

'You were a fool to come down here, Lars,' Donna snarled. She turned. 'And just who the hell do you think you are? Because you sure as crap aren't Count Ko'iron.'

'Ah, nobledam, in that respect you are mistaken,' Relli tried to sound conciliatory. 'Please, ah, please be seated so we can talk properly.'

Donna treated him to a contemptuous look and took a seat as far from the alleged count as possible. She noted that Relli's biggest Goliath was now standing in front of the door, blocking the only way out.

She almost laughed when she saw the food laid on the table, high-class fare by Underhive standards - a king's banquet. To nobles from the Spire it was little better than raw sewage, and lay completely untouched. Donna's guts were churning with tension but she grabbed up a roasted haunch of rat to gnaw on in the hopes it would upset the two nobles further. Relli seated himself between Donna and the count.

'Ah, it's a great honour, of course, to have such esteemed persons as yourselves as my guests,' Relli began. Donna glared at him.

'Ah, well, there is a delicate balance at work here, nobledam. I should perhaps explain what has brought us together. I was first approached some time ago by noblesir Polema with an exciting proposition,' he gestured to Lars with fat, ring-encrusted fingers, 'to organise an expedition to a locale known colloquially as "Dead Man's Hole".'

Donna was suddenly back with Hanno again at Dust Falls, peering over his shoulder at the little cogitator screen and trying to understand what DMH stood for in the guilder records. Now she knew. Dead Man's Hole meant two expeditions that had failed to return, twenty-one people lost. There was no need to let Relli know she had uncovered that little tid-bit of information just yet, so Donna kept her mouth shut and waited to see what the guilder would admit to.

'There have been some... difficulties in mounting a successful expedition to the area, as it lies deep within the Badzones and a considerable distance from the nearest settlement. However, the noblesir had convinced me that the rewards of such an undertaking would stand to repay our efforts a thousandfold, and so we turned to thoughts of how to secure our future success.'

Lars was looking from Relli to Donna and back again as if he desperately wanted to say something. Relli ignored him and continued.

'The noblesir had confided in me that the nobledam Ulanti had been known to him through... prior association in the Spire. Knowing of the fearsome reputation you have gained in the Underhive, nobledam, I had thought to locate you in relation to our difficulties and contract your services to assist.'

Donna eyed Relli critically. It sounded plausible enough except for two things.

'Then why the bounty hunters and why him,' she gestured at Ko'iron.

'I had contracted Shallej Bak on a number of previous occasions and he had been assisting me with the expeditions. He told me that he knew how to find you and bring you here - a simple letter in the right language, he said. I apologise for his methods, nobledam, I had no idea they would turn out to be so... direct. This noblesir arrived here barely two shifts ago, nobledam. He has his own reasons for being here as is best explained by his good self.'

Lars was almost bouncing up and down in his chair for attention by now but the count and Relli were ignoring him.

'What's eating at you, Lars?' Donna asked.

'D'onne, I wanted to say I was never in favour of all this scheming,' he said in a rush, 'I told Relli at the outset I should come and find you, that you would listen to me—'

'I would have slapped you silly and sent you back to the Spire. In fact, I may well still do that.' Donna took a bite out the rat haunch. Lars looked crestfallen.

'Alright, that's enough!' The count surged to his feet, and the medicae unit hissed as it struggled to keep up with him.

'I didn't come down this dung hole to listen to all this rubbish.'

He turned on Donna.

'I am Julius Ko'iron, rightful heir of the House Ko'-iron and you are D'onne Ulanti who was betrothed to the heir of Ko'iron. I demand you return with me to the Spire and fulfil your family duties.'

Donna laughed in his face.

'So, it's Julius is it? Piss off back to the Spire, Julius, before I kill you like I did your big brother, Marneus.'

'You didn't kill Marneus, you bitch! That would've been kinder!' The count's face was bright red, and the skeletal fingers were rapidly massaging his neck with their needle tips.

'Oh no, eight years fighting before insanity completely overtook him! Even now he hides from the light, locked away in his apartments day and night.' The new Count Ko'iron tottered and slumped back into his chair heavily.

Donna was shocked, her world broken in two. All this time she had been with the murderous scum of the Underhive because she was convinced she belonged there. Hiding and fighting and scraping an existence, all the time convinced she had murdered a noble and so was worse than all the gun-scum and the bounty hunters around her. That's what she had told herself, time and again, that she had joined the other dysfunctional killers in Necromunda down at the bottom, in the Underhive, because there was nowhere else to go.

But was she any better than that really? Julius had said his brother had gone mad, doubtless tormented by the memory of how she had unmanned

him - her, a mere woman after all. Somehow she felt now she *was* better than a murderer. What she had done to Marneus was one thing, what he had done to himself afterwards was another. She realised Relli was speaking again and probably had been for a while as she was lost in her thoughts.

'...the count has graciously agreed that given his condition, it may be some while before he returns to the Spire.'

'What condition? What's wrong with him?' Donna snapped.

'The count suffered poisoning from a milliasaur bite as he came down the Abyss, hence the treatment from his chirurgeon. So, as I was saying, nobledam.' Relli seemed a little peeved, like he felt he was losing control of the situation, 'the count has agreed that his claim to your hand can wait sufficiently long for Dead Man's Hole to be investigated with your help, in return for a share of the proceeds. I might add that the count himself has some very talented individuals in his entourage who will vastly improve our chances.'

Relli beamed. Everything obviously made perfect sense to him now they were all sitting down together. To him it was all a simple matter of negotiation. Time to introduce him to a few finer points of negotiation.

'So let me summarise what you're saying, Relli. You want me to go help find Dead Man's Hole and then go back to the Spire and wedded bliss with the good Count Ko'iron here.'

'There'd be no gallivanting around the sewers at all if we weren't still out of pocket from your damn bride-price, Ulanti,' the count muttered bitterly.

'Well I...' Relli could sense the trap waiting for him: he didn't want any of those things, he just wanted bottomless wealth to spend on his ekranoplan. To him the nobles were a way of getting it and their personal entanglements hadn't entered his balance sheets.

'And pray tell what would be in this for me?' Donna swallowed another bite of rat meat.

'Ah, the chance to return to the Spire, nobledam, wealthy enough to repair any old harms.'

Donna arched her brows at Lars. 'Lars, what have you been telling him?'

Lars suddenly found himself at the centre of attention and squirmed visibly. 'I believe that what lies in Dead Man's Hole would significantly alter the market in Hive City,' he said quietly.

'What part of the market, Lars?' Donna asked incredulously. Market forces on Necromunda had been ruthlessly monopolised and jealously protected by the Houses for centuries. Even a slight fluctuation had huge implications for Hive Primus. Proles could find themselves in or out of work by the millions and whole sectors of the city could open up or close down as the finances shifted.

'Energy generation.'

After thousands of years energy had become the most desperately sought-after resource in all of Necromunda. For millennia, engineers had tried unsuccessfully to balance out the massive requirements of the teeming populace and industry of the hive world with the concerns of availability and cost. Their demands had reduced the surface of the planet to a poisoned ash waste and necessitated the building of the first hives so that people could shelter from the cataclysm they had created around their remaining energy reserves. Energy consumption still remained the most significant limiting factor in the growth of any House.

'No kidding.'

Parts of the puzzle were sliding into place. Ko'iron, Lars, Relli - their motivations were all transparent. Relli's was simple: greed. He thought he had found a way of making a fortune and even when it had cost him dearly, he had refused to let go. If anything, he'd only become more desperate and held on tighter. Lars and the count both thought they could take her back to the Spire, Lars armed with nothing more than unrequited love and some harebrained scheme, Julius with pig-headed stubbornness and overweening pride. Frikkin' nobles.

That left only one player unaccounted for. The one, she realised now, who had been manipulating them all from the beginning.

'You don't know much about Shallej Bak do you, Relli?' Donna said casually.

'Ah, I, yes, yes I do. I have dealt with him for years, on and off. He's always been a tremendous help in the past.'

'Well, if you'd ever thought of him as more than a hired gun you might have checked up on his background.' Donna's voice was low but clear, almost hypnotic.

'Bak's clan came down from Hive City en masse about twenty years ago, first as Delaque gangers and then spreading out over the years to become

gun-scum, bounty hunters, outlaws, watchmen, settlers. It's got so there isn't a settlement in the Underhive that doesn't have one of the Bak clan around to watch and listen.'

'What are you implying?' Relli asked, white-faced.

'It's an open secret in many places. The Baks do "jobs" for Hive City Delques on a fairly regular basis. Among many others, they form the network of spies, assassins and saboteurs the Delaque have in place to safeguard their interests in the Underhive.'

'Naturally, the Delaque, being slimy, underhanded backstabbers, believe that all the other houses have agents in the Underhive too, including the noble houses.' Donna took a last bite of rat meat and looked at the long, greasy thighbone left in her hand.

'They think I'm an Ulanti agent, and Shallej's been using his bounty hunter status to try and hunt me down for quite some time.'

'Whatever scheme you're pursuing with Dead Man's Hole, you can guarantee the Delaque won't want it to happen. Any shift in energy generation would favour the Orlocks most out of all of the Houses, as they have the most readily available industrial capacity to use it.'

'In Shallej's mind this all makes sense. As an Ulanti agent I would do all I could to assist a scheme that would ultimately benefit the Orlock's biggest patrons - House Ulanti.'

'But, but why would he help bring you here then?' Relli stammered querulously.

Donna could see he already knew the answer. It was written in his fear-filled eyes, but she decided she would spell it out for him anyway. She stood up and snapped the thighbone with a crack that made Lars and Relli jump.

'So he could get us in one place and kill us all at once.'

There was the distant crump of an explosion. The deck lurched beneath Donna's feet, and lumebulbs flickered overhead, blowing like miniature fireworks.

Thirty minutes was up.

THERE WAS BLOOD on her hands and she couldn't get it off. It didn't matter how hard she rubbed them, the red streaks wouldn't go away. She

had come to the arboretum seeking water, somewhere she could wash the blood away, hut now that she had found it she couldn't bring herself to get close. Couples and families strolled past obliviously, hut she knew if she dipped her hands into the fountain it would run red, and then everyone would see she was a murderer.

So she sat on a bench with her hands clasped in her armpits and rocked gently back and forth. The fantastic gown she wore rustled and sighed in time with her movements. It was comforting.

'You look a little cold there, nobledam, may I offer you my coat?'

D'onne was so surprised to be spoken to that she almost cried out. She looked up sharply at the one who had addressed her and broken her spell of invisibility. He was a youth of medium height and dark hair, with strong but not unpleasing features. He smiled uncertainly and held out his heavy brocade coat. D'onne realised that she was cold. Her bare arms and neck were like ice. She took the coat and slipped it on, luxuriating in the welcome warmth of its previous occupant. She gazed up at him again, thinking she must look pathetically grateful.

'Thank you.'

'My pleasure. It is a beautiful dress but perhaps better suited to dinner in the Summer House than winter by the fountain?' His eyebrows arched inquiringly, an earnest plea for his gentle foray not to be thought too gauche.

D'onne giggled. T didn't intend to come here, my feet just brought me!

'Ahh, I know that well, all too often I look up only to find myself in places I've reached unbidden!

'Sire, you mock me!'

'I swear I do not. Why, only this shift past I appeared at my sweetheart's domicile only to discover my sweetheart was my sweetheart no more and her heart was given to another. What man would consciously place himself in the path of such woes? It is all the fault of those wandering feet, I tell you, we would all be happier without them!'

'Oh, I'm so sorry. I did not mean to intrude upon your grief, sire, please be on your way, I should delay you no further! She grinned wickedly at him and started to shrug off his coat.

'Oh no-no-no, nobledam ,' the man said, and seated himself beside her so fast that he almost bounced. 'All grief over my lost love has been

eradicated by an altogether brighter star arising in the firmament. Indeed, now I give thanks for what I cursed an hour, even a minute ago!

'Do you usually reveal your innermost thoughts to strangers so readily, sire?'

'I am moved to desperation by the possibility my new star may be a transient body, liable to leave my own sphere without warning. Hence I give my worship now while I still may, before cruel fate, and perchance cruel feet, remove her from me!'

D'onne laughed again; it was nice to be flattered. They sat quietly for a moment watching the fountain splash into its bowl. The shadows were growing longer and less people were coming by. With his eyes distant, he leaned over and murmured confidentially to her.

'I feel we share a common thread, you and I. Our paths have been brought together by circumstances beyond our knowing, forces beyond our ken!'

D'onne was wary. 'Why do you say such things, noblesir?'

'Because when I saw you I sensed a kindred spirit in mourning. I saw the weight upon your shoulders that I had felt upon mine when I lost my love, though I fear cruel fate has weighed upon you even more so than it has me!

D'onne could only nod desolately at his words.

'But it is a time for joy, don't you understand? In seeing you here I've felt my heart beat again, even were we to part now and never meet again I would cherish this moment always if only for that.

'I know that to you I'm just a fool in the park but I... I burn with joy that I could even make you laugh and lighten your burden just a little. Thank you for allowing me to live again!'

The man reached out and gently took D'onne by the hand. Caught in the wonder of the moment, she didn't think to pull away. He looked down at her hands and tutted, laying them delicately back in her lap before going over to the fountain. He returned with a moistened kerchief and wiped the red streaks of blood away without a word. He looked up at her face again and smiled.

'Would you grant me a boon to celebrate the event? Allow me to take you to dinner by the lake in spring!

D'onne smiled back hesitantly. 'That would be nice, but why there?'

'Because spring is a time of new beginnings!

THEY HAD LUNCHEON by the lake and it was glorious. They sat and ate and talked all the while, with D'onne expecting to be caught at any moment but not caring any more.

His name was Lars Polema. He was of the House of Greim, a minor cousin to the head family, and so little more than a well-connected employee. He was engaged in antiquarian studies of the endless records of Hive Primus from previous centuries that Greim used for its quota forecasting, and laughed about how dull it was. She simply called herself D'onne and he discretely enquired no further.

After luncheon he took her along the arcades near The Wall looking for new clothes. He gently steered her towards the most durable, understated garb they could find: a strong pair of boots and a well tailored pair of slacks, a close fitting jacket with lots of pockets and a hood.

He begged her to wait outside another store while he darted inside and she did, suddenly realising she didn't know what else to do. With a sad feeling she understood that she had to part from him soon, because to stay with him could only bring him to harm when Sylvanus caught up with her.

She looked up to see him standing before her. He held out something to her that was so small that it was cupped in his hand. Puzzled, she opened hers to receive it. Two small white cylinders lay in the palm of her hand.

'D'onne?' Lars asked. 'Have you ever gone into Hive City?'

DOG SOLDIERS

'If you can't keep it, then it was never yours!

— Old Underhive saying

RELLI, LARS AND Ko'iron were shocked into paralysis by the detonation, jaws dropping slackly in alarm. Donna was already moving. Ko'iron recovered his wits first.

That's it, Relli! All bets are off, I'm taking the girl now!' blustered the count as he straggled back to his feet. The surviving lumebulbs flickered and dimmed ominously before brightening again. Donna was suddenly beside him.

'Good enough for one is good enough for both, I say,' she proclaimed and plunged the sharp end of the broken rat bone she was holding into his eye. Count Julius Ko'iron screamed and fell, the medicae unit collapsing over him like a marionette with its wires cut. Relli was backing off against the far wall, blubbering. Donna looked up at Lars.

'You better get out of here, lover,' she said. 'Things are going to get messy'

Before Lars could answer, Donna ducked aside. A blow from the Goliath bodyguard shattered the edge of the table where she had been standing a second before. She short-kicked the Dog Soldier in the crotch, and then smashed her knee up into his face as he doubled over. The Goliath roared in anger and pain, swinging his iron mace again and sending Donna skipping backwards to avoid it. He lumbered after her with a murderous gleam in his eyes.

This fight could only go one way. Without weapons Donna couldn't hope to best an armed ganger like the Goliath - she could just annoy him for a while. Fortunately she was not entirely without weapons. Her flat little throwing blade was still secure inside her bodice. She sidled around the table so the Goliath couldn't rush straight at her.

The Dog Soldier's solution was predictably direct. He leapt up onto the tabletop, scattering slime loaves and rat meat everywhere. While the Goliath was still regaining his balance she drew the blade and threw, quick as a snake.

The blade flew straight and true towards the Goliath's thick neck but he twisted aside at the last instant, the sharp sliver burying itself in corded muscle instead of carotid artery. The Dog Soldier just grunted and swatted at the blade as if it were a biting insect. Not good.

The Dog Soldier made to leap at her but slipped in some fungus marinade and half-fell on the table instead. Undaunted, he unleashed a swing at Donna anyway, catching her off-guard with a rib-cracking strike in the chest. She tried to roll but was hurled backwards by the force of the blow. Red flashes of pain shot through her torso as she tried to breathe, a sucking void of oblivion felt close behind her skull. She shook her head groggily.

The Dog Soldier laughed. 'Ahm comin' sweet'eart, soon be ovah!' he called and slid off the table in a shower of hors d'oeuvres.

Imminent death was enough to sharpen her mind considerably. She scrambled to her feet, leaping aside from the Goliath's charge by hair's breadth. An ornate chair was splintered into matchwood in her place. Out of desperation, she snatched up a sharp piece of wood and speared it into the Goliath's arm. He just contemptuously backhanded her away and sent her reeling.

He came in again with the same right-to-left rib-cracking swing that had worked so well last time. Donna was not caught out twice. She ducked under the hurtling iron and darted inside his reach. She knew it was a risky move; he could crush her in a moment if he could bring all of his monstrous strength into play. But that was why Donna needed a weapon.

She seized the hilt of a knife protruding from the Dog Soldier's wide belt, intending to draw it and slash him with it in the process. The damn thing was so heavy it took all her strength and most of her body weight to

draw. She staggered backwards, dragging the heavy lump of metal with her, taking it in both hands to avoid dropping it altogether. The Dog Soldier laughed so hard at her that he almost cried.

'Hoo thass fair nah, you got yore weapon an' I got mine, hur-huh.'

'Well, come and get it, fatboy,' Donna snarled. 'Donna's waiting.' The Dog Soldier's knife might be big, unbalanced and stupidly heavy, but it had a wicked edge to it. It might just be sharp enough to carve through even the Goliath's thick skull.

He was more cautious, despite all his bravado. No straight rush and right-left cross this time. He was still slow, only now Donna was almost as slow, even wielding the knife in both hands. She managed to parry his first blow and her arms ached with the shock of impact. She darted past him and put a slash in his flank though he cannily rolled away from it and the wound was shallow. They locked weapons again with the same result, only this time he got completely out of the way of her riposte.

Attack, parry, riposte. The pattern repeated with variations again and again. Donna's hands were too numbed from the impacts of repeatedly parrying the Goliath's mace to do more than simple crosscuts in return. An accurate killing thrust was impossible, so she darted and slashed at the Dog Soldier. This was exactly the kind of fight the Goliath wanted, a slugfest where sooner or later his superior strength and endurance would overcome her skill and agility. She had some successes, producing a nick here and a cut there, getting ever more exhausted in the process.

She dodged away from another swing and bumped into the edge of the table. The Dog Soldier had been backing her towards it all along, obviously not prepared to wait for his victory. The mace swung down like a plunging meteor with all the force of his bulging muscles behind it, impossible for Donna to parry with the heavy knife. At the last instant she abandoned the knife altogether, and once freed of its encumbrance she spun aside, weaponless again.

The mace shattered another chunk out of the table and flying shards of oil-glass nicked Donna's exposed flesh. The sharp kiss gave her an idea. She threw herself at the Goliath, shoulder charging him while he was still off-balance from his missed blow. The Dog Soldier stumbled and fell, his chin crashing into the jagged edge of the table where a hundred crystal

knives were waiting for him. Blood splattered spectacularly across the table, the food, overturned chairs, the rich carpet.

Despite his obviously mortal wound, the Goliath gurgled hideously and tried to get up.

'No. You. Don't!' Donna yelled, punctuating each word with a kick at the back of his neck, driving it against the saw-toothed edge. On the third kick the head came free and rolled across the tabletop with the eyelids still flickering as the dying brain tried to focus. The torso flopped grotesquely and sprayed the rest of its contents from the gory stump. The chamber fell suddenly quiet except for the ragged sound of Donna's breathing and the streaming of blood.

Donna quickly retrieved her weapons from the Goliath's corpse, cursing at her cracked ribs as she bent down to take them. Only then did she think to look about her. Lars and Relli were gone. An opening that hadn't been there before had appeared in the back wall - some kind of secret bolt-hole no doubt. Someone must have dragged away Ko'iron during the fight because he was gone too. She stepped towards the opening. As she did so, another explosion shook the deck and Donna heard the chatter of weapon fire in its aftermath.

The Escher were attacking just like Jen had said. If Donna didn't help they would be massacred - she could hear the firing notch up as the quad stubber deck gun kicked in and drowned out the other gunfire. The way it was pumping out rounds made it sound like the Escher were pinned down - long strafing bursts of stubber fire were followed by a few defiant shots barking in return.

Despite her lust for revenge, Donna found her feet carrying her back to the door by which she had entered. Relli could wait for now, she reasoned, but the Escher couldn't. The buzz-saw noise of stubber fire cut the air again, this time followed by fewer return shots.

She started running along the entry hall back towards the atrium. Power fluctuations on the ekranoplan were making the Spire-holos flicker and jump in the windows beside her as she passed.

Relli had thought he could simply tempt her into doing whatever he wanted with a few glimpses of the Spire and some empty promises, that she would be pathetically grateful enough to become his agent. The stupid,

bloated egotist. She took malicious pleasure in shattering the holo shutters one by one as she ran, leaving a trail of empty blackness in her wake.

The door to the atrium was partway open, which was odd considering Relli had closed it. She slowed down as she got close to it and covered the gap with her las. Her mind was running through a list of all her foes aboard the ekranoplan and trying to rate them for threat value.

There were the three remaining Dog Soldiers, all pretty hard bastards and ready to kill her on sight. There was a good chance at least one of them was waiting for her in the atrium. There were Relli's pit slaves, who would keep fighting as long as Relli or the Goliaths were around to tell them to, but would probably slink off if they got the chance. On the other hand, they were all trapped onboard the ekranoplan by the Escher attack, so they would probably fight like cornered rats.

Then there was Ko'iron's entourage, 'talented individuals' Rellis had called them. Doubtless they were hungry for revenge too but probably more concerned about how to get the noble Julius back up through The Wall, living or dead.

And then there was Shallej and his posse of Delaque. He could be trying to kill off Relli, Lars and Donna individually or just working on a way to sink the whole damn ekranoplan with all of them still aboard. The explosions she had felt didn't seem big enough to be demolition charges, so they were probably grenades from the Escher. Donna prayed that however much of a fool Relli was, he hadn't shown Shallej the self-destruct button or the plug or whatever else would send the craft and its contents to the bottom of the sump quickly and easily. The fact she was still alive told her that he probably hadn't.

A shadow moved in the doorway. Donna fired her las through the gap and charged. Someone cursed and Donna saw the silhouetted head and shoulders of a man appear before being dazzled by a muzzle flash from something in his hands. An autogun chattered wildly, firing wide of her and smashing one of Relli's holo shutters into a cloud of tinkling shards.

Donna heard the clip run dry on the Dog Soldier's autogun at the same instant she cannoned into the door and sent him staggering back from the threshold. Seventy-six swept down with a hungry snarl but the Goliath blocked it with his gun. The rotating teeth seemed to scream in frustration as they scrabbled at the metal barrier between them and soft flesh. Donna

flicked her wrist and sent the chain blade skipping down the gun at the Dog Soldier's fingers. He desperately threw the weapon at her and took his chance to jump backwards as she batted it aside.

Donna heard shouts from down below on the floor of the atrium, followed by a shot. The Goliath flinched back as a chunk of railing vapourised beside him.

'Oi! Watchit ya numbties!' he yelled. Donna risked a sideways glance to see whom he was shouting at.

Two pit slaves were crouching in the lower doorway with stub guns drawn. Two more stub rounds clipped the railing marginally closer to Donna than the

Goliath. The little frikkers didn't care who they hit, she concluded. Apparently reaching the same conclusion, the Dog Soldier jumped as far back from the railing as he could. She put a las-shot into him and clipped his shoulder, barely slowing him as he pulled out an autopistol.

Donna dived down the stairs just as he let rip. The Goliath swung a crescent of hot lead around himself with no aim whatsoever, spraying bullet-pocked arcs across the atrium and various objets d'art with raucous abandon. Donna snapped off a las-shot in return but had her own problems as she fought to keep from going headlong down the stairs and breaking her neck. Another couple of stub rounds smacked into the wall near her, almost unnoticeable in the chatter of autofire but quite distinct because they were vaguely accurate.

Donna snapped off a couple more shots at the doorway and sent the pit slaves scurrying for cover. The autofire stopped and she heard the Dog Soldier changing clips. He was out of sight from her now. Donna decided it was time to start the revolution early.

'Why the hell are you shooting at me you pricks! Relli is dead! You're free!' She shouted to the pit slaves. Okay one little white lie - Relli wasn't dead, yet.

'Thass bullshit, don lissen boys!' The Goliath's angry bellow came over the balcony. At least she had an idea of where he was standing now, and he seemed a bit too quick to respond to be sure about pit slaves' loyalties.

'Like we should believe you, Dog Soldier!' one of the slaves was plucky enough to shout back. 'What if she's right?'

'Yous little frikas!' the Dog Soldier snarled. 'Gerrout an' fight or I'll kills you mehself!'

'Yes, what if I'm right?' Donna taunted. 'No more free dinners, fatboy!' She creased the balcony with a couple more las-shots.

That was all it took to push the Goliath into a murderous rage. He appeared at the balcony and sprayed the doorway with bullets. One of the pit slaves screamed in pain. The other one ducked back out of sight again. Donna bounced up and unleashed a fusillade of shots at the Goliath. Chunks of railing disintegrated under her volley and the Goliath retreated. Her angle was bad here, but going back up on the balcony gave the Dog Soldier an odds-on chance of turning her into a sieve.

Stub gun rounds snapped out from the doorway. Not at her, bless, but at the Goliath. She used the distraction to ran back up the stairs and onto the balcony. Auto rounds whipped past her head the instant she came in view. Donna dived and rolled, blasting shots back almost at random. One of her las-bolts caught the Goliam in the thigh, spinning him around. He clung onto the shot-scarred railing for support and levelled his autopistol at her. She put two shots just past his ear and then had to run for cover, still cursing at her inaccuracy as he opened fire again. Bullets pelted around her, ricocheting wildly. Something hit her heel and made her stagger. She span and snapped off a shot at the towering Goliath - another clean miss. He was straggling upright and pulling out a knife with his offhand, the giant cousin of the one she had tried to use earlier.

A huge red splotch suddenly masked half the Goliath's face, the autopistol dropped from his nerveless fingers and he toppled slowly over the railing to hit the floor of the atrium with a wet thud. A stub round had taken him in the back of the head, a hundred-to-one shot at least - score one for the revolution.

She ran down to the doorway below before the pit slaves got a chance to change their minds. She found both of them still there, one cradling the head of the other as his life leaked out of the holes stitched across his chest by an autopistol burst. There was something tragic and pathetic about the slaves. The crude amputations and mismatched bionics couldn't disguise their very human suffering. Donna had intended to waste them both to make sure they couldn't shoot her when her back was turned. Pity stayed her hand.

'You should get out of here,' she told the survivor softly. He looked up at her desolately.

'Frikking guilders. Friking Hive City. Friking *planet*! There were tears in the slave's eyes. The ownership stud in his forehead winked in silent mockery of his pain. 'Why do we have to frik things up all the time?'

Donna shrugged. 'It's the natural order of things. Frikked up. For what it's worth, I'm sorry.'

'The guilder's not really dead, is he?'

'Soon,' Donna crooned soothingly. 'Soon.'

DONNA LEFT THE slave to his misery and ran along the maze of narrow corridors. They had caught her here before, but now it was quiet except for gunfire echoing eerily down from the deck above. She came across a freshly bullet-scarred corner - it had been hit when she had been chased through earlier. Looking about her, she found a trail of destruction left by the pursuit and used it to find her way back to the outer hatch through which she had entered. She edged it open carefully and peered out onto the deck.

Flames and strobing muzzle flashes lit the dark surface of the sump outside. Hard black shadows flickered and danced across the deck in time to bursts. Donna could see little of the deck but it looked empty beyond the hatch. With her heart in her mouth she slipped out onto the deck, but no salvo of bullets crashed out from a waiting ambush. Everyone was too busy watching the massacre on the dock.

The deck she stood on was the lowest and ran in a U-shape around the stern of the ekranoplan. The next highest deck lay between the arms of the U and carried the quad-stubber and another deck gun separated by a big tailfin or funnel of some kind. She had seen stairs from there up onto a still higher deck at the front of the craft, up where its stub-wings projected out, presumably making it the location of the bridge or control room. Donna would lay odds that would be where Relli had run to - it was the castle's keep of his little kingdom after all.

She sheathed her weapons, jumped up and caught the railing of the next deck up. She pulled herself up and dropped into crouch. The gun in front of her was a smoking ruin, two pit slaves lay dead around it and the corpse

of a Dog Soldier was grotesquely pinned into the wreckage. The roar of the quad-stubber suddenly cut off with a sighing exhalation and Donna got the weird feeling that she was chasing ghosts. She cast a wary look up to the bridge but it was out of sight.

There were gunshots from the deck below her and behind the tailplane ahead. They sounded leisurely, well-aimed, like an audience keeping itself amused while they waited for the big performance to start again. She heard grunts as heavy bullet belts were slotted in place and then she suddenly understood. They had stopped firing the stubber to reload; the audible sigh had come from coolant hissing on the hot barrels. She drew her weapons and crept around the tailplane to get closer.

Another quad-stubber squatted on the deck before her, identical to the one behind her that was now twisted wreckage. Two pit slaves were reloading it and a Dog Soldier sat in a central cage with two of the long guns mounted on each side of it. He was cursing at the slaves to load faster. From here Donna could see more pit slaves at the railing and some on the lower deck close to the rear of the craft, all taking occasional pot shots at the shore.

The gun tower on the dock was in flames. There were bodies scattered at the bottom of the gangplank with bloody drag marks leading off behind a stretch of broken wall nearby. From up here she could easily reconstruct what had happened. The Escher must have knocked out the deck gun and the tower in the first moments of the attack, with a grenade launcher presumably, and some very well calculated shots. They rushed the gang plank then, and cut down the guards at the bottom. Before they could get to the top, the Dog Soldiers got the other quad-stubber firing and drove them back.

The wall at edge of the dock was extensively etched with fresh bullet holes. Donna was guessing that the Escher were still pinned down behind it. She couldn't see how they could escape with the quad-stubber covering them. It had a perfect field of fire. Anyone that tried to run would be cut to pieces within three paces. That was once it was reloaded, of course, and that was something to which Donna decided she was categorically opposed.

Donna waited patiently until they had threaded the last belt in place, listening to the other slaves laugh and shoot while they waited too and

hating them for taking pleasure in it. Only then, just as they were about to open fire, did she step out into plain view.

'Hey, Dog Soldier!' she called. 'You're the last one! All your brothers are dead! Come out and face me!'

The Goliath's head snapped round at her challenge and the quad-stubber started turning towards her. For a split second it was lined up with the other pit slaves at the railing, who were also turning in surprise - this wasn't part of the evening's scheduled events for them. She picked that moment to fire the Pig.

The plasma discharge flashed across the deck with blinding fury. It tore voraciously into the stubber's ammo hoppers and cooked off the freshly laid belts of ammunition inside in an instant. The results were nothing short of spectacular.

The quad stubber coughed out streams of bullets that went hosing wildly across the deck and transfixed those poor unfortunates standing at the railing. Then more ammo popped and metal went scything outwards in all directions. Even Donna was taken aback by the violence and darted behind the tailplane for cover.

Impacts and ricochets rang all around her for what seemed a painfully long time. She peered cautiously around the corner as they died away. She saw a fist, and then stars, and then her head cracked on the deck. A crushing weight fell on top of her, pinning her down.

'You're gonna die now bitch!' The Dog Soldier spat in her face.

He was hideously burned all down his left side and one arm had been shrivelled into a twisted stick. Sooty flakes of immolated flesh were dropping on Donna as they straggled. He was trying to get his remaining hand around her throat. Donna flailed desperately but

the Goliath was too heavy to dislodge. He clamped his knees tighter and her ribs screamed in protest. Another punch made her see stars, and his big, calloused hand locked around her ivory throat and squeezed.

Donna's vision darkened and she felt neck bones grating ominously. She could only kick and flail feebly. Her flapping hands encountered something on the deck - it was familiar and it was comforting. Her oxygen-starved brain struggled to make sense of what it was. A number; Seventy-six.

She swung the chainblade into the Goliath's arm below the elbow and it chewed into flesh and muscle. The weak blow couldn't do more than cut him. He grunted angrily and kept squeezing. Donna grabbed Seventy-six behind the blade guard with her other hand and pushed it deeper with all her might, sawing it back and forth. The Dog Soldier roared in pain and tried to rear back, as he did so his arm severed and dropped away in a cascade of crimson. Donna took Seventy-six and rammed it into his crotch. She kept pushing upwards until the chain blade protruded between his shoulder blades, just to be sure.

Donna crawled out from beneath the carcass and spat blood out of her mouth. She was starting to remember why she despised Dog Soldiers. They just didn't know when to lie down and quit. Pain and fatigue pulsed through her body as she fought with an almost overwhelming temptation to lie down and rest for a while.

Shots struck sparks from the deck beside her with shocking violence. She was suddenly wide awake and rolling into cover behind the wrecked stubber on nothing more than instincts and adrenaline. Her wits were scattered, but she finally realised that the shots were from somewhere near the bridge. She risked a glance out and almost got her face sawn off by autoguns. There were at least two shooters and they most definitely had her in their sights.

The Pig lay where she'd dropped it, in plain view on the deck not two metres away, but Donna knew that she would never be able to even get a hand on it before she would be cut down. That left her with the noble laspistol, but a simple laspistol just didn't give her enough firepower to go up against riflemen in good positions. A couple more bursts of autofire ricocheted off the wreckage. Donna realised they weren't interested in hitting her, they were just keeping her head down. But what for? Someone sneaking around for a grenade throw or head-shot? Neither prospect made Donna inclined to stay behind the stubber wreckage to find out.

She waited until she reckoned at least one of them was reloading and then sprinted for the edge of the deck. It was a calculated risk, she told herself. She had no way of knowing what she would be dropping into on the deck below, so it was a bit mad, but it had two things in its favour: one, she would be closer to the Escher; and two, it was better than staying

where she was. Bullets chased her all the way, whickering through the railing as she vaulted over it.

The lower deck was a vision of chaos lit by the flames of the burning tower. The Escher had come storming up the gangplank as soon as the stubber blew. They were fighting the surviving pit slaves hand-to-hand; the Escher's slender blades clashed against a crude array of hammers, saws, drills and claws. The deck was slick with blood and bodies lay everywhere.

She took all this in during the quarter second it took for her to drop down. Seventy-six was out and slashing even before her feet hit the deck. A pit slave went down with his skull split in two, the twin hemispheres of his brain displayed as neatly as if in a coroner's autopsy. She sheared muscle and sinew from a brawny arm next, then blocked a swinging saw-blade before impaling its owner.

Donna felt no pity or mercy for her opponents now. These were the most vicious slaves in Relli's employ, keen to fight or they would have quit their posts and fled long ago. More than that, these patchwork mannequins of steel and flesh weren't just trying to kill her, they were trying to kill her friends too. A lot of the Escher were people she had never even met but they came to help her anyway. All because for some messed up reason they thought 'Mad Donna' was worth something. She was an icon.

Through a gap in the crush of flailing bodies, she saw an Escher juve go down with her head pulped by a hammer. Jen's face flashed into view with one eye covered in blood. She grinned at Donna and was gone again. Donna felt a surge of hate well up inside her: hatred for Jen, for taking D'onne's misery and making it into a cause for martyrdom; for Tessera for bringing her down here; for Relli, Ko'iron, her father; for all causes, and all manipulators, everywhere.

The one thing she could do was ensure that the Escher didn't have to die for her.

Her hate was unstoppable. She ranged through the lumpen pit slaves with blade and pistol and made them howl. The toughest or stupidest came at her first, thinking to prove their worth by taking her down in close combat. She killed them most cruelly of all, with shorn limbs and torn faces that howled out their agony long after they should have been stilled.

The smart ones came next. They would usually try to put a bullet in her before coming within reach of her blade. They found out that Mad Donna's

aim was as deadly as her blade, and the laspistol infinitely quicker. She shot them down where they stood.

The losers were last, too stupid to realise they needed to run until it was too late, and too weak fight. She killed them with contempt verging on boredom.

There was a sudden silence after the clangor and screams of combat. The stench was overpowering: burning, blood, spilt viscera. Donna almost retched when she realised her boot heels were sunk in the soft entrails of a dying pit slave. She looked around wildly. Her first impression was that there was no one left standing at all, that she was alone on a ship of damned. Then she caught sight of the Escher rallying around a triumphant looking Jen. There were half a dozen of them left. Donna's heart froze at the sight of someone she knew among the injured to whom they were tending. Bright arterial blood leaked from her midriff and she was in a bad way.

It was Tessera.

TERMINUS

SMOKE WAS SWIRLING across the deck. The hazy figures of the Escher were slipping out of view, only outlined by the occasional gun flash as they chased after the last few of Relli's pit slaves. Donna crouched down beside Tessera disconsolately, feeling her heart grow cold and shrivelled as she watched one of her only friends dying. Three little pieces of metal had pierced her midriff, three insignificant little pieces of metal moving fast enough to rupture organs, shatter bones and cleave arteries. They had tried patching her up as best they could but there was nothing they could do to stop her bleeding internally.

'So... did you find... what you came for... D'onne?' she said weakly. Blood was dribbling from the corner of her mouth.

'No, you're dying for nothing.' Donna voice was flat and bitter, angry.

'Thanks, D'onne,' Tessera smiled up at her beatifi-cally. That's been... the story of my life.'

Donna stripped off a glove and took Tessera's hand in her own. Her grip was tight, and the skin felt dry and smooth. She knew what Tessera needed to hear.

'I did what you suggested - I know, I know, but there's a first time for everything - I asked the gang why they came looking for me. I was so sure you'd put them up to it. Jen set me straight.'

Tessera nodded and spoke. 'I've seen it happen before. Someone... survives long enough... gets a... name and there's always some idiots ready to call them... a messiah.'

Tessera's voice was dwindling to a whisper. Donna's mind searched frantically for an answer, some way to save Tessera, or to go back in time, or to change reality to fit with the way it should *really* be. It made no difference, Tessera's heart continued to pump blood relentlessly into the gaping holes that had been torn in her body cavity. In the end, all Donna

could do was say how she felt and hope reality would somehow deign to take notice.

'I don't want you to die, Tessera'

'It's alright... I do... I'm too old for this game now... everything hurts... Jen's ready to take on the gang.

'Dammit, Tessera, I still need you!'

'D'onne, hush... you don't need anyone any more... never did really...'

Donna's heart pulsed suddenly as her brain spat out an answer: Ko'iron's medicae unit! There was nothing they couldn't fix, or at least stabilise long enough to get fixed. Donna's words came out in a headlong rash, tripping over each other. 'Look, just hold on. I know how I can save you, if I can find Ko'iron - he's got a medicae unit. One way or another I'll get it and bring it back. Just don't die!'

'You're... mad... D'onne.'

The grip on Tessera's hand tightened momentarily and then Mad Donna was gone.

DONNA QUICKLY CLAMBERED her way back up onto the gun deck. She chafed at the need for caution as she slunk forward; Tessera lay dying below her and she didn't have time to waste slinking about. She kept telling herself that she couldn't afford to get pegged by some passing gunman now, and a headlong rash would just make her real dead real quick.

Smoke was drifting everywhere, backlit by the orange glow of flames in the wreckage here and there. It sounded like there was a spirited firefight taking place around the U-shaped deck below, but the gun deck she was on and the stairs that led up to the bridge seemed deserted. No sign of the gunmen that had driven her off earlier. She found that faintly disturbing. They'd had a good position - why give it up?

Donna heard a creak close behind her and spun around in an eye blink. Tola and Avignon were hauling themselves over the railing behind her.

'Figured you wouldn't mind some company,' Avignon stage-whispered. Tola giggled.

'You two idiots better not get in my way,' Donna said, though in truth she was glad of the back-up.

'No sweat - ladies first,' Avignon smirked.

'Humph. What's all the shooting about?'

'Jen reckons we've got Bak's little Delaque friends pinned down in the front bit of the boat. She sent us up here to see if we can get an angle on them.' Avignon patted her well-worn autogun meaningfully.

'Alright then. There were two at least up in the bridge with autoguns. I don't know whether they've gone or are just waiting for good shots. Cover me and we'll find out.'

Donna ran, zigzagging between scattered wreckage and body parts. The eviscerated, half-burned corpse of the Dog Soldier she had fought stared up at her accusingly as she passed. She was gambling again, working the theory that Relli had dragged Ko'iron and the servitor away to the bridge. She was also gambling that autofire couldn't cut her down if she ran fast enough.

She threw herself to the side as muzzle flashes stabbed out from the bridge. Bullets lashed the deck behind her like hail. Avignon's autogun chattered out and elicited a cry of pain in response. Donna rolled, covering the bridge with her laspistol, scanning for a target.

She heard Tola running forward and saw a flicker of movement as one of the gunmen raised his rifle to the railing. Her las-bolts slammed into his head at the same instant that he pulled the trigger on Tola. The burst sprayed wildly around the deck, and the gunman's finger clamped in a death grip as he toppled out of sight. Tola shrieked.

'Check on her, Avignon!' Donna called as she sprinted for the steps. She hugged the wall and slithered quietly up while trying to look in all directions at once. She peeked over the edge at the top and saw the gunman sprawled nearby with a scatter of spent shell casings around him. His head was a gory ruin but the long coat and pale skin told her all she needed to know. She'd found the Delaque.

The Delaque Avignon had hit was wounded and trying to crawl away. Donna scanned the open deck she could see at the top of the steps for more enemies. It was bordered along one side by the bridge itself, but there was a long run of windows and doors that could conceal an army of lurking foes.

'Tola's okay, down but not out!' Avignon called from below.

Donna cleared the top of the steps and skipped along sideways facing the bridge. No lights were showing inside, no signs of movement. The wounded

Delaque saw her coming and scrabbled for a pistol at his belt. She closed on him in a couple of long strides and easily kicked it out of his grasp.

Ahh, you bitch,' he hissed. 'Just kill me and get on with it.'

"You're forgetting something, slick. That's "psycho-bitch" to you,' Donna hissed. 'Where's Bak and Relli? I swear if you don't tell me quick you're going to regret it for the rest of your very short and very painful existence.'

The Delaque squirmed. He knew Mad Donna's reputation as well as any.

'He's-' the world exploded into gunfire and an avalanche of shattering glass. Donna instinctively dived behind the injured Delaque for cover. She felt his body jerk as bullets ploughed into it. The deafening salvo seemed to go on endlessly: breaking glass, bullets whining past, ricochets pinging off metal. A tiny corner of her brain registered Avignon shouting somewhere in the distance.

The firing stuttered and died away, leaving Donna with the whiff of gun smoke in her nostrils and pounding eardrums. A familiar voice cut through the sudden silence.

'Glad you could make it, Donna, I really am.' Bak's sinister whisper was obscenely triumphant. 'You've been everything I had hoped for - a distraction, an assassin, a saboteur. I couldn't have wished for a better partner!'

'Well then, come out here, partner!' Donna called back. 'I want to renegotiate some of our business arrangements.' Donna was scanning the bridge, looking for the shooters, but all she could see was darkness and shards of glass hanging from their frames like broken teeth.

'Oh, I find them eminently suitable for our current relationship,' Bak sniggered.

'I was thinking of something more like that arrangement I had with Cousin Kell, you know? The one where you die screaming and cursing the day you ever heard my name.'

'Oh you poor Ulanti bitch, you think you can bait me over Kell? He was as useless as he was stupid, that's why I put him in Dust Falls to draw you on in the first place.'

'Nice story, Shallej. Is that why you sent men into the sewers after me? To "draw me on?" How many died Shallej? Half of them? All of them? And what about Dead Man's Hole? How many more did you lose there? You know something, Shallej? I think you're a crap leader. I think the only way you stay in charge is by killing off anyone that's better than you, which isn't asking a lot,' Donna figured there was no harm in trying to sow a little dissension in the ranks. Something she said must have stung Shallej. His voice was pure venom when he replied.

'You think what you want! Tell it to the sumpsharks!'

She heard him saying something to the men with him. It sounded like, 'It's done, let's go'. That was worrying.

Donna felt a vibration run through the deck. A high-pitched whine began, coughed out and then restarted. It was picked up and repeated, once, twice, rising in volume each time: three, four, five, six more times. Donna realised the noise was coming from either side of the bridge, so she glanced outwards and saw a sight that froze her heart.

Each of the stub wings to either side of bridge bore the squat shapes of mree big engines. She had given them no heed until now, assuming them to be empty husks. As she watched, the engines opened up like flowers. Venturis extended seamlessly and lit with cherry red flames. The engines built up to full power in a rising howl. The ekranoplan lurched and began to slide forward from the dock.

'Take Tola and get out of here, now!' she yelled down to Avignon, not even knowing if she could be heard over the roar of the engines. She heard a fusillade of shots crackling up from the lower decks, Jen was doubtless finding out that the Delaque weren't as pinned down as she'd hoped.

Donna jumped up, charging headlong for the bridge. Muzzle flashes lit like stars in the darkness, driving her back into cover again. She fired back blindly but the flashes were moving targets. Bak's men were pulling out.

Time was running out, and that made Donna more reckless than ever. She dived headlong through a shattered window, tearing her flesh on the knife-like shards. She landed on a table in the darkness and slid awkwardly off it as the ekranoplan lurched. Shots buzzed past her like a swarm of angry insects. Rolling upright, she saw a Delaque silhouetted in a doorway. Donna put two las-shots into his torso and he fell back out of sight.

The firing stopped abruptly. The room was empty. With her bionic eye's crystal vision Donna could see that she was in some kind of chartroom, with a corridor running forward to the bridge proper and doors off at either side. She was starting for the doorway where she had shot the Delaque when a sudden chill at the back of her neck made her spin around.

The room was empty. Nothing moved. The Delaque had all gone. But even now she felt as if something was creeping up on her, something she could see just out of the corner of her eye, but when she looked directly it was gone. The chill feeling at the back of her neck didn't go away. If anything it intensified.

But time was running out and she didn't have time for mysteries. The roar of the engines had steadied and the ekranoplan was wallowing and lurching against its mooring lines like an unruly pack animal. Donna heard the whip-crack sound of a line snapping. Soon the ekranoplan would be heading off into the sump for its final voyage. The room was empty. Nothing moved. She turned back to the doorway.

Something hit her from behind with the force of a sledgehammer and sent her flying. She crashed into a cabinet and fell to the deck. She glimpsed a glitter of chrome hurtling towards her and she lashed out with a blind kick at it. Her boot connected solidly enough to deflect steel-pistoned jaws driving at her throat, but the enforcer hound behind them kept coming. Blade-sheathed claws raked at her legs as it lunged at her again with its jaws snapping.

Donna swung Seventy-six up but it was too close for the blade to connect. She punched the cyber-mastiff s gargoyle-like head aside with the knuckle guard instead. That bought her another second of life. The beast reared back and Donna rolled from beneath it. She was up and onto one knee before it came ravening back at her again. This time her chainblade parry connected squarely, gouging at the polished steel of the mastiffs exoskeleton. Donna took a return cut at the mastiffs foreleg and sent it skittering backwards with a shower of sparks.

It looked like a spectacular hit but Donna wasn't fooled. Any ordinary creature would be shorter by a leg after a blow like that; the enforcer hound barely even slowed down. It dug its claws into the deck and jumped at her. This time Donna darted aside and let the heavy cyborg crash into

the cabinet behind her. In the second it took for the mastiff to shake itself free of the wreckage, she darted out of the door.

The door was metal and it was heavy, more of a hatch. Donna threw her weight against it and it swung ponderously shut. She glimpsed the polished metal of the mastiffs skeleton through the closing gap. Then the door jammed only partway shut, and Donna looked down and cursed. The dead Delaque's foot was caught in the doorjamb, and the mastiff crashed against the door. Donna had to fight tooth and claw to keep it from being forced open. Tortured metal shrieked in protest, and the mastiffs muzzle and claws scrabbled in the gap with a whining of servos.

The assault ceased for a moment and Donna instantly thumbed Seventy-six into life. The whirling teeth licked downward through the dead Delaque's ankle and severed it with a spray of blood. Donna threw the door shut in the mastiffs face. Panting and shaking, she glanced down the steps at her side and then out of the small porthole in the door. The mastiff was close by, staring back at her. Now there was another figure in the room with it, one that sent an involuntary chill down Donna's spine. A robed figure, one she had seen what seemed an eternity ago at Cliff Wall - short and rotund-looking, it was swaying as if in time to unheard music. The robe's hood had been cast back to reveal a pale, round face framed by tangled black locks. It was a homely looking face, suited for a nursemaid or a cook, apart from a pair of eyes that twinkled with ages-old malice.

An icy sensation brushed through Donna's skull as she looked at the woman. A bloom of frost appeared on the glass of the porthole and stretched feathery fingers across it. The chilling sensation swelled, becoming cold spears inside her head that stabbed down her spine. The world pitched and darkened before her sight, consciousness dwindling into a shrinking spot of light.

She had failed everyone: Tessera, Tola, Avignon, Hanno, Jen, Lars. Their faces reared out of the darkness at her. They flowed past her in a vivid parade of accusation and disappointment. She had led them all into pain and suffering. Everyone she had ever met had been hurt by knowing her. It would have been better if she had never been bom, better if her life were ended now to stop the damage she was doing to everyone and everything around her.

Her head throbbed abominably. Everything went black.

DEAD LEAVES RUSTLED above her like dry hands. A chill wind caressed her hare hack and arms. The arboretum was covered in a light dusting of frost that caught thin polarised rays of light coming through the skylights high above. Blood was on her hands. Her heart hammered in her chest. She would he found soon. She would he caught and taken back to the tower. Imprisoned for life.

Nobles and their entourages strolled past. Harassed nursemaids shepherded children in unruly flocks. Their faces turned minutely away whenever they came close to her, denying her existence within their ordered world. She could almost hear their thoughts: a girl alone in the Arboretum'? Scandalous! She must be insane] But not a word was spoken, not a glance was given. Her solitude remained perfect and unchallenged.

Their movements reminded D'onne of the slow, formal dances her father had insisted she learn, of masquerades where nobility stepped and fought their internal battles of supremacy with gestures and nuances almost too subtle to register. A wave of hopelessness surged through her. She felt hollow, spent, an empty shell filled only by the beating, skipping tremor of her heart.

A shadow fell across her. She looked up into the furious face of her father and her fluttering heart broke.

LOQUI'S OPEN MOUTH was screaming but the banshee winds snatched the pitiful sound away and tore it apart. Her night robes billowed wildly about her like torn wings, she was spinning, flailing wildly as she flew up into storm-wracked skies. Streamers of cloud whipped past like predatory shoals and arcs of lightning scored the swollen, bruised atmosphere with bright metallic fractures from horizon to horizon. Loqui was swept further out from the creaking spire and started to fall towards the roiling cloud base far, far below. Despite the patent absurdity of it, D'onne believed she could hear her sister's thin, distant scream long after she disappeared from sight.

Her eldest sister, Corundra, was smiling down at her with full red lips. Her face flickered in and out of the darkness, the actinic glare of the lightning distorting it into a hundred cruel masks. Little D'onne felt herself

being lifted by small hands and carried over to the edge of the esplanade. Lightning crashed down about them as they reached the railing.

COUNT KO'IRON'S SWEATY face leered up close to hers. His hand was gripping her by the throat and he was forcing her onto the table. Her back was bowed back cruelly against the table edge. Crystal goblets scattered and broke with a hysterical tinkling sound. But there was no one there. No one would come to help. She was alone with a predator in her home.

DONNA KNEW WHAT came next. She didn't want to see this, she'd hidden this deeply a long time ago, so deep that even she didn't see it any more. Why? Why was this memory here?

KO'IRON' LAUGHED AND raised a bottle to his lips, easily keeping young D'onne pinned with his other hand. He knew his business when it came to forcing himself on women, and making them feel helpless while he did it. She writhed in his grasp, only exciting him further. He pressed his slobbering lips against hers, his waxed moustachios scraping rapaciously at her soft skin and the reek of alcohol gusting into D'onne's nose and mouth.

Something small and hard was clutched in her fist. She smashed it into Ko'iron's leering face without a second's thought. The resulting spray of blood shocked her to the very core. The grip on her throat released at once, and Ko'iron fell back burbling out a thin, high scream and clutching his face. In an instant the tables had turned - a small piece of metal had made Ko'iron stop when a hundred pleas had not. Rage blossomed in D'onne's breast, this was the man she was being sold to, the man her father wanted her to breed with. She smashed the fork in her hand into his other eye, realising at the last instant that Ko'iron's cold grey eyes exactly matched those of her father.

DONNA'S LIVING EYE snapped open. The deck lurched beneath her feet as the ekranoplan surged against its last mooring line. Barely a moment had passed. She could still see the woman, the Wyrd, silhouetted on the other side through the frost-scarred porthole, but the sleek chrome shape

of the cyber-mastiff was gone. She yanked the heavy steel door open and stepped out. The robed woman took an involuntary step backwards.

'That's right, witch, your mind games failed. They've just got me seriously pissed off instead.'

The woman looked confused and upset, like a child that has had its toys taken away. She kept backing away towards the other door. Donna brought up her laspistol.

Where's Ko'iron? I won't be asking twice.'

The woman closed her eyes and Donna's nape hairs prickled. She fired, and the las-bolts cut straight through where the woman stood, although Donna was not sure if she really hit anything. There was the stink of burnt flesh and a spray of blood, but when Donna looked at the spot they seemed to fade away, just like the woman herself. The room was empty. Nothing moved. Pretty soon Donna found herself unable to believe the woman had ever really been there at all.

A snaking trail of viscous fluid led off towards the bridge. Bright score marks showed where steel shod claws had run. Had the mastiff returned to its master? There was one way to be sure, and at least it looked like the brute was hurt, leaking out precious fluids, just like Tessera.

The corridor at the back of the chart room was short, with cabin doors hanging open at either side to give glimpses of cramped quarters. A fresh corpse was sprawled half out of a bunk in one room, and bullet holes were everywhere Donna looked. Bak's men had not been subtle when they took over.

The bridge itself was a complete mess. No lights were left but fires sputtering in the guts of wrecked consoles gave the place a fitful illumination that reminded Donna of a sepulchre. More bodies were strewn around on the floor here. She paid no heed to the dead. She was too numb with pain and exhaustion to give them more than a cursory glance as she walked by.

Some had been riddled with shots but at least two had had their throats cut. The sluggish pools of their life-blood sucked at Donna's boot heels as she passed. Directly ahead of her a skeletal metal stairway disappeared up through the roof. Bright scratches struck exclamation points in the oxidised alloy of the steps - the mastiff had gone up. Now the question was how to follow without one's head being bitten off.

Outside, the last mooring line gave way with a crack like thunder. Donna was almost thrown to the deck by a sudden surge of acceleration. The multi-throated engine noise rose in triumph and the ekranoplan slid majestically forward across the sump. Donna couldn't help but grin - wherever Relli was, he must be pissing in his pants by now.

Anyone up top must be trying to hang on for dear life after that lurch. Whatever she was going to do, the time to do it was now. She bounded up the steps, diving and rolling out from the entry too fast (she hoped) for anyone to draw a bead on her.

She glared around, chainsword and pistol in hand for the expected rush of enemies, but there were none. The steps came up into a groove in the top of the wings that in turn led to the frame of an observation blister that had once been artfully faceted in armoured glass, most of which were now cracked or missing. A perfunctory mast rose in front of the blister at a rakish angle - it had the look of an afterthought placed there only to hang flags on.

The wind whipped past, tugging at Donna's hair and stinging her living eye to tears. She could see a figure up ahead, just beyond the observation blister. It was only a silhouette but the chromium glimmer of the mastiff was at his feet and that left no doubt.

Count Ko'iron was making his last stand beneath the empty flag-pole of a sinking ship. He was surely ignorant of the rich, unconscious symbolism of his choice.

'YOU'VE GOT YOUR own gun, that's a good start,' the old woman had told her as they had made their way along yet another service corridor worming deeper into Escher territory. To D'onne's eyes this 'Tessera looked older than her mother, but she seemed fit and able enough as she led them down into increasingly filthy and disused-looking areas with a familiarity that was reassuring.

D'onne had been surprised that they knew about the laspistol she was hiding until she thought about it for a moment. Of course they had scanned both her and Hanno for hidden weapons when they entered - it was simply basic security. Hanno probably knew about it too. They didn't bother about the pistol at The Wall because no one cared what was taken out of the

Spire and into Hive City, just what got brought back inside. The Escher were probably the same way. D'onne felt naive.

Hanno was still blustering furiously and to no avail.

'You can't just take a noble into the Underhive! Not without personal armour and proper support!'

'She won't be the first noble to get crap on their shoes, enforcer,' Tessera told him. 'Besides, it's the only kind of sanctuary we can offer now. If she stays here, thousands are going to pay for it with their lives.'

'Lord Helmawr can provide her with all the protection she needs! There must he a proper investigation!'

D'onne was getting tired of being treated as an article of baggage to be argued over.

'Enforcer Hanno,' she interjected, quietly but firmly, 'I appreciate your concerns and your dedication to your duty does you credit. However, I fear your optimism in relation to Lord Helmawr's most likely stance is unwarranted. There will be no investigation. If I surrender myself to the ruling house I can either expect to be held as a hostage against House Ulanti's good behaviour for years to come, or, more likely, be traded back to my father for some immediate short term advantage.

'Believe me, Hanno, I know what I'm worth,' she concluded bitterly. 'Coming here was an act of desperation. If Madam Tessera believes I've put these people in danger, then I have to go. And quickly. You can either extend your sense of duty to accompany me for my protection, or go and report back to the proper authorities on what you have witnessed!

Hanno looked taken aback. Her analysis had been clear and dispassionate, a statement of undeniable fact from someone in a far better position than he to know just what Helmawr would do. Tessera was nodding unconsciously as D'onne spoke but Hanno had been too wrapped up in his own worldview to see it as clearly.

Hanno had looked at the seething, ramshackle Hive City and, like most, blamed its many problems on human incompetence and simple neglect. Only now was he coming to understand that those were just symptoms. The founding fathers of Necromunda had institutionalised corruption, built greed into the city's very foundations and then set themselves as rulers over it all as the noble houses. For millennia they had made it so and nothing was going to change now.

Poor Hanno. D'onne could see the cracks in his belief system yawning into vast gulfs as he learned more about those he served. The lords of Necromunda had no interest in redemption, or the wellbeing of their fellow man. Their populace was an indentured workforce and nothing more. Even their own sons and daughters were bartered and sold on the open market. That didn't fit his worldview at all; it made him into a corrupt servant of a corrupt regime, not the fair-minded arbiter of justice his ego told him to be.

D'onne looked at Tessera and tried to radiate calm and confidence she didn't feel. Her stomach kept knotting tighter and tighter the longer they stood around. Whatever was going to happen, she needed to know what it was going to be and, most of all, she needed it to happen quickly.

'Madam-'

'Just call me Tessera, D'onne, we aren't big on titles here!

'Tessera, do you believe that we can escape into the Underhive without my father knowing?'

'No, I don't believe we can even escape from House Escher without your father knowing. What's more, the news of where you've gone will hit Hive City about four minutes after we get to the first settlement in the Underhive, but that's what I'm counting on!

'I don't understand!

'Oh my dear D'onne, it's all a question of reach. In Hive City there are literally hundreds of thousands of agents House Ulanti can mobilise quickly and easily against any of the industrial houses. Many will work for your father just out of spite and political expediency up here. It's not like that in the Underhive!

'No, it's a shambolic anarchy of crazed mutants, renegades and criminal gangs from Hive City, which is why my father won't be able to reach me there, presumably!

Tessera had given her an odd look then, as if re-evaluating.

'That's a little simplistic, but I expect that's exactly what you're taught in the Spire,' she said, perhaps rather archly.

The point was that all the houses have plenty of spies in the Underhive but they have very few agents working for them down there and even less whom they can trust.

'Your father will quickly hear that you have left House Escherfor the Underhive, but there will be very little he can do about it, and while he's searching for a way the attacks on House Escher will stop.'

That made her reappraise Tessera too. She was thinking clearly about the best course for her house, and seemed to know plenty about the Underhive too - which made D'onne wonder about those 'criminal gangs' that supposedly plagued the Underhive in such profusion. Could it be that they were all simply shady extensions of the Industrial Houses?

'WELL HANNO, WHAT'S it going to be?' Tessera asked as they arrived.at a hatch that was caked in rust, centuries old. Hanno gave her an icy stare before turning to D'onne.

'Nobledam, I was given permission by my proctor only to accompany you as far as House Escher territory,' Hanno said to D'onne. 'But under the circumstances I think it is clearly my duty to accompany you further if you are determined to go ahead with this plan to enter the Underhive.' He shot a sharp look at Tessera.

Interesting. It seemed Hanno didn't want to go back Hive City. D'onne wondered how much of it was a desire to protect her and how much of it was a desire not to go back and explain what he had heard. Lord Helmawr might well decide it was most expedient to dispose of the earnest Enforcer Hanno once his story had been recounted. Calamitous events in the Spire seldom left a surfeit of live witnesses behind. Dead men tell no tales.

Tessera spun the wheel in the centre of the hatch. It turned remarkably smoothly, considering the apparent decrepitude of its mounting.

'In that case, my dear enforcer,' Tessera said with a wicked grin, 'you might want to lose the body armour before going much further!

She hauled open the hatch and a wave of hot, humid air surged out. Sweat prickled on D'onne's body as the noisome heat enveloped them.

'Deeper down it gets cooler' Tessera said conversationally, 'and the condensation isn't half as bad, but for the next few shifts it'll be like this or worse so you want to strip down if you can. Heat stroke can be a killer down here!

D'onne knew right then that she was going to hate the Underhive.

THE HATCH OPENED into a kind of common room. There were bunk beds, crates, chairs and half a dozen Escher lounging around. Their baroqtxely shaven heads, tattoos, piercings and plentiful weaponry told D'onne that these were gangers, real Underhive scum. They eyed D'onne and most especially Hanno with studied insolence, the threat of imminent violence floating in the air between them.

'Be nice now', Tessera said. 'These two people need our help. It's not like they're the first to ask and it's not like it's the first time we've said yes. These two are just a bit unusual is all'.

Several of the gangers eyed Tessera with overt scepticism but no-one turned away muttering and none of them challenged her directly. D'onne was fascinated. When Tessera had started talking, D'onne had been convinced that it was some kind of foreign language. It was only by listening carefully that she could make out the weird inflections, the clipping and lengthening of vowel sounds that were at work mangling the usual prole cant into something entirely different. Tessera had slipped into it easily, shrugging off her formal, upper Hive City accent like a cloak.

One of the gangers stood up suddenly, a blonde mohawked giant that stood a full head taller than anyone else in the room. She jabbed a blunt, scarred finger at Hanno and declared, 'Me an the girls say we goin' nowhere with law hoy there, until e drops the armour so we can see that sweet enforcer rearguard]'

The room erupted in hoots and giggles. Hanno went an interesting shade of purple. It was doubtless just the release of tension but D'onne found herself laughing too. She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed without thinking first about whether it was 'appropriate' to do so. Maybe being in the Underhive wouldn't be so bad after all.

Tessera rolled her eyes, turned to D'onne, and whispered with theatrical conspiracy, 'That is "Crazy Kristi," I'm afraid. We would have got rid of her a long time ago but no one's figured out how to kill her yet'

Crazy Kristi spread her arms like a triumphant pit fighter and lapped up the storm of boos, catcalls and thrown litter from her fellow gangers. D'onne grinned.

Not so bad at all.

SURVIVAL INSTINCT

> In the broiling social froth of the Necromundan hives, it is not the strongest individual that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.
>
> — Excerpt from: *Xonariarius the Younger's Nobilite Pax Imperator - The Triumph of Aristocracy over Democracy.*

THE EKRANOPLAN WAS skimming across the sump lake on its final odyssey. From the top of its upper wing, the dark majesty of the glistening sable expanse spread in all directions, and the pale lights of Down Town were dwindling away behind them with alarming rapidity. Methane fires twisted in their wake and rippled away to black horizons inestimably far off. Gargantuan stalactites hung overhead like inverted mountains, reaching out to touch the surface as if it were a starry night sky and the ekranoplan was racing across the heavens instead of through the roots of the underworld. Donna had never felt so consciously out of her environment as she did upon the sump lake - she could have been in outer space and felt more at home.

This was a truly alien place, inimical to the intrusion of man.

The sharp tang of pollutants was different out here on the lake, not organic and rotten like it was around Down Town but more obviously chemical, caustic and deadly. The whipping wind made by their progress scoured the skin and stung Donna's living eye. She could still make out

Ko'iron through the tears. His white armour shone starkly against the fantastic midnight panorama behind him, and the glittering chrome enforcer hound lay silent at his feet. He was the very image of some paladin or angel descended from the places of light into darkness to smite the fallen.

The High Cathedra of Hive Primus is full of such images, armoured warriors selflessly fighting aliens and foul beasts to protect their fellow man. There are even relics of crusades among the stars, and scriptoria filled with ancient accounts of battles against impossible odds now long since forgotten. The faithful always point to these as evidence of an earlier golden age of justice and honour, mankind at its best and bravest as it confronted a new dawn on a million worlds across the galaxy.

Little D'onne had always been dazzled by the shining holo-liths of the cathedra, its secret treasure houses of reliquaries and the halls of tattered, shot-scarred banners won beneath distant suns. The martial pride of the Spyrer hunt had first stirred her interest and then her long sojourn in the tower had later given her ample opportunity to study the subject at her leisure.

Like any good noble, she had studied the careers of her illustrious ancestors first and foremost. By every standard she had been taught they were the only things that really mattered. The results were disappointing, to say the least. Every time she had followed up some epithet or battle history she found the so-called regimental hero had been a hundred kilometres from the battlefront at all times, or the landfall of a battalion on a hostile planet had been bravely 'led' by a noble up in orbit. The family histories wheedled and pleaded on behalf of its paper-thin protagonists but could not conceal their arrogance, ignorance and sloth.

D'onne eventually understood that to her family war was just another business arena, and an unprofitable one at that. It was only commonly proffered as a career to the most wasteful, stupid and myopic family members. Others might toy with it briefly, just long enough to get a few awards and a uniform for attending the correct social events before returning to an undeserved heroes welcome. It seemed those aberrant few that became true, professional, soldiers left Necromunda and never returned. She had been quietly sickened by all matters military after that, and turned her mind to other things.

But nobility still loved to wrap itself in the flag of past glories it had never earned. They spouted martial tradition and rattled their immaculate sabres at every opportunity, and some even went so far as to hunt down in the Underhive. Then they came equipped with weapons beyond the comprehension of their enemies and armour suits that were smarter than those they protected. The suits had stored water and food to nourish the nobles, inbuilt diagnostics to tend to their wounds and inertial maps to guide them to prey located by a suite of sensors. The nobles believed this tradition kept them hardened and honed in readiness in case they were called on to fight for their house or their world.

It was hard to make headway against the wind. Headwind slapped at her, trying to force her back at every footstep. Donna tried not to think about what would happen if she lost her footing altogether and was swept off the top of the wing. She stayed inside the groove to the observation blister and it afforded some shelter. The white armoured figure of the count remained stock-still, gazing forward across the lake while his argent cloak billowed and snapped like a banner behind him.

You could tell from his very stance that Julius Ko'-iron was just such a mock-warrior noble. He embraced the fantasy of the heroic hereditary warrior, those who since ancient times had selflessly protected (read: tyrannised) their people (read: unwilling subjects) in return for their support (read: money) against threats internal and external (read: rebellious subjects and rapacious relatives). He had exterminated vermin in the Underhive and thought himself a man, a great hunter. Well, Donna thought, now the great hunter was going to meet a great predator. She had already taken his eye and now she was coming back for the rest of him.

She was getting tired of fighting against the headwind and trying for stealth. It was making her whole body hurt but most especially her ribs. She had a sneaking suspicion that the count knew she was there anyway, but that he was choosing to prove his superiority by ignoring her until the last possible moment.

'Ahh, there you are Julius,' she called out playfully. 'How's the eye?'

He turned then, and as the argent cloak whipped aside she realised what had become of the medicae unit. It clung to his back like a parasitic child, thin legs clamped around his chest. One steel hand was at his neck and another on his face where it covered the eye she had gouged like a

squatting metallic spider. Its dull-eyed face swiveled as Ko'iron turned; it had been watching her all along.

'D'onne Astride Ge'Slyvanus Ulanti,' he yelled over the noise. 'I knew we weren't finished with each other yet.'

'Still thinking you can take me home to do my duty?' Donna's voice dripped with sarcasm.

Ko'iron's face flushed crimson at her insolence as he screamed back at her. 'You stupid, ignorant woman! I didn't come down here to take you back to the Spire. I came down here to erase a mistake, an embarrassment to not just one but two, two houses of the blood. You-'

Donna was laughing. 'Oh Julius, you are quite the charmer, so like your brother in so many ways. You try to make it sounds as if Ulanti and Ko'iron were equals. We both know different, Julius, so you can drop the act with me.'

Ko'iron's jaw worked ineffectually as Donna swept on.

There's no scandal like an old scandal that just doesn't go away, is there Julius? So you decided to uphold your family's honour, huh? I don't buy that. Nobility is great for talking about honour until their skins are on the line. My father put you up to this, and he sent you down here for a reckoning. I'm guessing he told you that he would write off some of the bride debt you owed, I'd bet-'

"You couldn't just die and sink into obscurity, could you! You had to become a gang fighter! You had to gain notoriety and a name! All because D'onne Ulanti is more important than her family, or her father's promise! You disgust me! Alliances fractured, deals broken. Have you any conception of the mess you've made?'

That's all crap, Julius. If there's one thing I've learned down here it's that in the Spire alliances and deals are just another way of screwing each other over, all the while dreaming that something can be had for nothing. The families use people as playing pieces in the same old games to try and win more of the pot, which is wasting even while they squabble over it. Know your place, do your part. Words to turn generations into automata while the few decide amongst themselves how to divide what is made by the many.'

'What? That's swing shift heresy! Is there no depth you won't plumb, woman? I don't know what Old 'Sly'vanus thought he was doing with you

but it must have been a total failure. How could he have spawned such a heretical prole for a daughter?'

'You should thank me really,' she shouted into the wind. 'There'd be no House Ko'iron left if father had had his way - you'd all be serving drinks and cleaning boots in House Ulanti by now if I hadn't objected so strenuously to the match I was presented with.' That was a bit of a stretch, but the idea seemed to upset Julius a lot.

'Bitch!' he shouted.

Ko'iron's hands came up and Donna dived into cover before she even saw what he was holding.

There was a roar and a miniature meteor howled past, a second and third following it in quick succession. A fourth one clipped the observation blister and exploded, throwing metal and glass outward in a spinning corona of fragments that hissed venomously and rattled off the wing.

He had a bolt gun, a rare sight in the Underhive thanks to their expensive ammo and temperamental reputation. Bounty hunters, gun-scummers, watchman types like Hanno often used the pistol version if they could get their hands on one. The miniature rockets that bolt weapons fired, the 'bolts', could blow off limbs or eviscerate a body with a single hit, or even cripple with a near miss. They were so deadly only plasma gave more chance of a one-shot kill.

Another volley of bolts howled past, tearing shrapnel out of the wing behind her. The ekranoplan lurched slightly, probably coincidence but it did make Donna wonder how long it could survive Julius throwing around mass-reactive bolts near its engines.

Julius started stamping around to get a better angle at her, and Donna rolled up to put a shot into him with her laspistol. He made a big, obvious target in his white armour and fluttering cloak, but when she pulled the trigger, nothing happened. She jerked the trigger again and the pistol's grip suddenly pulsed red-hot. She dropped the gun with a curse. Julius laughed.

Thought you could shoot me with my brother's own gun did you?' he shouted. 'Ha! It remembers its place better than you think,'

He raised the bolt gun and let fly. Donna ducked down into the narrow groove and huddled deeper as bolts rained about her. She felt the impacts of the rockets tearing into the wing above, saw the blinding flashes and heard the hiss of shrapnel over her head. Donna's flesh shrank instinctively

from the storm of violence and she wished that she could worm deeper into the metal floor for shelter.

Through the strobing flashes of bolter fire, she glimpsed her laspistol. No, she corrected herself, that was *Ko'iron's* laspistol winking up at her from nearby. She wondered what other inbuilt protocols it might have that she didn't know about. It could obviously sense somehow if a target was of Ko'iron blood and punish the user if they repeatedly tried to fire on them.

Such technology was difficult, but not impossible, to achieve. Donna had heard of weapons keyed so that only certain individuals could use them and this was some bizarre twist on that arrangement. It was probably intended to prevent Ko'iron siblings from shooting each other in the back. She wondered if it now remembered her as 'bad' and would punish her if she tried to use it again. She eyed the treacherous yet seductive pistol dubiously.

The firing stopped, creating a brief illusion of silence until the roar of the engines and the rush of the wind reasserted itself. Julius shouted something, but Donna's ears were still ringing from the barrage and missed it. She gripped Seventy-six and waited, expecting him to rash to the edge of the trench and sweep it with explosive bolts. In the background, the engine noise of the ekranoplan was getting rougher. One of them stuttered and died away, making the whole wing shudder briefly. The other engines howled louder as they straggled to compensate and keep the craft skimming. Julius did not appear.

'Are you deaf? Come out and take what's coming to you, stop hiding like some miserable prole.'

He must be running low on ammunition, and was trying to needle her pride to make her give away her position. Attacking a noble's pride might work in his world but this was the Underhive and Donna had been taunted by professionals. She kept quiet.

'Or maybe you're hurt, and just lying there slowly bleeding to death, hmmm?'

Yes, indulge your fantasies Julius. Go ahead and think you've already won. She wondered briefly if Tessera was already dead, whether she was even still aboard the ekranoplan - it was almost certain that the Escher would have taken her off if they could when the engines started. If so, she had come on this murder hunt for nothing, and was liable to meet her

death at the hands of an over-privileged retard with a big weapons' budget in pursuit of a truly lost cause.

A lead weight of determination settled on Donna's soul. Even if she was going to die, Julius Ko'iron could not be allowed to live. She forced her bruised and battered body to move. On a mad whim, she reached out for the laspistol, and fought down the instinctive flinch she felt as her hand closed around it. There was no pulse of heat, the pistol grip felt perfectly cool and smooth through her torn glove.

Time for the oldest trick in the book - Jen had reliably informed her this one was in use before Necromunda was settled and probably even before that. She took out her filter can and tossed it to the other end of the narrow trench, near the steps. The flick of movement and the tinny clatter it made was all it took to get Julius firing again. Bolts rained down like a meteor swarm, raking the top of the stairs with an inescapable web of shrapnel - inescapable, assuming you were actually under it, of course.

Julius was happily blazing away at shadows, so Donna had plenty of time to peek out, take aim, and unleash an accurate volley of shots at her target. Julius saw the flash of her shots and instinctively flinched back for a second before he started pouring fire on her. He didn't see what she'd hit, and didn't even think about why she'd shot at all until a fraction of a second later. That was when the first engine exploded.

Donna didn't know much about engines, especially not the kind of weird jets mounted on the ekranoplan. But, she reasoned, like most things in life, an engine will stop working if you shoot it often enough in the right places. She hadn't expected the results to be so spectacular.

The innermost engine she'd hit belched flame and then exploded outwards into a ball of red-hot metal shards. Its two brethren gulped down some of the debris and were pierced by more of it, each exploding in turn and ripping off pieces of the stub wing they were attached to. The rest of the wing and bits of engine disappeared aft, trailing smoke and flames, all in the twinkling of an eye.

The ekranoplan shuddered and lurched like a dying animal as its motive power was shorn away on one side. It started wallowing over into a sharply banked turn that pushed Donna against the side of the trench she was hiding in. Stalactite-mountains dipped overhead in mock salute as the ekranoplan tipped over towards the surface of the sump lake. She

imagined that she heard Julius scream amidst the tumult of howling engines, but that was probably just wishful thinking.

Splash down. The crippled ekranoplan kissed the pitch-black surface of the sump, bouncing off and skipping across it for a dozen metres before digging in again. This time the ekranoplan gave up its remaining momentum in a spray of effluents and toxins that choked the last of its engines. The craft spun through one-hundred-and-eighty degrees and rose almost vertically before slamming down into the lake.

Donna clung on with every ounce of her strength as the world whirled about her. The heart-stopping fear of being flung overboard into the toxic sump gave her muscles strength like iron, though in her frightened mind they felt like water. The awful, sickening g-force of the crash dragged at her, tried to suck her out of her haven wedged into the trench. At the last moment the ekranoplan seemed determined to tip her out, or to flip over completely and crash her beneath its vast bulk. Then finally, grudgingly, the craft splashed back down and slewed to a halt.

It felt like it took a long time for Donna to realise the motion had stopped, or at least slowed to a drift. She was shaking as she disentangled herself from the now twisted trench. The ekranoplan was lying at an angle with the tip of its remaining, intact stub wing dipped into the sump and the wrecked one held high above the surface like a smoking torch.

The crash must have torn a hole in the ekranoplan's hull because the glistening surface of the lake was creeping higher with each passing moment. Methane fires skated and whirled around the wreck like sylphs. Further off, Donna could see v-shaped wakes patiently circling as the local wildlife tried to decide whether this intruder in their realm was predator or prey. It was certainly crippled and sinking, she sourly concluded, so the ekranoplan couldn't help acting just like prey right now.

No matter which way she looked she couldn't catch sight of the lights of Down Town, the oily expanse of the sump was the only thing visible. She craned to see the rear of the craft, where she had left Tessera, but a pall of smoke and fumes hung about the tilted stern. It was hard to imagine Tessera could have clung on through the crash even if she had been conscious, so Donna had probably killed her too. She couldn't see Ko'iron anywhere either, much as she half-expected to find him clinging to some

piece of flotsam and shouting imprecations as he died a horrible death in the sump. That would have been nice.

Thump. Something hit the submerged wing tip. Donna raised her pistol and looked over in time to see a white-bodied, multi-limbed apparition haul itself up onto an engine casing. Black slurry rolled off its jointed legs, silver glittered on its back. But it was all wrong - those were not the sleek limbs of a spider-mare, this was something more twisted, and more familiar.

Count Julius Ko'iron crawled up the wing like some newly metamorphosed insect. The tattered and sodden cloak once so magnificent, now dragged behind the count like a discarded cocoon. His hair was gone, his exposed skin was red, pockmarked and still bubbling in places. The pristine white armour was cracked and stained, missing parts that had been sloughed away in the crash. The medicae unit on his back looked worse: what little flesh it had before had peeled back like old paper to show the bone, staples and circuitry beneath. It was half-clinging to Ko'iron, half dragging him along, and the count's head was lolling back and forth grotesquely.

It was the servitor's ravaged face that stared back fixedly at Donna. Something in its gaze convinced her that it was the count looking out through its eyes, dragging his slack body forward with the help of the servitor's limbs as some hideous composite being. It struggled fully upright as its jaws worked and some gargling, monstrous attempt at speech came out. Donna had already seen enough.

What ever it is, I don't need to hear it. You want revenge, meat puppet? Come and give me your best shot. You want help?' She thumbed Seventy-six into life and it purred in anticipation. Then I'll give you all the help Donna's got to give, the only kind of help she knows about.'

Seventy-six sang as she swung her arm in an experimental arc. All the pain and weakness she had felt was gone. She felt good.

'I will help you die,' she told him.

Ko'iron wanted revenge. Revenge had driven him into the Underhive, and now his thirst for vengeance had consumed him utterly. His once-white armoured arms rose into a fighter's stance and his gnarled red hands twisted themselves into fists. As they did so, his forearms grew blades, wicked hooks that extruded smoothly from hidden sheaths in the armour.

Donna cocked her head and smiled. 'Oh goody'

He lurched at her, his butcher's-blades swinging. She parried one and whirled away from the other, disturbed by the glassy-sounding crack she heard when the two blades connected. Seventy-six's whine had a stutter to it now. She backed up the wing a couple of steps, Ko'iron shambling after her on all eight limbs. His blades bit into the engine casing like butter as he hauled himself forward.

She cut at him and he swayed back, trying to hook her chainblade. She countered almost absent-mindedly, flipping the tip of her sword around in a half-circle to cut at his upper arm. The teeth scrabbled at his armour ineffectually so, as an afterthought, she thrust it into the medicae unit on his back. Ko'iron mewled and staggered back a pace.

'Mono-blades, my dear count?' Donna was disparaging. Those nasty one molecule cutting edges would mess up Seventy-six a treat if I let you keep hacking at me. I think we won't be having that, oh no.'

She aimed the laspistol at him. Ko'iron tensed, then relaxed as he recognised it. He stood up taller, daring her to try and shoot him with it. She smiled and pointed it at the medicae unit's face. She waited for half a second for the shock to register in Ko'iron's mind, and then she shot it in the eye.

The servitor's head exploded in a shower of flash-fried brains and gore. The rest of its exoskeleton fell back sparking and twitching, slithering off Ko'iron's back. The count himself collapsed onto his knees. Donna didn't give him time to recover hacking off one of his arms at the elbow. She took the other arm off at the shoulder, although Seventy-six screeched in protest at having to carve through his thick shoulder plates.

'Just a little longer baby, then you can rest,' she told Seventy-six. It crooned happily again in response.

Julius had fallen down. His legs were still moving, and his head was twisting back and forth. But now he had no eyes left (the sump had burned out his last real one) and he didn't know which way to crawl, even if he could crawl, which he couldn't really. Donna looked around. The sump was inching its way past the outermost engine now, but there was still plenty of time. She put her foot on his chest and looked down at him for a moment. Her voice cracked when she spoke.

'You... if you had just left it alone, it wouldn't have to be like this. If you could have just...' She shook her head. Her voice was hard when she spoke again.

'I've killed a lot of deserving bastards in my time, Julius, but believe me you've made it to the top of the heap, and in record time too. You were a star, count. I feel better about killing you than anyone I ever met before. Now... go to hell.'

She set Seventy-six chewing at his groin and looked in his face as she shoved it deeper inside, through intestines and organs and up to his foul heart, but he was long gone. Crimson tears leaked from the white armour as she methodically churned his insides into soup.

IT WAS PEACEFUL.

Donna sat with her knees drawn up beneath her chin, watching the surface of the sump get closer. The ekranoplan was settling gradually, its internal spaces filling up one by one as the corrosive effluent seeped in. She watched the methane fires dancing, saw the circling wakes disperse and be replaced by the stilt-legged silhouettes of spider-mares that now skated warily in the distance. She gazed in wonder at the hanging spires overhead with their swirling patterns of metamorphosis and decay.

The sump wasn't even black, she realised, but just like oil it was rainbow hued across its restless surface. In places she saw twisting threads of ochre, vermillion and ultramarine streaking its surface, currents of different substances unable to break down into the general entropic mass.

It was quiet too. It was probably the quietest place she had ever been. Here the silence was broken only by the occasional drip or sigh and hiss of the wind-born flame. No engines, no machines, no air pumps, no filters, no power grids, no talk, no screaming, no gunfire - it was peaceful.

Donna smiled at the irony. She had finally found somewhere she could be at peace because nobody could live here. The very bottom of the hive, the place where the most unwanted waste was dumped had become a place where man couldn't survive, and it had become beautiful because of it. Paradise created by toxicity. That made her laugh.

She was ready for the end. She had climbed up to the tip of the ruined wing and now patiently waited for the sump to get to her. She had every

confidence it would, and admired the thorough way the ekranoplan was not only sinking but being corroded and absorbed, piece by piece in the lake.

The count's armour split open like the petals of a flower and floated on the surface briefly before being consumed. It would be her turn soon enough, but she had the laspistol in hand in case it hurt too much. It seemed fitting that it should end like this. She and it had been together since the start.

SOMETHING WAS NAGGING at her. She came out of a half-dazed reverie, staring at the swirling colours on the surface of the sump. There it was again. A sound, something breaking into her circle of perfect quiet and solitude.

'D'onne!'

Donna blinked. She had been called that once, a long time ago in another life. She felt affronted by the reference.

'D'onne!'

There was a youngish-looking man calling to her from the spreading stain where Ko'iron had been. She blinked again, half expecting the apparition to disappear. Instead it resolved itself into a man in a chequered coat standing close by on a motor-skiff. He looked terrified.

'D'onne, get onboard! Quickly!'

Why the frik would I want to do that, Lars?'

'Because you'll die if you don't!'

She noticed the spider-mares were a good deal closer than before, obviously interested in the motor-skiff. Lars was looking too, but he turned back to her quickly.

'Because I'll die if you don't!'

'Well get going now, before the spider-mares decide you look tasty.'

'But then you'll die.'

'Gold star, Lars, I want to die. Now piss off.'

'D'onne, I'm sorry for everything that's happened. I'm sorry I came down to the Underhive. I'm sorry for it all but please... there's more to life than this.'

'Hate and death is all there is, Lars, and I'm the queen of hate and the mother of death. I've had enough of both.'

'No! You're more than that, D'onne. I remember the girl I met by the fountain-'

'That was a romantic fantasy, Lars. I was half out of my mind with fear and I needed to escape - all you did was play-act a role,' Donna snapped. Lars looked hurt and fell silent. Spider-mares skated a little closer. Much against her better judgment, she felt there was something she had to ask Lars.

'What happened to Tessera?'

'What?'

'Tessera. Hell, you don't even know. What happened to the Escher, did they get away?'

'Yes, I think so. I wasn't really looking once I heard the engines start. I saw Bak and his men make off in skiffs like this, so I stole one, I'm afraid, and came after the ekranoplan.'

'Why?'

'Because I thought you were still onboard and I was right.'

You wanted to ride in on your white charger and save me?'

'I've always wanted to ride in on my white charger and save you. I'm not a strong man or a proud man, D'onne, but since I first laid eyes on you that has always been true.'

'You flatter yourself.'

'Well, that would be a shame because I'm aiming to flatter *you*! Lars glanced at the spider mares again and wet his lips. 'D'onne, I just want you to hear me out for a moment, and if you still want me to go then I'll go... Not because I'm afraid for my life, which I am by the way, but because it's what you want me to do.'

'Enough with the damn preamble, Lars. Spit it out and then go, nothing you can say will change my mind. This is the end.'

'Well you see I have a theory that I think is pretty sound, and that's that you aren't going to let yourself die.' Donna glared at him but Lars ploughed on. 'It goes like this: if your own self-loathing and hatred was so great, your disgust powerful enough to make you self-destructive, why didn't you die years ago?'

What?'

'You came down here and ran with the gangs, D'onne. You've taken all the Underhive could throw at you and lived through it. One misstep here or

a hesitation there would have killed you a hundred times over. If you had even the slightest doubt in your mind that you wanted to live you would have died. But you didn't. You lived through it all. I just saw this ekranoplan crash into the sump and yet there was no doubt in my mind that when I got here you would be sitting on the wreckage.

'And what that means, D'onne, is that at some point, maybe not now but soon, you'll want to live again. Perhaps when you're half burned by the sump, maybe earlier, and don't look at that pistol, D'onne - again, if you were going to shoot yourself you wouldn't have waited until now to do it.'

'I hate you, Lars. I ought to kill you.'

'But killing me won't help you survive, and I respect your survival instincts, D'onne. I think you should too.'

He was right. Deep down, a chill at Donna's core told her she would be struggling to survive long before she was even halfway submerged. The thought of agonised thrashing consumed her. And, as for the pistol, well it had seemed possible before but now she just couldn't imagine using it on herself. Lars had ruined it all; when he gave her a chance for escape her inner serenity had vanished like smoke. Damn him!

'D'onne, also consider this: if you die now, then your father has won, Ko'iron achieved his mission and everything carries on as if nothing happened. Do you want that?'

There was long pause as Donna ruminated. 'You say there's enough generation potential in Dead Man's Hole to upset the markets?'

'I think so, it wouldn't take much.'

'But enough to hurt the Spire?'

'What are you thinking, D'onne?'

Donna straightened up, ran down the wing and leapt lightly onto the motor skiff. She kissed Lars, who was so surprised he stopped looking terrified for a moment.

'I think I may have found a prospect worth living for,' she told him. Lars beamed happily. 'I want to be around to see your untimely death.'

Lars looked hurt again, and Donna laughed.

SALVATION

C.S. GOTO

THE SPIRE

Everything is built on something else -
What shoulders the burden of elsething?
Glory rests wholly on the Undying Emperor
(or elsewhere only if strictly necessary).
Praise the Emperor for the heights of Ko'iron.
For it is better to be well defined at the top
Than lost in the paradoxes of foundations -
unless it isn't.

— Paradoxes of the Spire

ANYTHING COULD HAVE happened and he wouldn't have noticed. He was not an observant man at the best of times, even when his nose was not pressed deeply into the glue-cracked spine of an ancient tome. He read with his whole being, always sniffing each page before he read it, hunching over his desk and pushing his face close to the parchment, as though certain that he could inhale some of the original intent that the author had been unable to transliterate into the orderly etchings of script. When his lungs rattled with the forgotten damp of the paper, he would raise his head and sigh, nodding slightly in appreciation. Smoothing the pages flat with his pale hands, he would begin to read, before commencing the ritual again on the next page.

Zefer's desk was tucked away on the seventy-third floor of the Ko'iron librarium. He called it his desk because he sat at it every night and read for three hours exactly. In the four and three-quarter years that he had been

permitted access to the higher levels of the librarium, he had never once seen another curator sitting at that desk. Hence, he reasoned, it was as good as his. Every ninth evening, he would carefully place his stylus into an ostensibly careless position on the desk and leave it there overnight. On those nights he would not be able to sleep, and he would sit on the edge of his bed wringing his hands in anxious excitement. Nothing could match his sense of satisfaction and relief when he saw it there, unmoved, the next day. It was *his* desk.

In his most audacious moments, Zefer might even refer to the seventy-third floor as *his* floor, since he was invariably the only person there. He never actually said those words out loud: *my floor*. But they echoed around his head in the hours of late afternoon, before he was released from his duties in the lower levels of the librarium. Once, caught up in the euphoric regression of whispers in his mind, Zefer had even moved his desk to the end of another book stack, feeling his power over the floor growing with each scrape of the table leg on the flagstones. In the end, his resolve had cracked and he had run back to the librarium in the middle of the night and replaced the desk in its original position, cleaning the scratches off the floor with saliva and the cuffs of his robe.

The book smelt like cold vegetable soup, and its pages were slightly damp with his breath in the frosty night air. Zefer traced his finger along each line of text as he read, letting its slender, flickering shadow dance in the candlelight, nodding slightly at points that made sense to him and screwing up his forehead when things made no sense at all. It was the *Paradoxes of the Spire*, so his face was a perpetual lattice of cracked ice. Over the last few months, Zefer had made it nearly halfway through the ancient tome. As far as he knew, this was the furthest that anyone in his generation had managed to get. The text was tortuously convoluted and riddled with mysterious allusions that were wasted on the normal reader. It was not exactly a heavy book - indeed the poetic style was faintly ridiculous - but it was dense and deceptively impenetrable. It was the opposite of a labyrinth: impossible to get into, but easy to get out of. Most people simply gave up on it after its famous introduction:

In the beginning they lay the end into the ground, And the finale was buried beneath the foundations, As though expecting the sky to fall into the abyss In the days of Ko'iron's salvation to come.

The book stacks of level seventy-three were overflowing with commentaries written by renowned scholars, many of them focussed exclusively on those first four lines. Zefer had read them all and, on reflection, it seemed fairly clear that even the most erudite and wise of House Ko'iron had not made it beyond those muddy introductory lines. Zefer had read all of the commentaries before he even picked up the *Paradoxes*, thinking that he should approach the original text with as much rhetorical ammunition as possible. That was why it had taken four years before he had even opened the hallowed book itself, and why he had read the first four lines over and over again every day for three months, experimenting with various interpretations and test-driving the theories of the past masters.

He was not sure that he had produced any great or innovative insights, but he had made careful note of his thoughts in a little book of his own, *his book*. Sometimes, on his long, lonely walk home through the gently twisting streets of the Spire, Zefer would fantasise that his son would stumble- across *his book* at the end of stack 4.73.2176b. There were one or two things that needed to be done before this particular fantasy could come true: Zefer needed to write the book, and he needed to have a son. He wasn't confident that either condition would be satisfied in the near future.

After he had got through the complicated web of the first four lines, progress had been much smoother. Indeed, he had covered more than five hundred lines in just over two months. He was relatively sure that the speed was because he wasn't paying as much attention, but part of him remained confident that he had gained an important foothold in the text in the first few lines, and that the rest built logically upon those foundations. In fact, those first lines made more and more sense as he read further and further into the book.

Turning the page deliberately, Zefer ducked his nose down into the exposed inner-spine and inhaled deeply. Sighing, he pressed the new pages flat and started to read. Then he stopped. He flicked back to the previous page and read the last line again.

Though it may be lost, salvation is always found

Turning back to the new page, he read the first line.

When you look up, there is nothing but the sky.

He sniffed again, picking the book off the surface of his desk and squashing it against his face. The new page smelt different, as though the chef had forgotten to add salt to the soup.

Stretching out his arms, he held the book in front of him, balancing it precariously on the palm of his left hand. With his right, he turned the problematic page backwards and forwards in front of the candlelight, feeling its pendulous shadow swinging across his face as he squinted at the movement of the parchment. He pressed down slightly on the edge of the paper with his right index-finger and the shadow split into two vertical stripes, with the candlelight burning brightly straight through the middle.

In shock and excitement, Zefer snatched his hands back and the book clattered down to the desk, its heavy leather covers snapping shut. Pushing his seat back from the desk, Zefer jumped to his feet and took a couple of paces towards the exit. Almost immediately, he stopped, changing his mind, and turned back to the desk, wringing his hands with indecisive anxiety. The *Paradoxes of the Spire* lay solidly on the small writing-desk, unmoving and unconcerned by all the commotion. Zefer stared at it.

Slowly and hesitantly, as though stalking a terrible enemy, Zefer shuffled back towards the book, fixing his eyes on the faded gold lettering on its atrophied leather binding. The yellow candle light burst into periodic reflections, luring him back to the desk with the flickering promise of riches and wisdom.

He picked his chair off the ground, standing it back onto its legs in front of the desk, and sat down, breathing evenly to calm his nerves. The book seemed to look back at him, implacable with the confidence of unspoken ages, and he shivered slightly as though caught in the glance of a ghost.

Taking a deep breath and exhaling loudly, Zefer flipped open the front cover to the frontispiece with its elegant illumination of Hive Primus - the capital of Necromunda. Never having been outside of the huge hive city, Zefer always paused in wonderment at this picture. He looked at the contorted and vaguely conical structure, pushing up from the crumpled remains of the Underhive. It rose erratically from the barren wastelands of the surrounding planes to a height of about ten miles, slicing through the permanent layer of lethally poisonous, yellowing and noxious undercloud at about three miles, created by the continuously vomiting factories of Necromunda. Then, at the five mile mark, there was the layer of natural

cloud, thick and billowing, as the heavier toxins rained down into the underlayer leaving only the relatively clean, acidic water vapour congealing into a thick cumulus belt. And high above that, aspiring to the heavens, was the majestic spire of House Helmawr - the hereditary lords of Hive Primus and guardians of all Necromunda. The hive was surprisingly beautiful, thought Zefer, each time he looked at it.

Out of habit, Zefer glanced over his shoulder towards the reinforced window cut into the thick exterior walls of the librarium. At night, he could see nothing out there at all, except for the faint glow of millions of lights refracted through the thick vapour. During the day, the view was only slightly better: swirling and eddying cloud sweeping past the glass and smudging it with moisture.

He shook his head at the marvel of the structure in which in sat, and at the glory of Ko'iron that it represented. The great Ko'iron librarium was a tower of more than one hundred levels; at unbelievable expense, it had been built on one of the exterior walls of Hive Primus, five-point-two miles from the Underhive. The founders of the great House had insisted that its curators should be granted the extraordinary privilege of natural light by which to study the history and glory of Ko'iron over the generations to come. Hence, the librarium protruded like a thorn from the side of the Spire, the windows of three sides pointing out into Necromunda's vaporous atmosphere and the fourth connected by a web of bridges and walkways back into the Spire itself.

In fact, the Ko'iron curators enjoyed almost no natural light at all. The House Ko'iron architects had overlooked the fact that this altitude was perpetually enshrouded by the natural cloud belt. When the local star was at its peak, just after noon, a thin yellow light filtered through the thick clouds, but it was certainly not enough to read by. In any case, most of the curators would be on their lunch-breaks at that time. Unfortunately, the architects had been so stubborn about the potential wonders of natural light that they had neglected to install sufficient interior lighting - thus, like the other curators in the librarium, Zefer had to carry a supply of candles with him at all times. Rather than producing the most magnificent librarium in the Spire, bathed in the splendour of natural light, House Ko'iron actually boasted the darkest and dingiest librarium out of all the Spire's great Houses.

As usual, Zefer ran his finger over the cloud line etched into the frontispiece, tracing the contours of the voluminous vapour trail. He knew that the librarium was hidden behind that layer, but it was the first paradox of the *Paradoxes of the Spire* that the Ko'iron librarium was hidden from view in the frontispiece of one of its own most famous tomes.

He flicked through the pages of the ancient book, searching for the lines that had caused him such consternation. Finally, after a few minutes of flicking and sniffing, Zefer found the page: '*...though it may be lost, salvation is always found*'

It didn't even end with a full-stop. And the first line on the next page was a clear non-sequitur: '*When you look up, there is nothing but the sky.*' For a few more moments Zefer wondered whether this was really a non-sequitur, or whether it was simply a characteristic, stylistic device. In the end, it was the missing full-stop and the odd smell of the following page that proved decisive. He held the book up to the light once more, flipping the page in question vertically against the candle. He delicately pressed the page with his index finger until it buckled and split into two. He pushed his finger in between the pages and tugged it up against the top edge, but the pages were still uncut and thus connected together as a single, folded sheet.

This time Zefer was ready for the wave of excitement that gushed over him as he realised what he had found, and he laid the book carefully back onto his desk. He looked nervously over each shoulder, as though suspicious that this would be the first night in nearly five years that there would be someone else on the seventy-third floor, watching him. He couldn't see anyone, but it was almost completely dark beyond the reach of the candlelight, so there might have been an entire troop of Delaque spies waiting in the shadows for all he knew.

Picking up his stylus, he slipped it between the uncut pages and tugged gently, watching the folded edge separate and tear a fraction. He checked back over his shoulders again, paranoia trickling down his spine like a droplet of icy water. Another slight flick with his stylus and the crease ripped nearly halfway along, revealing the lost pages where the missing full-stop suggested that they would be. With a final, nervous thrust, he sliced the pages open and instantly stuffed his nose down into the new

pages, inhaling deeply. They smelt unlike any pages he had ever smelt before; they smelt... untouched.

Zefer pressed the hidden pages flat with his hands and sighed loudly, letting the intoxicating scent of the unblemished paper escape from his lungs at last. Nobody had ever read these pages before. Nobody. Not since the book was written, thousands of years before, had anyone seen these words. Zefer was so excited that he could hardly bring himself to lower his eyes to the page. Instead, he glanced down at the timepiece on his wrist and realised that he had been at his desk for three hours and seven minutes. Seven whole minutes more than usual, his routine he had kept for five years shattered by a few moments of lost concentration. In mild panic, he checked back over both shoulders once again, suddenly fretting that somebody might be witness to his incompetent time-keeping.

Snapping shut the *Paradoxes of the Spire*, Zefer placed his stylus carefully onto its cover, diagonally across the top left-hand corner, and then he hurried out of the librarium, flustered and conscious that his routine had been broken.

THE GOGGLES BLINKED and whirred, chiming quietly when they clicked into focus and then buzzing when the image fuzzed again. They were an old and unreliable technology, with a blind spot right in the middle of the lens where the tiny pixels on the little image intensifier had burnt out, but they were all that Krelyn had been left with after House Delaque's Red Snake gang had cut her off. She bobbed her head slightly, like a mongoose taunting a cobra, trying to trick the goggles into focussing on the speck of reality hidden behind the digital blind spot, but it was no use. The faulty pixels where precisely those used for focussing, so the little machine had no hope.

Clicking the goggles to manual, Krelyn estimated the distance between her rooftop perch and the circular access tunnel set into the wall on the other side of the street. It was an unusual tunnel, employed by only a very few of the Ko'iron curators who stayed in the librarium late into the night, after the more orthodox exits had been sealed. The tunnel emerged about eleven metres above the surface of the street, presumably because of a miscalculation on the part of the librarium's architects, or perhaps because

of subsidence in the street itself. This part of the Spire was more unstable than most, and small hive-quakes were not unheard of.

About three hundred metres, thought Krelyn, thumbing the dial on the side of the goggles and watching the image leap into focus. She was concerned that she had missed him - it was already more than five minutes past his usual time. By now she would have expected to have seen a steady stream of spies spilling out of the tunnel, springing from its lip onto the nearby rooftops and then vanishing into the shadows. But there had been nobody, unless it had all happened in that cursed blind spot.

There he was. Shuffling and sleepy, tripping occasionally on the uneven floor of the tunnel and staggering to a halt just before the edge dropped eleven metres down to the flagstones on the street below. He looked nervous, thought Krelyn, even more nervous than usual.

The curator paused for a moment, letting his heavy, dark over-robe flutter in the breeze that funnelled through the passageway. His hands were clutched anxiously together, and he was wringing them, as though trying to squeeze water out of them. A candle flickered precariously in his grasp. Hunching his shoulders into the suggestion of a cringe, he looked back behind him, perhaps concerned that he was being followed.

Krelyn watched the figure blow out his candle and crouch down to the ground, sitting onto the floor and swinging his legs over the edge of the tunnel mouth. He sat for a moment, apparently mustering the courage for the short drop down to the ledge that protruded from the wall a couple of metres below him. He didn't look very confident, and Krelyn found herself scoffing inwardly at the frailty of the man. Too much time in that librarium, she thought.

Finally, he twisted himself around and caught hold of the rock edge with his fingers, sliding his body down the wall until he was dangling from his hands. From her position on the other side of the street, Krelyn could see that the man's feet hung only a few centimetres from the ledge below, but he was kicking his legs frantically, as he struggled to find something solid to put them on. She could see the knuckles of his hands gradually whitening as his grip locked and then faltered. One hand slipped and the man swung momentarily, like a hooked fish, before the strength of the other hand failed and he tumbled into a heap on the ledge below.

Just like last night, thought Krelyn, shaking her head behind the goggles. Just like every night.

Uncrumpling himself, the man smoothed out his over-robe with his hands and set off along the ledge towards the narrow stone steps that led down to street-level. But once he was out of the tunnel, he was no longer Krelyn's concern. She was supposed to ensure that the librarium was emptied each night, and to monitor the movements of those employees who kept unsociable hours. For the last few years, the bumbling Curator Tyranus had been the last Ko'iron servant out of the great librarium, and tonight appeared to be no exception.

Krelyn lifted her goggles back to the tunnel mouth and waited. It usually took another couple of minutes before the spies started to appear. There were invariably five of them; Krelyn presumed that one was in the employ of each of the other Noble Houses of the Spire. She wasn't sure why they would want to spy on the Ko'iron librarium, but she was aware that Ko'iron also sent spies into the librariums of a couple of the other Houses, especially Ulanti and Catallus. Indeed, she had served for a time as a spy in the upper levels of the Ulanti librarium, keeping tabs on the discoveries of the curators who were researching the history of that ancient House. Nobody ever found anything new - all of the oldest books had been read and reread hundreds of times. There was not a page unturned and not a word unanalysed.

Nothing happened for nearly ten minutes, and Krelyn shifted her weight uneasily on the tiled rooftop. If they didn't appear in the next sixty seconds, she would have to go in after them. What in the world could they be doing in there - it was only a librarium - and Krelyn didn't savour the thought of putting her life on the line for a few stacks of paper and twine.

Still nothing. Krelyn dropped the goggles from her face, tucking them into her belt as she stood. Her long black cloak fluttered out behind her like a shadowy banner, and she paused for a moment, balanced perfectly on the apex of the roof, with the building dropping fifty metres down to the sparsely peopled street under her toes.

The light in this sector was always dim, and hardly a single ray found its way up to the roofline when the streetlight-gargoyles were dimmed to encourage the residents to sleep. Despite her dramatic pose, Krelyn was confident that she would be almost invisible from the ground - her cloak

was made of a special, unreflective fabric that actually drew light into it, soaking it up from the surrounding air like a sponge, producing a blurry phase-field that cast the wearer into a perpetual dusk. Wearing the cloak was like having tinted glass windows on your transporter, but without the transporter.

She turned away from the edge and took a couple of steps further onto the roof, letting her cloak swirl into an arc behind her, before turning again and taking a long, slow breath, preparing herself for the jump. With a burst of motion, she dashed forward, kicking off the apex of the roof and bicycling her legs as she flew across the street. Her cloak spread out like an air-sail in her wake, keeping her buoyed up. After a couple of seconds her feet touched down lightly on the tiles of another roof, lower than the first and about fifty metres away from it. She kicked off as soon as she landed, peddling her legs and letting her cloak give her wings.

Halfway to the next rooftop, Krelyn stole a glance towards the mouth of the tunnel. There was a faint flicker of deep blue in the shadows, and Krelyn cursed under her breath. She dropped down onto the next tiled roof, landing a little heavily, and pushing herself into a roll to ease the impact. As she turned over her shoulder, she pulled the goggles out of her belt and brought them up to her face, already focussed on two hundred metres by the time she was back up on one knee at the very rim of the rooftop.

A hooded figure was pressed up against the deeply shadowed inner wall of the tunnel, almost invisible in his trademark Delaque over-cape - it was the kind used by all the Delaque gangs, and it made them almost indistinguishable from each other to outsiders. Slashed across his face was a visor of midnight blue - an optical enhancer used by Delaque spies in particularly bad light to heighten their already sharp vision, or in intense light to protect their sensitive eyes. A tiny reflective burst from the visor had given him away, and Krelyn could see him clearly. Besides, she knew what she was looking for, having been trained by the same spymasters as the hooded man.

The man was looking nervously back down the tunnel, as though fearful that he was being followed, or hunted. Of course, he *was*, just like every night. But tonight there was a new quality to his anxiety, and Krelyn was suspicious that he was not simply going through the motions this time. He waited just slightly too long in the shadows at the end of the tunnel, and he

stared back into the darkness with just a little too much intensity. When he sprung down from the tunnel mouth, his cloak ballooning out behind him to slow his elongated descent onto a low rooftop nearby, he was just a fraction too hurried. The man had something to report to his masters, and Krelyn needed to know what it was.

After another moment, another figure appeared in the mouth of the tunnel. He was virtually indistinguishable from the first, and his manner was equally agitated. Then another and another, until the usual five had finally emerged from the darkness and fled the Ko'iron librarium on their way back to make the most important routine report of their lives.

Krelyn watched them go one by one, crouching behind the castellated perimeter of the Quake Tavern's elaborately tiled roof. The curdling smell of roasting meat seeped up through the building beneath her, teasing her senses with the idea of dinner. She inhaled involuntarily, savouring the flavours absently while her brain raced to keep abreast of the night's developments.

More than anything else, she needed to know what had waylaid the curator and the spies - their routines had become so regular over the last few years that they were almost rituals, and this kind of variation suggested that something profound was amiss. However, she could not simply approach the curator and ask him what he had found, since House Ko'iron had a well know policy of trust in its hereditary servants, and it would not be fitting for one such trusted servant to discover that his movements were being tracked by an in-house spy. Conversely, there would be nothing gained from following one of the other spies and trying to prise the information out of ffiem - Krelyn was well aware of the pycho-conditioning undergone by all Delaque agents and she still had the scars on the base of her neck to prove it. Besides, her masters in House Ko'iron would not look favourably on the creation of the kind of major diplomatic incident that would arise if she damaged the servant of another House, even if that servant had been spying on Ko'iron's famous librarium. Some open secrets were best left in the shadows, where they belonged. Politics.

Placing one hand onto the fortified eaves, Krelyn swung her legs up and over the edge of the roof, dropping in a flurry of cloak down onto a narrow balcony.

There was only one thing for it, she thought as she peered through the window into one of the ostentatious suites in the upper floor of the Quake Tavern: she would have to go into the librarium herself and find out what all the fuss was about.

She slipped the latch on the window and climbed through into a bedroom suite that momentarily took her breath away. The walls were covered in lush, purple velvet, and the carpet on the floor was so deep that footprints had been left in it by the last people to enter. The centrepiece was a huge, antique bed, surrounded by drapes and tapestries. Judging by the muffled sounds coming from the other side of the curtains, the bed was already occupied.

Without ceremony, Krelyn swept through the room and clicked open the door on the far side of the bed. Letting the door swing shut behind her, she headed straight down the stairs, through the bustling bar and out into the street below, paying no attention to the commotion in the Quake Tavern or the whispered conversations about an incredibly courageous curator. She was in no mood for the petty rumours of the effete clientele of the Quake and was entirely focussed on getting across to the mouth of the librarium's entrance tunnel.

ZEFER COULDN'T SLEEP. He hadn't even gone home. Instead, he had walked around the winding, undulating streets of Gwentria's Fringe - an affluent sector of the Ko'iron domain that lay up against the edge of the exterior wall of the Spire itself - muttering to himself and wringing his hands. He couldn't get the book out of his head.

Before he knew where he was, he found himself propping up the bar in the Quake Tavern with a frothing tankard in his hand. The place was bustling with people, just as it was every night. The locals were chattering boisterously about money and trade, and small pockets of strangers were huddled around tables in the darkened corners, talking conspiratorially about their adventures in the lower reaches of Hive Primus. Zefer had once found himself in the middle of such a group, since it had descended upon his table as he sat quietly next to the fire nursing his drink. One of the men had claimed to be from Hive City, on the other side of the great Wall that separated the unsanitary masses from the civilised people of the Spire. He

had told some remarkable stories about his adventures in the Underhive, where he claimed to have found ancient archeotech from the time of the Emperor himself. Zefer had assumed that it was all nonsense, but he had subsequently seen the man in the Ko'iron librarium, evidently in the employ of the Acquisitions Section.

Zefer surveyed the scene absently-mindedly, wondering vaguely whether he should go and find a seat somewhere. As he turned to face the room, a dark-hooded figure brushed past him, jolting his arm and sending his drink flying. The man gave no apology and seemed not even to have noticed, leaving Zefer standing forlornly in a puddle of mead, with his arm still outstretched, clutching nothing.

As the hooded man approached the bar, the jostling patrons almost fell over as they pushed each other aside to make space for him. The man behind the bar came rushing over at once, leaving a drink half-poured on the counter in front of a fetching young woman in a distractingly revealing red shirt. For a second, Zefer and the woman shared a glance of annoyance at all the fuss being made of the Delaque venator, but Zefer dropped his eyes quickly, suddenly searching the ground for something that he hadn't dropped.

It's no good, thought Zefer as his glance jumped around the room in agitation and the mead soaked slowly into his cloth boots, there are too many distractions in here. He needed a place to think.

There was a sign above the bar that read: *Simple rooms - comfortable beds*. Somebody had scribbled a broad smile and an exclamation mark onto the sign in a childish or drunken hand, but Zefer didn't care about the innuendo tonight. He lent over the shoulder of the hooded figure at the bar and slapped a fistful of money onto the counter. The barman stared at him in something approaching awe as Zefer rested one hand on the shoulder of the venator to push himself back away from the bar again. The hooded agent paused momentarily, with his drink just licking at his lips. With an eerie slowness, the venator turned his head to face Zefer, and the Quake Tavern fell into silence. Their faces were so close together that Zefer could clearly see the little red snake tattooed under the venator's left eye.

To the barman, it seemed that the venator affected a slight double-take when he saw the exhausted features of Zefer next to him. There was only a

fraction of a second of hesitation before the venator turned his gaze back to his mead and took a deep draw on the foaming liquid.

Zefer hardly seemed to notice the minor miracle of his continued existence, as he dragged himself up the tavern stairs towards one of the guestrooms, he just wanted to rest but the rest of the Quake immediately broke into urgently whispered gossip. The woman in the red shirt watched him go in admiration, wondering whether all the bravado had been for her benefit.

At the top of the stairs, Zefer just pushed open the first door that he came to and stumbled into the room. He trudged through the incredibly deep pile carpet and flopped onto the bed, letting the curtains around the bed-frame close in around him. For a few minutes he lay on the edge of sleep, as nervous exhaustion fought with nervous energy for control of his consciousness. He rolled fitfully, and moaned, clutching at his head with his hands, as though trying to bring his racing thoughts under control with sheer physical pressure.

The click of a latch being released brought him back to his senses and he froze. Although Zefer could see nothing through the heavy drapes around the bed, he was certain that somebody had entered the room. They were light on their feet, but Zefer could just about hear the deep carpet compressing as they walked carefully around the edge of the bed. After a few seconds, the intruder made it to the other side of the room and there was the sound of another latch clicking, and then the clunk of a closing door.

Zefer pulled back the curtains around the bed and hastened over to the door, sliding home the intricate series of bolts and locks that peppered its surface. Then he rushed over to the window on the other side of the room, tripping slightly in the heavy carpet, and clicked its lock into place. He had been through enough today already, and really couldn't cope with any more excitement. He just wanted to sleep.

THE TUNNEL WAS dark and damp, and the floor was an uneven patchwork of cracked rock. Through the optical enhancers built into her visor, Krelyn could see the hazardous passageway clearly. She could even see the glaring structural weaknesses that would cause the corridor to

rapture and collapse if there was ever another sizeable hive-quake in the area. As she stepped carefully over the cracks and ducked under the splinters of stone that stabbed down from the ceiling, she thought about the five miles of open air that lay beneath the weathered passageway under her feet. She walked a bit faster, keen to get across the invisible drop and into the firmer structure of the Ko'iron librarium on the other side. Like the vast majority of people in Hive Primus, Krelyn had never been outside the immense edifice, and any reminder that there was an outside made her slightly nauseous. Like most people on Necromunda, she was intensely agoraphobic, and the thought of five miles of open space beneath her feet made her eyes bulge as she dashed through the last few metres of the tunnel.

Once inside, Krelyn found herself on a dim landing, with a wide, spiralling, stone staircase twisting off to her left into the upper-levels and down to her right. The mouth of the tunnel itself was perfectly in line with the landing - so the architects clearly had known what was going on inside in the librarium, even if they had not been not so sure about the structures in the Spire itself - but it was hidden behind a large hanging tapestry. As Krelyn looked back from the landing, she winced slightly when she caught sight of the giant, embroidered face of Hredriea, an old, long-dead matriarch of House Ko'iron, flapping slightly in the breeze from the tunnel behind it.

Where to begin? Krelyn peered through the darkness of the unlit librarium, looking for some sign of where the curator might have been working. Sitting outside on the rooftop, night after night, Krelyn had not really appreciated how huge this place actually was. She had imagined a pokey little tower with a few curators at rickety old desks. But the tower from her imagination would have fitted easily into this huge landing, the vaulted ceiling of which disappeared into the shadows far above her head. A little sign on the wall showed the number sixty-five next to an arrow pointing to the right, and Krelyn shook her head in disbelief.

Clicking to infra-red on her visor, Krelyn studied the marble steps. The stone showed no trace of footsteps -it was an incredible heat-conductor and thus a tracker's nightmare. However, there was a thin strip of carpet that ran up the middle of the stairs, and Krelyn could just about make out the telltale pink of human thermo-prints heading up into the upper levels.

Five nimble spies and a heavy-footed curator left just about enough of a heat trail, even after half an hour.

Springing up the steps two at a time, but keeping her eyes trained on the ground to keep track of the thermal images, Krelyn rapidly ascended into the upper levels of the librarium. Had she looked up, she would have noticed a distinct change in the decoration after level seventy, marking the beginning of the restricted-access collections, open to only the most trusted of curators. These levels lacked the overbearing grandeur of the fifties and sixties; they were austere, dusty and undecorated, but the carpet was deeper and less worn. Krelyn could actually see physical footprints in the pile, just as she had noticed in the decadence of the Quake Tavern.

The footprints stopped ascending and shuffled off into one of the reading rooms. Krelyn looked up and made a mental note of the number on the grubby little sign that indicated the librarium level - seventy-three. She stared long and hard at the staircase that ran up to seventy-four, even running her hand lightly over the surface of the carpet. There was no sign that even a single foot had compressed that pile in recent days, or even recent years, reflected Krelyn.

The prints led directly to the fourth reading room on level seventy-three, and Krelyn began to detect more agitation in the gait of the curator who had left them. As soon as she entered the reading room itself, the prints of the associated spies broke away from the main track, spraying out into different parts of the room as though scattered by an orderly explosion. Krelyn smiled at the neat organisation, as she realised that each of the spies had taken a different direction automatically, clearly fully aware of where the others would be and unwilling to tread on anyone's toes. This kind of pattern suggested that there was a regular routine at work - after all, she herself had been watching Curator Tyranus for over four years, and the spies had been around for at least that long, presumably without bumping into each other.

The curator's wooden desk was still glowing with an excited pink imprint, suggesting that the man had been pretty agitated by something before he left it. There were hand prints all over the place - not all of them from the same hands. However, glowing brightest of all was the book on the desk, its paper having absorbed the sweaty attentions of all six of the night's protagonists.

Krelyn carefully picked up the stylus that had been laid across the cover of the book, placing it onto the desk with a faint clink. Then she picked up the book itself, turning it slowly in her hands in case there was something physically special about the tome. It felt like a normal book to her. Perhaps slightly heavier than a comparably sized volume made in recent years, but she was willing to believe that older technologies were heavier than modern ones. *Paradoxes of the Spire* looked older than most.

The thermal prints on the pages stopped about halfway through the text, so Krelyn was confident that nobody had read beyond that point. The first line on the last page to have been read caught her imagination: When you look up, there is nothing but the sky. In her mind's eyes, this was the privileged view of House Helmawr - the only House in the spire without anything built above their glorious domain. To her, it sounded very boring up there.

A noise made her start and turn her head back towards the stairs. Had she been followed? She froze, sUaining to hear. In her ear, she could just about discern the faint whirring of the aural implant that amplified and filtered sound; it was slightly faulty now and the whine of the device seemed to obliterate every other sound in the silence of the dark librarium.

There were heavy, dragged footfalls, and she could also hear some wheezing. Whoever it was, they were not very fit. It was very unlikely that this was a dangerous pursuer, but it seemed equally unlikely that it would be some kind of menial, up here in the upper levels of the librarium.

Krelyn closed the book quietly and returned it to the desk. She took a couple of steps towards the heavy darkness between two of the dustiest and least consulted-looking book stacks but then stopped. She hopped back to the desk and snatched up the stylus, placing it carefully across the cover of the book, just as she had found it.

By the time Zefer staggered up to his desk and slouched down into his seat, Krelyn had retreated into the shadows to watch him, with her cloak wrapped around her like a death-shroud.

HE HADN'T BEEN able to sleep. At first, the thought of the stealthy intruder had kept him awake, hidden behind the thick drapes around the bed waiting for silent death to come upon him. But his mind was a mess of

activity, and he wouldn't have been able to sleep anyway. He had just laid there, twisting his body under the covers with each convoluted contortion of his brain, working himself into a fever and bringing on the prefigurings of a migraine.

The words of the book had swum in and out of his mind, taunting him with their nonsense and goading him with the fact of his astonishing discovery. He might be the only curator of his generation to have discovered a new piece of authentic historical text. Its authenticity was beyond question, of course, since it was contained within the very pages of one of the most lauded volumes in the Ko'iron collection.

And there was also the question of the stylus. Zefer had been torturing himself about having left the little device on top of the book. If there was anything that was going to draw people's attention to that particular tome, he thought, it would be the unexpected and inexplicable appearance of a wayward stylus on its cover.

He had thought that his careful positioning of the stylus would permit him to work out whether anyone tampered with the book whilst he was away - in much the same way as he had often left it sitting on *his desk* in the past. However, it gradually dawned on him that he didn't want to know whether anyone else had tampered with the book, he simply wanted to make sure that nobody else looked at it at all.

That was the realisation that had finally got Zefer Tyranus out of bed and stumbling urgently down the stairs of the Quake Tavern toward the librarium. As he entered *his floor*, he was breathing heavily and muttering to himself, rehearsing the now-obvious non-sequitur over and over again in his head: *'Though it may be lost, salvation is always found... When you look up, there is nothing but the sky.*'

As he sat down at his desk and snatched up the stylus from the cover the book, Zefer wondered about that last sentence - the one that followed the newly discovered pages. As far as he could tell, it must be referring to one of two places. It was either a spatial reference to the House of Helmawr - since the only thing higher than the House of the Lord Guardians was the sky itself. Or, alternatively, it could be a temporal reference to a time before the hive had even existed - at such a time, there would be no hive to look up to, so when you looked up there would be nothing but sky, no matter who you were.

Flipping through the pages to find the rough edges of the freshly torn paper that he had sliced earlier that night, Zefer found himself trembling with excitement about the possibilities contained in two entire sides of new, unread lines of the *Paradoxes*.

He found the page and stuffed his nose down into it instantly, savouring the unusual smell of discovery. He recoiled slightly from the scent, snapping his head up out of the book and scrunching up his nose in appalled confusion. He paused for a moment and then sniffed again, just to make sure. There was no doubt: someone had touched the page since he was last there.

Of course, he realised suddenly, casting his mind back to the moment when he had slumped back into his chair, the stylus had moved too. He had very deliberately left it diagonally across the top left-hand corner. When he had returned to the desk, it had been laying perpendicular to that corner - close to where he had left it, but not exactly in place.

Zefer looked nervously over his shoulders and peered into the almost featureless darkness around him. He screwed up his eyes, looking for some variations in the shades of black, but it was hopeless. There was nothing. Whoever had been spying on him was probably long gone by now. In any case, Zefer was too excited to worry about anybody else watching him -the most important thing was that he had the book and that he could spend the whole night poring over it. Whoever else had touched these secret pages, they could not have understood their significance or the meaning of these lines. Zefer had spent years of his life without even daring to dream that this night would come.

FRESH AIR

IT HAD ALL been a bit of an anti-climax. He had written up his report two weeks ago, rolling it into a perfect tube and shooting it down one of the funnels into the intricate system of pressurised pipes that served as a communication system in the librarium. The valve had hissed open and sucked down the message, and then clicked shut with a satisfied clunk. The passage of the paper tube could just be discerned as it hissed and thumped through a series of other hidden valves in the complicated pipe network until it vanished into the invisible depths of the system. After a few seconds, a scrap of paper had been spat out of the little slot next to the funnel. It was his receipt, completed with the printed signature of Princess Gwentria herself, together with a friendly note telling him that he would have a response as soon as possible, if a response was considered necessary.

Zefer was absolutely sure that his report justified a response. He had never been so certain about anything in his whole life. How often did his superiors in the Historical Research Section receive genuinely innovative reports based on newly discovered primary sources? If they were ever going to receive a paper tube that required a response, it would be this one.

But nothing seemed to happen. For the first few days, Zefer had been so excited about the prospect of the response that he had been completely unable to work. He had simply sat at his seat, staring at the message funnel, smiling fixedly and waiting for the little chime to sound and for the slot to hiss open. But nothing had happened and Zefer had pretended to go about his business in a disinterested manner, finding any number of excuses to pause and stare at the message funnel, as though only casually interested in whether anything popped out of it or not.

After a week, he was getting a little frantic. One night, after everyone else had gone home, Zefer abandoned his usual trip to the seventy-third

floor and crept back to his daily work-station. He prodded and probed the message funnel, holding the valve open with his stylus whilst peering into the dark recesses within. The following morning, he sent a tube off down to the maintenance department to request that somebody should be sent to check that his message funnel was functioning properly. A couple of hours later, the valve had hissed open and a dirty brown roll of paper was ejected into the receptacle. Picking it up and sniffing at it gingerly, Zefer was fairly sure that this was not the response that he had been waiting for. When he unrolled it, he saw that it contained only four poorly penned words: *Seems to work fine*.

Finally, after three more days, Zefer looked up from his work at the delicate sound of a chime. The funnel hissed disgruntledly and out popped a pristine white tube sporting the little blue crest of the Ko'iron on the seal that held it together. It was of the kind used only by officials and curators of the Historical Research Section.

Zefer just stared at it, hardly believing his eyes and not daring to let his arm reach out and take the message. He pretended not to be interested for a few minutes. Instead of rushing over to open the message, he shuffled some papers around his desk and moved his stylus from one position to another, pretending to check which was the most efficient arrangement.

When he could contain himself no longer, he half stumbled and half tripped over to the message intake and reverently lifted out the little white tube. Checking over both of his shoulders to ensure that he wasn't being observed, he carefully secreted it into the loose sleeve of his shapeless grey jacket.

That evening, he virtually ran up the winding staircase to the privacy of the seventy-third floor, where he leapt into his chair and tugged the little tube out of his sleeve in a single, smooth movement. He slid his fingers under the seal and opened the roll, closing his eyes and pressing his nose down against the paper as he smoothed it out with his hands.

It smelt strangely familiar. With his nose still only millimetres above the paper, he opened one eye and peered at the text in trepidation. The eye bulged as it registered what was written on the page and Zefer threw back his head in a fit of vented disbelief.

It wasn't a response at all.

THE GROUP IN the corner were beyond blind drunk. They had gone through blind and come out the other side with big, bold splashes of colour all over their field of vision. They were colourfully drunk and irritatingly loud. And they were not making friends.

By far the loudest of the group was sitting confidently on the back of a chair with her feet on its seat and her back to the wall. Her dirty blue dreadlocks thrashed around her intricately tattooed head like a storm of snakes as she yelled and laughed at the story of an older woman seated opposite her. The older woman's back was facing the interior of the room, so Triar could only catch glimpses of the wrinkled skin of her studded and pierced face as she turned her head to include the rest of the group in her narrative.

From his place at the bar, Triar counted fourteen other Escher gang members in the saloon of *The Breath of Fresh Air*. They were from a local branch-gang of House Escher called The Coven - named after the unapologetic witch by whom it was led. Only six of them were at the table with the raucous group, but the others were as easy to spot as hellfire in a dark room. Triar had marked them as soon as he had walked in the door, making a mental note of their number and position, just in case there was trouble later. There was always trouble later.

He was watching the corner-table through the mirror over the bar, taking occasional glances up from his drink and peering out from under the folds of his heavy hood. He was pretty sure that the drunken women had no idea that they were being watched - or, at least, no idea that he wasn't just another man gawping at their immodesty. Enveloped in his bright blue cloak, even with his back to them, it would not take a genius to work out that he was a Cawdor ganger, but the ladies were drunk beyond such colour-recognition. Given his location in this part of Hive City, they should also have realised that he was from House Cawdor's evangelical local gang, The Salvationists.

'That's them,' said the man standing next to him, sloshing the remains of his pungent drink around in the bottom of a cup.

'Really?' questioned Triar sarcastically, turning his tarnished silver mask to the black-cloaked agent at the bar. 'I would never have guessed.'

'You pay me for information,' hissed the informant, his visor glinting slightly with a hint of blue in the inconstant light. A little red snake

tattooed under one eye twitched irritably. 'I am merely providing it.' The man nodded his head into a vague bow and then turned to leave. There was obvious false-modesty in his manner.

The Delaque may be the finest spies in all Hive Primus, thought Triar as he watched the black cape slip between the jostle of other patrons and out of the door, but they are not noted for their wit.

Following the figure of the retreating spy in the mirror, Triar noted the spread of blue hoods throughout the *Fresh Air* with satisfaction. Here and there the metals of their masks glinted with understated menace, and Triar knew that he had manoeuvred well this evening. The neutrals in the bar were also beginning to realise that something was going down, and one or two had stopped drinking and were starting to look from one blue cape to the next and then at the women in the corner, doing the sums. The wiser amongst them were already finishing their drinks and quietly filing out of the door.

The Breath of Fresh Air was an unusual establishment. At first glance it looked like a genius-stroke of planning. Outside its main doors was a huge, four-bladed fan in the junction of three enormous ventilation shafts. It was the only fan in this area of Hive City, and thus the only source of even remotely fresh air, which made it an extremely valuable site. The *Fresh Air* was full all day and all night, with half of its patrons more excited about drinking in the fresh air than the crude liquor.

However, the genius of the site also bordered on insanity. The fan was the biggest point of contention between three separate gangs that held territory along each of the ventilation pipes that fed it. Gangers from all three would frequent the *Fresh Air*, which brought in a great deal of money. But with the gangers came tension, broken bottles and occasional skirmishes, which cost a great deal of money.

The proprietor was a tiny man, not more than a metre tall. He only had one eye, but never wore a patch - he liked to watch people staring into the open socket with his other eye. He told everyone that his growth was stunted by the potency of the liquor that he distilled in the smoky backrooms of the *Fresh Air.* For some strange reason, this seemed to make people want to drink even more of it, so Squatz prided himself on his rare psychological insight.

Perhaps Squatz's real insight was the realisation that the Hive City gangers would drink in *The Breath of Fresh Air* rather than in the safer, gang-owned establishments inside their own territories. Squatz knew that the most important thing for all the gangs was to be seen to be unafraid of each of the others. His bar was the perfect, neutral venue for such posturing, and the strategic importance of its location gave everyone the excuse they needed to be there. The money he made more than compensated for the occasional damages. Besides, most of the real violence took place outside in the public space in front of the great fan so that everyone could watch the fun. In the end, Squatz had realised that the three-way competition over the site was a better guarantee of its security than the patronage of any single gang might have been. He was one of a very small number of genuinely inter-gang institutions.

'Take it outside,' said Squatz, walking along the counter of the bar to refill Triar's cup from a grubby looking bottle. Standing on the bar, he could look levelly into Triar's masked face.

'I'm sure mat I don't know what you mean,' replied Triar, smiling invisibly behind the shimmering silver mask that twisted around his face like a metallic skin.

'You know what I mean,' retorted Squatz, the opaque bottle poised to pour as the ugly little man waited for some sign of acknowledgement from Triar. But the silver mask just stared implacably back into his face, and Squatz decided to pour the drink anyway.

'Why do you let them in here? They're... unclean,' said Triar, tilting his head slightly to one side to indicate his curiosity.

'Their money's as good as yours,' replied the short man on the counter, lifting the steaming bottle neck away from Triar's cup.

'No it isn't. It's unclean. It may look the same, but it will rot your soul while you sleep.'

'That's my problem then, not yours,' countered Squatz, trying to placate the Cawdor without being forced to convert. He had never understood the appeal of the Cult of Redemption, nor the strange devotion of many of the Cawdor gangers. In fact, Triar was such a devotee that he had named his own gang The Salvationists, and he made it his business to prosecute the cause of righteousness as though he were himself the leader of a

Redemptionist crusade. Not all of his gangers shared his passion for the cult, but they were all in awe of their boss's sense of duty.

Triar gazed at Squatz for a moment, holding his cloudy green eyes for a number of seconds, his face-mask seeming to glow with compassion. 'That's where you're wrong. Souls are my concern, Squatz. You know that.'

The tiny barman shook his head in a sudden fit, shaking the image of Triar's startling blue eyes off his retina. Squatz had been in business a long time, and he was not about to let this fanatic's cheap conjuring tricks derail him now. Triar was one of the most charming of his patrons, but sometimes it seemed to Squatz that he was a little too charming. His eyes were occasionally a little too bright. Triar himself would dismiss his curiosity, saying that his manner was touched by the glory of the Undying Emperor himself, but Squatz suspected that there was something wyrd in Triar's ways. He was certain that the adherents outside Triar's own little gang of Salvationists would not appreciate his secrets.

'Do you know what they are saying under your roof, little man?' asked Triar, keeping his gaze level and his tone low. 'They,' he continued, flicking his head towards the group in the corner, 'are talking about an archeotech finding that "proves" the Undying Emperor visited Necromunda and that - listen well to this part, little *man* - he was a *she*!

'Oh, you know that I never listen to the private conversations of my patrons, sir,' mumbled Squatz, trying to sound deferential. 'Present company excepted, of course,' he added just in time.

Triar had just slugged back his shot of Squatz's house special and slammed the cup down onto the bar. He eyes were beginning to burn and Squatz could see the 'righteous anger' building under the so-called Redemp-tionist's hood. He wondered for a moment how the young gang leader could be so righteous if he also engaged in so many sins: he was a heavy drinker, a constant profaner, and at least an occasional fornicator. In the same thought, Squatz found himself wondering about Triar's wyrdness, but that might be a crucial step too far for a Cawdor firebrand, especially for one who called himself the Salvationist. In any case, reasoned Squatz pragmatically, a little sin was good for business.

'Of course,' replied Triar, his voice set into a hard edge as he turned his back to Squatz and the bar. The blue hoods throughout the room turned in his direction, and he raised an open hand to signal his own readiness. From

behind him, Triar could hear the whispered pleas of Squatz: 'Please, outside.' And the remaining neutrals in the room fell over each other trying to get out of the door. Only the drunken women seemed oblivious.

In a sudden movement, Triar clenched his hand into a fist and then pulled it down to his waist. A fraction later and *The Breath of Fresh Air* erupted into turmoil as the Salvationist gangers pushed and barged their way towards the Escher women of The Coven at the corner table, fighting their way through the fleeing throng of neutrals. Meanwhile, Squatz jumped down behind the bar, not for the first time thankful that he was short enough to be completely shielded by its heavy metal structure.

THINGS HAD NOT been quite the same since that fateful night a few weeks before, and Krelyn's routine had been shot to pieces by the suddenly erratic behaviour of that cursed curator. For nearly five years she had been able to rely on his routine. Most importantly, he would leave the Ko'iron librarium through the minor exit tunnel precisely three hours after he clocked off work. Krelyn had been able to make plans for the rest of the night based upon his movements. There were a great many distractions in the luxury of the Spire for a bored venator, and Krelyn relied on them to keep her mind off the life she had lost when House Delaque had cut her off. But her well timetabled displacement activities were no more.

Over the last few weeks, Curator Tyranus had been leaving at irregular times. Sometimes later than normal and sometimes earlier - once or twice he was not even the last person to leave the building. On three occasions, he had left so early that he hadn't even used the little exit tunnel opposite the Quake Tavern. Instead, together with the other curators and pledge-workers of the Ko'iron librarium, he had filed out of the great gates that opened into spacious expanse of Hredriea's Plaza. Krelyn had only been there by chance, taking an unusually circuitous route to her rooftop perch, when she saw the man shuffling along with the others. As she had struggled to confirm that it was him, Krelyn had stifled a chuckle when she saw the clutch of other venators pushing through the crowd and peering over shoulders, checking the same thing. That curator was causing more trouble than he was worth.

The sudden shift in her mark's behaviour had made a new series of demands on Krelyn - demands that she had not been required to meet for years. She was not entirely sure that her equipment still functioned well enough to enable her to perform these functions. Most of it, like her goggles, was old and decrepit - it had not been replaced since her masters in House Delaque lost the lucrative Ko'iron Contract nearly ten years before. The collapse of this ancient commercial agreement between one of the houses of Hive City and one of the Spire's Noble Houses had left Krelyn stranded in the service of the Ko'iron, since she had already given her oath of loyalty to the great Noble House, despite the fact that she could trace her bloodline directly back through the Delaque family itself. She was one of the very few Delaque agents entitled to use the Delaque name. This lineage, at least, did not atrophy with time, even if her equipment did. She would always be Krelyn

Delaque. However, a fancy name was not enough, and the venator masters of House Delaque had severed all contacts with House Ko'iron, which also meant cutting off all communication with one of their favourite daughters. Since then, Krelyn had been on her own amongst the ritual and pompous splendour of the Spire, struggling to service her own equipment and to fulfil her obligations to her adopted masters. She wondered whether her brethren in Hive City had forgotten her already.

The only things that hadn't fallen apart were her blades, since she had very little use for them in her recent line of work - spying on librarium curators for their own employers. She kept an elaborate array of bladed weapons in a state of highly polished perfection, sharpening them and purifying them every night in her chambers. Each morning, she would fix them against her skin with straps, securing them under specially made slits in her fatigues, so that she could access them quickly if needed.

Her firearms were a completely different story. She was trained to use them, not to maintain them. A glorious example of a pilfered Van Saar laspistol, perhaps the finest weapon that Krelyn had ever had the good fortune to steal, was displayed in a wrack above her bed. Before she was posted up in the Spire, she had even had the audacity to take it to a House Van Saar weaponsmith to have it customised to her requirements - the butt was extended into a shoulder-brace for better stability on ranged shots, almost transforming it into a rifle. As it was, she could wear it hanging

vertically at her side, with a simple strap securing the stock under her armpit. Her cape neatly covered the whole thing. Of course, it didn't work any more. It had seized up years ago and now it just glimmered like a finely polished ornament in her immaculate and unfashionably sparse chambers.

When she had first entered the service of the Ko'iron, the young Prince furod had been just about to embark on his first hunting jaunt into the Underhive as part of a Spyrer team. Although he was unaware of it, Krelyn had accompanied the young prince, hidden in the shadows, to ensure that no real harm could come to the patriarchal heir apparent. During those months in the slovenly underworld of Hive Primus, Krelyn had silently offered prayers of thanks to the Undying Emperor for her laspistol and her blades. However, as his little sister, Princess Gwentria, had grown up, Jurod had changed his ways and hardly ever ventured onto the other side of the great adamantium Wall that separated the stately abode of the Spire from the vast bulk of the working hive below. And when he did go down, he no longer needed a chaperone. Hence, now, Krelyn's weapons were little more than memory crutches of a more glorious time.

She tutted and shook her head, as she crouched in readiness on the rooftop across from the mouth of the librarium's exit tunnel. Most people in Hive City spend their lives wondering what it would be like to get through the great wall and into the mysterious world of the Spire on the other side. Krelyn would have given anything to trade places with one of those aspiring weaklings. Hive City might be dirty, diseased, chaotic and dangerous, but at least it was alive. The Spire was... she searched for the right word in her head. The Spire was *boring*.

A line from that ridiculous book seeped back into her mind: '*When you look up, there is nothing but the sky*! It wasn't true of the Spire and, even if it was, she would hate it.

Swaying her head to shift the blind spot in her goggles, Krelyn saw the shuffling figure of her curator stooping to sit down at the end of the tunnel, dropping his legs over the edge as he had done hundreds of times before. He was about an hour early, and he looked decidedly agitated. Instead of twisting his body round to lower himself awkwardly to the ledge, he simply sat for a moment before pushing off with his hands and kicking out with his feet, sending himself flying forward and down

towards the ledge. Krelyn could swear that she had seen a flash of anger cross the bookish face an instant before he jumped.

Curator Tyranus hit the ledge hard and stumbled forward before falling flat on his face against the rock. He lay where he had fallen for a few seconds, and Krelyn found herself worrying that the stupid man may have hurt himself in that moment of bravado. But, after a while, he pushed himself back up onto his feet and limped off toward the stairs that led down to street level.

BEFORE ZEFER EVEN knew where he was going, he found himself sitting on the marble steps of the Matriarch's Shrine, picking at his fingernails in the half-light and mumbling incoherently. A thin trickle of blood was working its way down from the corner of his mouth, and his leg was burning with pain. He couldn't remember walking past the Quake Tavern, but he must have done in order to get to the shrine.

Behind him, the towering statue of Hredriea, the maternal grandmother of Gwentria, the current Ko'iron matriarch, loomed regally over the plaza. The shrine had been built two hundred years before as a testament to the power of the female line of the Ko'iron family. The history books in aisle 2.81.4527c of the librarium told of how the shrine had been commissioned by Hredriea herself, following a huge hive-quake that had destroyed much of what is now Gwentria's Fringe. Evidently, all of the construction work had been done by the female pledged-workers of House Ko'iron itself. Hredriea's idea had been to build a monument to the glory of the Undying Emperor that tied her family intimately to his patronage. So, she herself stood as the guardian to the shrine, and her immense statue at the crest of the steps dwarfed the pale stone of the Emperor's image in the temple building itself.

Zefer often came to sit on these magnificent steps, usually in the middle of the day, when the plaza would be bustling with merchants and the vibrancy characteristic of this affluent district. The square was flanked on three sides by shimmering white marble buildings, each with intricately castellated rooflines, sprinklings of potent gargoyles, and gloriously soaring arches. This district had found its wealth under the protection of Hredriea and it had thenceforth maintained its association with the Ko'iron

women, just as it had maintained its reputation as one of the most affluent quarters under House Ko'iron's control. It was, in any case, unusual because of the natural light that seeped in during the day through the huge stained glass windows set into the thick exterior wall of the Spire that curved slightly around the back of the shrine. Of course, the cloud belt took the edge off the sunlight, and the torches in the streetlights burned all through the day to ensure that there was enough light, but the glow of the sky outside gave the stained glass an eerie radiance found nowhere else in the Spire. At night, the ancient and colourful windows were floodlit from giant spotlights set into the marble steps. Zefer sat between them, with their beams criss-crossing into a web behind him.

A group of chattering youths bumped and stumbled through the plaza, supporting themselves on each others shoulders as they sang wordless songs in a jumbled chorus. The noise made Zefer look up out of his bitter reverie and he realised that what he really needed was a drink.

ELRIA BIT DOWN on the zip-tab, cracking its membrane and flooding her system with an eclectic collection of stimulants. They kicked her metabolism into overdrive just as the group of Salvationist gangers reached the table. She threw her head forward, thrashing her blue dreads down between her knees and reaching up into the thick hair with her hands. As she flicked her head back, the dreads rushed back into place revealing vicious, gleaming blades in Elria's hands.

She was on her feet in an instant, standing on the seat of her chair with her arms outstretched to her sides, pointing the blades menacingly at the blue-cloaked gangers who were trying to flank the table.

As she moved, the rest of the women at the table leapt to their feet, crunching their tabs and spinning on their heels to face the approaching blue hoods. Their drunken abandon was instantly replaced by lethal focus, and their readiness startled the advancing gangers.

Seeing his men stall, Triar leapt up onto the bar and pulled the long-bladed dagger out of his boot, flourishing it ostentatiously from hand to hand. He pointed its gleaming tip at the flamboyant figure of Elria, standing dramatically on her chair in the corner.

'This witch is sowing decay into the souls of the weak and the helpless! Is it not enough that she blasphemes against the divine form by outlawing men from her House? Now, it seems, she blasphemes against the Undying Emperor himself - concocting and disseminating apocryphal stories that he was a woman!'

'This *man*,' countered Elria, her head turned to the side as she surveyed the scene out of the corner of her eyes dirough a curtain of blue hair, 'would have you surrender your thoughts to the soulless idol of a best forgotten faith. He is simply the deluded representative of an anachronistic, patriarchal system. Why not believe that the Emperor was a woman, if that will bring liberty to your life?'

In his hiding place behind the bar, Squatz slapped himself in the head. Why did they always spurt such nonsense at each other? If they were going to fight, why not just get on with it? And why wouldn't they go outside? He was pleased, at least, that they appeared to have honoured their vows not to bring guns into the Fresh Air.

'If you have proof of your heresy, bring it forth and show us the error of our "deluded" ways,' taunted Triar, dropping the tip of his blade into a mocking shrug, appealing to the crowd in this piece of amateur theatre.

We have as much proof that she was a woman as you have that he was a man,' retorted Elria, still watching out of the corner of her eye and hardly moving at all. Around her, the Escher women remained completely stationary, perfectly focussed and unphased by their plight.

'There are centuries of records that support our position, Elria Escher, and none at all in support of yours.' Triar was laughing behind his mask, and his blade tip was now pointing at his feet. 'You will not find a curator in all of Necromunda who would take you seriously. And,' he added, snapping his blade back out towards her, 'you will not find a Redemptionist who would not take your head for heresy.'

'Your records mean nothing to me, Triar Cawdor, and your faith in the metal of the Redemptionists is pathetically misplaced... as you are about to discover, again,' Elria added the last word with some venom, turning her eyes to face the ganger directly as though to reinforce her point. Her red eyes shone unnaturally for a fraction of a second, and then the bar on which Triar was standing burst into flames.

'I DON'T UNDERSTAND,' said Zefer, throwing the message tube down on the official's desk. It was early in the new working day, and Zefer had hardly slept the previous night.

'It's very simple,' replied the senioris, unrolling the paper and inspecting the text in a dismissive and cursory manner. 'This is your response.'

'But it's not a response at all!' cried Zefer, nearly shouting.

'It may not be the response you wanted, but it is still a response,' replied the senioris with irritating and implacable calm.

'But... but it's just the report that I sent to them. They haven't even stamped it to show that it has been read,' continued Zefer, refusing to believe that this was really the end of the story.

'It should be of no concern to you whether it has been read or not, curator..' The official scanned the report for a name. 'Curator Zefer Tyranus. Is it not enough to know that you have done your duty by submitting the report in the first place?' The senioris looked up from his desk for the first time and stared at Zefer. He did an obvious and startled double-take. 'What happened to you?'

Zefer glared down at the officious man, seated so comfortably behind his protocols. There wasn't even a name plate on the desk, just a little plaque with the words 'Duty Senioris,' etched into it. This was certainly the longest conversation that he had ever had with a senior official in the librarium, and it was not going quite as he had imagined that it might.

'I fell,' said Zefer, immediately aware that this explanation sounded like a lie. 'It was a rough night,' he continued, without really clarifying anything.

'So it seems.' The senioris had decided that he didn't want to know anything more. The curator's face was animated with hysteria and a crusty line of dried blood was drawn down from his swollen lip. His grey eyes were gaunt and heavily shadowed, as though sunken into his head after weeks of sleeplessness. His smock was dirty and soiled with what looked like vomit. The cloth over one leg appeared to be stained with blood from the inside, and the senioris noticed for the first time that the curator was standing lopsidedly, with all of his weight on the other leg. He reeked of drink and the kind of inhaled-toxins that clung to your clothes no matter how many times you washed them, not that there seemed much danger of that.

'If you are not satisfied, then you will have to take the matter up with the Office of Princess Gwentria herself. She is the final authority over issues of historical research. I must warn you, however, that she will not tolerate a filthy curator wasting her time - if she has already not read your report once, she will be considerably angered by being forced to not read it a second time.'

The senioris looked back down at the report and skimmed his eyes over the lines of neat text that covered it. He had no idea what it was about, and he didn't really care. None of these reports ever had even the faintest significance to his life, and he didn't get to where he was today by paying any attention to them. Much better to hand it along the bureaucracy until the author got so fed up with trying to find somebody who would read it that they simply gave up.

Rolling the report back into a neat little tube, the senioris stamped his seal onto it and handed it back to Zefer, who took it dejectedly. Then, without looking up, the official stamped another sheet of paper three times and squiggled his signature at the bottom, before handing the completed sector-pass to Zefer.

This should get you into Princess Gwentria's offices... eventually,' he said, lifting his eyes at the end, as though the last word had some particular significance.

Zefer took the piece of paper and studied it. He always read every note, report and memorandum, and he was not about to break that habit now. It certainly looked like a sector-pass into the highest levels of the Ko'iron precinct. This piece of paper would grant him admittance to the dizzying heights of the Spire, higher even than the cloud layer that inconveniently enshrouded the librarium - it could take him right up to the hallowed doors of House Helmawr itself, nearly two miles higher than he had ever been in his life.

Turning away from the senioris and limping down the long corridor towards his own desk, Zefer silently cursed himself for stupidly throwing himself out of the librar-ium's exit tunnel and then getting so drunk the night before. He knew that he was a mess today, but he hadn't cared when he had burst (he liked to think that he had burst, but really he had limped and shuffled) into the senioris's office and demanded (okay: quietly asked) why he had received no response to his groundbreaking report.

If he had known that the result of this dramatic confrontation would be a sector-pass to one of the most exclusive parts of the Spire, he would at least have cleaned the vomit off his smock.

As he limped down through the passageway, Zefer studied the pass. There were three stamps. One of them appeared to be the seal of the Historical Research Section: an intricate and slightly fuzzy image of an explorer with a torch brandished before him, presumably spreading the light of knowledge, or something. One of the stamps seemed to register the time at which the pass was issued. But the other was less obvious - it was some kind of reference number or code: CC9FB2. It meant nothing to Zefer, and that troubled him slightly.

THE EXPLOSION OF flame left Triar standing in a block of fire on the bar counter. The Salvationist gangers hesitated for a crucial moment, unsure of whether to help their leader or plough into his attacker. At least a few of them had never seen a wyrd in action before, and the spontaneous combustion of the metal bar had shocked them into indecision.

Triar resolved the dilemma for them, breaking into a ran down the bar and then vaulting through the flames at its end. He cleared the short space between the bar and the corner table in less than a second, swinging his blade in a horizontal arc as he flew towards Elria, flames rippling along his blue cloak.

But she was faster. As her companions launched themselves away from the table, laying into the Salvationist gangers who had finally found their direction, Elria stamped down on the table-edge and jumped back onto the seat of her chair. The table pivoted on its legs and then flipped up into the air, directly into

Triar's path. Immediately, Triar smashed into the table, his blade piercing the surface and stabbing out the other side towards Elria's face. She neither flinched nor moved, and the blade lost its momentum about a centimetre in front of her nose.

Before Triar and the table even hit the plate-metal ground, Elria flashed out her leg and kicked them both. They slid across the room, scattering furniture as they went. When they came to rest, Triar was still trying to remove his blade from the tabletop, and Elria's eyes flashed again. The

table erupted into flame and Triar kicked it away from him, abandoning his blade and scrambling to his feet.

The other blue-cloaks clustered around their leader, beaten back from the far corner all the way to the door, each brandishing a blade uncertainly. Triar clambered to his feet in their midst, staggering back against the heavy, riveted door as he struggled to maintain his balance after the shock of his fall.

This is not the end, Escher witch-' started Triar, but he lost his footing and fell back against the door, barging it open under his weight. A blast of fresh air from the giant fan outside breathed into the bar, whipping the flames into renewed ferocity. Triar caught his fall and propped open the door with his arm, trying to capitalise on the dramatic blossom of fire.

'Your blasphemies and heresies will not go unpunished. The Undying Emperor suffers not the heretic to live.' The pronouncement was mostly for the benefit of the crowd that had hurriedly assembled outside the *Fresh Air*, hoping to see the fight spill out into the square in front of the huge ventilation pipes.

Standing in the middle of the still-flaming bar, her blue hair bathed in flickering golden light, Elria offered no response, but Triar was neither expecting nor waiting for one. He turned on his heel, letting his cloak whip up into a whirl as he spun, and swept out of the *Fresh Air* with his gangers hustling and jostling in his wake, their masks hiding their embarrassment. As they emerged from the tavern, a hail of cheers descended on them from the Cawdor gangers of The Salvationists who had collected on top of the battered ventilation pipe on the left. The sound poured eerily down from the mouthless, metallic faces. To the right, lounging casually atop the other horizontal pipe, was a small group of women from The Coven who simply smiled down at the retreating blue-cloaks, patronising them with their silence. They had seen Elria trounce Triar's gangers before, and they enjoyed the humiliation that their quiet amusement caused.

As Triar looked up, a flash of black just above the great fan caught his attention, and he wondered who else was taking an interest in his affairs. With another flourish of his cloak, he turned off to the left, heading back into secure Salvationist territory. As he left, the smug women sprang down from their perches and sauntered over towards the *Breath of Fresh Air*, claiming it for the The Coven, at least for tonight.

'CC9FB2?' ASKED THE admittor at the desk in front of the huge doors. He was a tiny man, dwarfed by the highly polished metal table behind which he sat. Zefer suspected that his feet didn't touch the ground, but he dared not peer under the table to check.

Towering over the little official were two inhumanly huge guards. Their feet were firmly and heavily set on the shiny silver of the floor and their reflections seemed to stretch right up to Zefer's toes. They had bright green hair, shaved on both sides of their heads to leave only a strip along the middle standing vertically on end. Both of them had the Ko'iron crest crudely branded onto their massive upper arms. In one of the books in aisle 3.70.1141a, Zefer had once read about a group of unsavoury people called Goliaths. They were supposed to be colossal barbarians from the Underhive, but he had never met anyone who had actually seen one. For a moment, he wondered whether these two guards might fit the profile.

Slightly anxious now, Zefer rechecked the stamp on the pass that the senioris had given him. 'Yes, CC9FB2,' he confirmed.

The admittor snorted slightly as he nodded and started to flick through the pages of the insanely thick book that was barely supported by the elegant curves of the table. Zefer noticed that the man did not start his flicking at the beginning of the book, but rather flopped the tome open about three quarters of the way through and started to flick from there. To be frank, Zefer was surprised that the admittor had enough strength to turn the bound covers himself; behind the book and desk, next to the huge sentries, and in front of the great doors, the little admittor looked comically small.

'Ah yes, here we are,' he said, licking the end of his stylus and preparing to make some sort of mark in the book. You are in luck. CC9FB1 has cancelled, so you are not as far down the queue as you may fear.'

'Queue?' asked Zefer as the significance of the number started to sink in for the first time.

'But of course,' replied the little man, looking up from his writing with a smirk creased into his face. 'Princess Gwentria is a very important person. You didn't think that you were the only one who wanted to see her, did you?'

'But... but I have very important news for the princess. I have information that she must be made aware of,' said Zefer, vaguely hopeful

that he might be able to impress the importance of his discoveries onto this bookish man.

'Of course you do,' smiled the admittor, his smirk gradually fixing into a sinister sneer. 'That is why you are here. Nobody comes to the princess's gates if they do not. People have been coming for years - there is a great deal that the princess needs to know, it seems.'

'And where are you up to in the queue?' asked Zefer, sighing audibly and resigning himself to a wait.

'Oh, we're moving through it at quite a rate now. Oh yes, much faster than when we first started. Of course, some of the people have cancelled and some others simply forgot their place in the queue, and one or two have died - ah yes, like poor old CC9FB1 - but things are moving much faster.'

'Excellent.' replied Zefer, encouraging the man to continue. 'So, where are you up to now?'

'We are at CC9FB,' replied the admittor proudly.

'Should I take a seat?' asked Zefer wearily, waving his hand towards the empty row of red velvet seats that led along the silver wall away from the desk.

'By all means,' said the little man, excitedly jumping to his feet. 'I don't think that we have had anyone actually *wait* for their appointment for years!' The admittor sprang off his chair, and Zefer actually lost sight of him behind the desk for a moment. When he finally reappeared, he was even shorter than Zefer had imagined.

'What do people usually do?' asked Zefer, a little taken aback.

'Why they go home, of course or they get back on with their lives. But, to actually *wait*. Well, that really is dedication. I congratulate you, Curator Tyranus,' said the little man as he ushered Zefer over towards the first of the velvet chairs.

'Thank you,' said Zefer, increasingly unsure about what was going on. 'Let me make sure that I understand this correctly. You have reached CC9FB. I am CC9FB2 and CC9FB1 has cancelled.'

'Well, yes, or rather died. But the effect is much the same, as far as the queue is concerned,' nodded the admittor enthusiastically.

'So I will be next.'

The little admittor stopped nodding and his smile disappeared instantly. 'Sir, do you take me for a fool? Is this some kind of test?' he asked, looking around suspiciously. 'You and I know perfectly well that you are not next. There are still BFD5B7 people before you... give or take those who have given up, forgotten or died.'

Zefer stared at the little man and tried to understand what he was saying. 'What do you mean, CBF5C7?'

'No, no, don't be ridiculous. There are not nearly that many. I said BFD5BF.'

'Okay,' said Zefer slowly, feeling like the little man was somewhat missing the point. 'So, what does that mean?'

The admittor returned the frustrated gaze for a few moments, screwing up his eyes as though it was impossible to imagine what could be so difficult for the curator to understand. Finally, the crease crept back onto his face, and he smirked.

'Oh, I see what has happened. BFD5BF is a number. After the first few years, the queue grew so large that it became increasingly inconvenient to employ numbers in base-ten. Hence, we shifted to base-sixteen, which obviously required the use of a few letters. Actually, the new system is working very well indeed. Take your own number, for example. Had that been written in base-ten it would barely have fitted on the pass!'

Zefer stared at the jubilant admittor and smiled weakly. 'What?'

'Yes,' continued the little man, climbing up onto one of the velvet chairs as his mouth muttered in calculation. 'If I'm not very much mistaken, you are number thirteen million, four hundred and ten thousand, two hundred and twenty six, as you would say in conventional decimal terms. CC9FB2, as we would say, more correctly, in hexidecimal.'

Slumping down into the seat next to the admittor, Zefer sunk his head into his hands. 'And what number are you up to the queue?'

'CC9FB,' replied the little man cheerfully. 'Eight hundred and thirty eight thousand, one hundred and thirty nine.'

'Which means that there are...' Zefer's mind was racing with numbers that it could only just contain. 'There are more than twelve and a half million people ahead of me in the list...' His voice plunged into silence.

'BFD5B7,' chirped the admittor cheerfully. 'Twelve million, five hundred and seventy two thousand, and eighty seven,' he added helpfully. 'Give or

take a few here and there-'

'-who might have died while they waited-'

'-exactly!' flourished the admittor, as though a great breakthrough had been made. 'Can I get you something to drink while you wait?'

ZEFER SAT ON the velvet seat and stared into the shimmering silver floor, watching the colourful reflections of the ceiling fresco as though in a giant mirror. His mouth was working silently, as though a stream of words were rolling across his tongue without ever finding a sound. Every now and again he shook his head vaguely, in mesmerised disbelief. He was in shock.

It had taken six years to get through eight hundred thousand places on the queue. Six years. And that was partly because hardly anyone had actually turned up for their appointments. Zefer couldn't even do the maths. He had no idea how long it would take to get through another twelve and half million people. Come to that, he had had no idea that there were even that many people in the Spire, let alone in House Ko'iron or in the Historical Research Section. This was all too much for him, and he was glad that the vast, ornate waiting hall contained such comfortable chairs.

Other than the little admittor and his two huge Goliath guards, Zefer was alone in the cavernous hall. His loneliness was somehow consoling, since it permitted him to sustain his delusions that he was a significant actor in the affairs of the great house - a delusion challenged profoundly by recent news that he was only one of more than thirteen million people in a queue to see the boss.

Yet even the immaculate silver hall conspired against him. He gazed across the open space towards the polished wall on the far side, and saw a scruffy looking man hunched into a red velvet chair. The man was motionless and dejected, staring back at Zefer with the same expression of desperate resignation on his face. It was like looking in a mirror.

After a few moments, Zefer thought that it would be impolite not to acknowledge the man, so he nodded a brotherly greeting. The man nodded back again. No, thought Zefer, he's not returning my signal, he's doing it at the same time. Zefer raised a hand and waved, and the man did the same thing.

It was his reflection after all. Staring hard at the far wall, Zefer could clearly see that it was him. Even worse, he could faintly see the reflection of him staring at himself staring at himself staring at himself. An infinite regression of increasingly tiny Zefers disappearing into infinity, like a queue of millions of Zefers, all sitting on comfortable red chairs in a shining hall. He looked at the infinite line for some time, trying to work out which of the images actually corresponded to his place in the queue to see Princess Gwentria, but he couldn't see that far.

He shook his head again, violently this time, trying to clear it of befuddlement. How could the queue have become so long? He didn't believe for a moment that the ofher people had reports as significant as his own. Why could the seniorises not deal with the other problems, rather than passing them along the line to the end, blocking his way forward?

Casting his mind back to the officious senioris from whom he had received his pass, Zefer shivered at the realisation that he was not a man who would choose to deal with a problem if he could possibly avoid it. The bureaucratic structure existed precisely so that such men could pass anomalies up the chain of authority towards the top, thus relieving themselves of any sense of responsibility. Zefer clenched his fists in frustration as he realised that he had actually been intimidated by that snivelling man.

Thinking back on the conversation, Zefer could still remember the smug satisfaction with which the senioris had used the word 'eventually' He had handed over the pass and said: This should get you into Princess Gwentria's offices... eventually,' So, he had known! The senioris had been fully aware that Zefer would have to join the queue - he had even stamped the pass with his position in the queue: CC9FB2.

If only someone would read the report, thought Zefer, then they wouldn't keep him waiting in an infinite queue forever. No wonder nothing ever got done, if the whole of the Historical Research Section was held in a infinite queue to see the only person who couldn't pass the problem along to somebody else.

A delicate bell chimed, echoing around the silver hall with metallic beauty, and Zefer looked over to the desk, where the admittor sat, half-hidden behind the huge log-book. A bright red light was glowing above the

great doors behind the sentries, and the admittor was excitedly leafing through the pages of the book.

Clearing his throat and looking hopefully around the vast, empty hall, the admittor spoke. 'Uh um, CC9FC, please.'

He waited a few seconds, but there was no response. 'CC9FC?' he repeated, lifting himself onto his elbows and peering up and down the cavernous hall.

'CC9FD, please,' said the admittor, crossing something out of the log book and shaking his head in disgust. As he spoke, the great doors creaked open, slowly swinging back to reveal a dust-riddled darkness beyond. Slowly emerging from the shadows shuffled an old woman, leaning heavily on a stick that clinked against the polished silver of the floor. Her hair was wiry and white, and her limbs seemed to tremble as she moved, her head shaking involuntarily despite the faint smile of achievement that graced her withered lips.

Zefer watched the old woman straggle across the highly polished floor of the hall as he listened to the admittor mumbling angrily under his breath.

'CC9FE? No? Honestly, I don't know why these people bother joining the queue if they are not going to turn up... CC9FF? By the Emperor, this is pathetic.

'CCAOO?' The admittor appeared neither to notice nor to care about the woman.

As Zefer watched, the old woman stopped shuffling and swayed tremulously. She had reached the middle of the hall and seemed unsure about where to go next. Then, quite suddenly, she collapsed to the ground, her walking stick clattering and ricocheting on the metal. Zefer jumped to his feet and ran across to her, skidding down onto his knees. He slid to a halt next to her head and peered down into the glazed eyes. Lying on her back, the woman smiled faintly and opened her mouth, straining to tell him something. Zefer waited, but no noise came, and then he realised that she was dead.

'CCA01?'

'She's dead!' cried Zefer, climbing to his feet and turning to face the admittor.

'What? Oh, really?' The admittor pulled a brass lever and the red light above the open doors changed to green. That is inconvenient.' A few seconds later, a couple of servants came rushing out of the darkness with a large, cloth sack. They hurried up to the old woman, pushing Zefer aside, and bundled her into the bag, before rushing back through die doors, dragging the dead-weight behind them.

'CCA02?' asked the admittor hopefully, looking up and down the length of the hall, as though expecting to see somebody waiting who had not been there mere seconds before.

Zefer watched the old woman being towed away and listened to the admittor reeling off the numbers. He looked at the two huge Goliath sentries standing massively and immovably next to the great doors. And he made a decision.

'Admittor, sir,' he said as he strode back towards the desk. 'Why not let me in instead of CCA02? He or she is clearly not here - they may be dead for all we know. In any case, they probably made their appointment years ago and are likely to have forgotten about it by now.'

'You must wait your turn like everyone else, CC9FB2,' replied the admittor, crossing out a name from the log. 'CCA03?,' he called, looking past Zefer into the empty hall.

'But there is nobody else here!' cried Zefer, starting to get angry. 'Don't you see, you are going to have to read out every number between CCA03 and CC9FB2 before anyone will answer you. And do you know how long that will take?' asked Zefer, doing some arithmetic in his head. 'If you read out one number each minute, it would take you nearly twenty four years to get to me, and you are not going at even nearly that speed. I am reasonably certain that I will have died of old age or boredom before you get to me, so then nobody will ever answer your call. Don't you wish that, just once, you could actually let somebody in?'

The admittor looked up at Zefer with guilty excitement written on his face. 'Yes, I do wish that,' he said. 'Nobody has been admitted since I started here,' he confessed, almost sadly. 'Perhaps we could move you forward a little.'

THE HEIGHTS

'SO, YOU ARE CCA04?' asked the permittor in the next corridor.

For a few moments, Zefer said nothing. He was still struggling to take in the scale of Gwentria's palace. This corridor was the smallest that he had been in since entering the palace nearly three hours earlier, and it was huge. The ceiling was domed and decorated with brightly coloured frescoes depicting the past glories of House Ko'iron. At regular intervals along its length hung magnificent chandeliers, bristling with crystals and glowing orbs of light. And both the long walls were studded with paintings and portraits, showing the great and good of the family. He had never seen anything like it - it made the grandeur of the librarium seem pedestrian and shabby.

'Well?' prompted the permittor again.

'Oh, er, sorry. Yes, yes I am... that's me. Yes,' said Zefer, fumbling his words because he was new to the art of lying.

The strangely elongated man peered at Zefer over his spectacles. 'Are you quite sure?'

'Yes, of course.' Zefer wracked his brain trying to think of something persuasive to say, or at least something that would persuade the odd looking stick-man standing in front of him with a clip-board. 'How else would I have got through to see you?' Excellent, thought Zefer, that would do it.

'True,' said the permittor, apparently satisfied with this procedural logic. You may go in. The princess is expecting you. Do please endeavour not to try her patience, she has had a long day and it is about time for her nap.'

'Of course,' replied Zefer, feigning sympathy. 'I will be as succinct as I possibly can be.'

With that, Zefer stepped past the permittor and reached out to push what he hoped would be the last set of doors lying between him and Princess

Gwentria. As his hand approached the shimmering gold metal, the doors gave way in front of him, opening out to reveal a narrow, brightly lit and gloriously decorated corridor. At the other end, Zefer could quite clearly see that there was no door and no permittor laying in wait. Instead, the corridor led straight into a large, airy chamber, from which Zefer could hear the magical sound of girlish laughter.

The constricted passageway was gleaming with light, although Zefer could not see its source. The pearlescent white floor seemed to glisten and the immaculately silver walls reflected the light back in on itself, rendering the corridor into a blaze of light. Zefer squinted as he stepped forward, feeling the golden doors seal quickly behind him.

Hesitantly, he started to walk towards the laughter, as though drawn by the thought of happiness. The portraits on the walls seemed to follow him with their eyes as he glanced furtively from one side to the other, fearing that the walls might close in on him or that another palace official was going to leap out of a hidden door and explode his lie.

As he neared the middle of the passageway, Zefer paused. There was a huge fresco on the wall, depicting Jurod the Humane - Princess Gwentria's elder brother. He was seated bestride a bizarre looking machine, brandishing an elegantly curving blade in one hand and a heavy looking firearm in the other. The machine had two fat wheels, front and back, and vicious looking spikes arrayed around a forked ram that protruded from its nose. A great cloud of black smoke plumed out of the exhaust cluster at the rear, billowing around the flood of midnight blue that was Jurod's cape.

Cowering before the charging figure of Jurod were a crowd of snivelling creatures that might have been men, or might have been animals. It was hard to tell. They were crouched close to the ground with fur coverings tied tightly to their bodies, like second skins, but human hands and feet were visible underneath the bestial visage. One of these man-creatures was at the epicentre of die scene, trapped between the charging figure of Jurod on one side and the seething mass of his brethren on the other. The figure stood upright with his head thrown back in a scream and his arms cast out wide in supplication; the ram of Jurod's machine was just beginning to puncture his finely muscled stomach.

In the books of the librarium, Zefer had come across tales of the exploits of the most senior members of House Ko'iron during their periods of Spyrering. He had read descriptions of scenes like this before, but he had never thought to see one, and certainly not in such a glorious place as Gwentria's palace. His nose scrunched in revulsion at the thought of the most hallowed members of his house descending into the inglorious abyss of the Underhive.

'Praise the Emperor for the heights of Ko'iron,' he recalled from the *Paradoxes of the Spire,* 'for it is better to be well defined at the top than lost in the paradoxes of foundations. Unless it isn't,' thought Zefer, letting the meaning of those last three words impress upon him as though for the first time, as he stared up at the dramatic and bloody scene. Unless it isn't: there was something perversely attractive about the grotesquely heroic images.

Jurod's eyes seemed to blink involuntarily, as though they had been open too long in the dry air. Zefer caught the motion out of the corner of his eye and performed a startled double-take.

That's my brother!' came a delighted shriek from the chamber ahead of him, making him snap his head round to find the source of the voice. Then he remembered where he was and he dropped to his knees, lowering his eyes into the pearly white of the floor.

'Your excellency,' he muttered, fumbling around in his brain for the correct mode of address.

'Doesn't he look wonderful? He killed them all, you know. All of them in one night. Mummy had said that he couldn't return to the Spire until he had killed forty ratskins, thinking that he would be gone for months. But he did it in one night, all by himself. Without a gang. Isn't he wonderful?' The voice bounced off the walls of the narrow corridor, echoing and repeating itself until it became a breathless tirade.

'Most impressive, your excellency,' acknowledged Zefer quietly, still stooped in deference.

'Isn't that echo fantastic? Sometimes I like to stand at this end of the corridor and shout things, just to hear my voice wobble and repeat like that. It is fun, don't you think? Do you like echoes?' Again, the high pitched voice ricocheted around Zefer, and he was convinced that it all came from a single breath.

'Yes, echoes are lovely, excellency,' replied Zefer, not quite sure what to say. His voice was soft and low, and hardly echoed at all.

'I can hardly hear you. Mummy says that it's rude to mumble, so don't do it. Why don't you come over here where I can hear you properly, then we can both make echoes together.' For a moment there was the irritated edge of chastisement in the voice, but it quickly gave way to playfulness once again.

This was not going quite in the manner that Zefer had anticipated, but he nodded and pulled himself up to his feet. 'Yes, your excellency, of course.'

'What? I can't hear you,' came the voice again, this time in a mocking sing-song tone.

Zefer finally raised his eyes and looked along the corridor. When he saw the figure standing in the chamber at the end, his jaw dropped and his eyes widened just a little too much. Princess Gwentria was not at all as he had imagined.

'WHAT? WHAT ARE you staring at? Are you going to come and make echoes or not?' asked the princess, stamping her feet in irritation.

Zefer stared at the little girl, completely lost for words. She must have been about fourteen. Her red hair was bunched into pig-tails on either side of her head, and her freckled skin was paler than the marble floor. She was surrounded by piles of toy animals that Zefer could not identify, and scattered over the floor were a whole array of bleeping and flashing devices that must also have been toys of some kind.

'Oh, erm, nothing,' managed Zefer, endeavouring to compose himself. 'I am not staring at all. I was just struck by... your beauty, your excellency.'

The little girl clutched her hands together and swayed her shoulders shyly. 'Oh, well... stop staring!' she shouted to overcome her embarrassment.

'Your excellency,' said Zefer, trying to move the conversation into a more comfortable area as he approached the princess. 'I have business to discuss with you.'

'Oh, not you too,' grumped the girl, stamping her foot again and turning away from him. 'That old woman also wanted to talk about some kind of book or something. That's not why you're here, is it? I'm bored of books. I

want to go adventuring, like Jurod did. Did you see the picture of him? Isn't it wonderful?'

'The picture is magnificent, excellency,' replied Zefer, trying to bring the conversation back round to his report, 'but I really must ask for your opinion on another matter.'

'Will it lead to adventure and excitement?' asked Gwentria, slumping into a giant, amorphous blob of a chair, which moulded around her as her weight sunk in.

'Quite possibly,' said Zefer, suddenly realising that it might indeed. He had already had the most exciting few weeks of his life; after all, here he was talking with Princess Gwentria. Admittedly, she was not quite what he had been led to expect, but that was merely a small detail. For a moment he found himself wondering whether he should have waited for his proper place in the queue, by which time the young Gwentria may have been a little more... princess-like.

'Oh goody, then do tell.' she said, dumping her elbows onto her knees and leaning forward attentively.

'Oh, well, I'm not really sure where to start.,' began Zefer, realising that it was true as he said it.

'At the beginning, dummy. Everyone knows that,' she giggled.

'Of course. In my spare hours after work, I have been reading one of the greatest works in your librarium, excellency: *The Paradoxes of the Spire*. I'm sure that you've heard of it,' Zefer waited for some indication that she was following, but she had started to play with one of her pig-tails and offered him nothing.

'Anyway, it is a very famous book. It has been read and reread over the course of centuries, with nobody ever reaching a truly satisfactory understanding of its meaning. It is alleged that it was written in the distant past, when House Ko'iron was little older than you, excellency.' Gwentria twitched a little as the story pointed towards her personally.

'Is it a good story?' she asked.

'It is undoubtedly a confusing story, excellency, written in very cumbersome and convoluted terms. However, there is certainly a good story behind it, and that it why I am here. You have undoubtedly heard rumours from your servants and from other visitors about the strange and mysterious things that can be found in the Underhive?'

Gwentria's eyes widened with interest. Yes. And my brother, Jurod, he's actually *been* there!'

'Indeed, excellency. Well, I discovered a missing page in the book that sheds new light on the famous opening lines.'

'Tell me the lines,' said the princess, pouting, almost instantly bored at the mention of books again.

Very well. These are the first lines of the book: *"In the beginning they lay the end into the ground, and the finale was buried beneath the foundations, as though expecting the sky to fall into the abyss in the days of Ko'iron's salvation to come,"* recited Zefer carefully.

'I don't understand.' Gwentria scrunched up her face in displeasure.

'No, nobody ever has,' explained Zefer, 'until now. But the missing pages tell of a time before Hive Primus was the huge structure that we know today. It was a time when this world was new, and House Ko'iron was just beginning to take shape. This was the time when the ancients started to construct Hive Primus, under the guidance of the Undying Emperor himself.

'If you had been there at that time, Princess Gwentria, and you had looked up from the ground, you would not have seen the towering edifice of the hive. When you looked up, there would have been nothing but the sky.'

'How lovely,' answered Gwentria, her imagination caught by the image. 'I once visited the Palace of Hel-mawr, right at the very peak of the Spire, and from there I could see nothing but the sky when I looked out of the windows.'

'Yes, my princess. And you have cleverly hit upon exactly my point,' coaxed Zefer, keeping the girl's interest.

'I have?'

'Yes. You see, House Helmawr has its place at the very top of the Spire because of a long historical claim that ties it to the founding of the hive itself. *The Paradoxes of the Spire*, suggests on the contrary, that it is House Ko'iron that should claim this heritage. Don't you see, it's impenetrable language must have been a code to protect the author from the Helmawr,' said Zefer excitedly, 'but now the meaning is clear: "Though it may be lost, salvation is always found buried in the depths of space and time, where

Ko'iron first planted her roots." It was the Ko'iron matriarch, not the Helmawr patriarch who stood shoulder by shoulder with the Emperor!'

Gwentria was playing with her pig-tails again. 'I don't really understand,' she said, puffing out her cheeks. 'Are you saying that there is something down at the bottom of the hive that belongs to me?'

'Yes, yes, I suppose I am suggesting that,' admitted Zefer, somewhat shocked that the little girl had seen straight through to the most material implications of his story.

'And, you have come here to tell me that you are going to get it for me?' she asked, smiling sweetly.

'Oh, um, no. No, that's not quite why I'm here, I don't think,' replied Zefer, suddenly confused about what he expected to happen as a result of this meeting.

'But, if you don't go and get it, why should anybody believe what you are saying. It's just a story for children, isn't it?' explained Gwentria wisely. 'So, I think that you should go,' she concluded with a firm nod.

With that, there was a loud clunk and a hiss, and the wall behind the huge, squishy seat in which Gwentria was enthroned drew up into the ceiling. In the space behind was revealed a group of scribes, each feverishly scribbling onto clipboards, presumably recording the details of the conversation, thought Zefer. The strange, stick-like permittor from the other side of the brightly lit corridor was also there. He looked up as the wall vanished into the ceiling, making a few last marks on his clipboard.

'CCA04, this is the end of your audience. Please come with me,' said the permittor as he strode through the chamber towards Zefer, picking his way naturally over the mess of toys on the floor. 'It is time for her excellency's nap now.'

'Oh, do let me know how you get on!' said Gwentria happily. 'Perhaps, next time, we can make some echoes?'

'Yes, thank you,' said Zefer in some confusion, as the permittor took him by the arm and led him back down the bright corridor, past the epic fresco of Jurod towards the heavy golden doors at the end. 'I'll do my best, your excellency,' he called over his shoulder.

There was a giggle behind him. 'Yes, that's it. That echoed!'

KRELYN HADN'T SEEN the Wall for years, not since she last passed through it to take up her position in House Ko'iron under the auspices of the now defunct Delaque-Ko'iron Contract. At that time, she had slipped through the Tunnel of the Red Snakes - one of the secret Delaque gateways - avoiding the entanglement of the authorities around the great Spiral Gates themselves, which were kept securely guarded at all times. Traffic through the Wall was tightly controlled; the people of the Spire guarded their privileges jealously, and the people of Hive City below were unscrupulous in their attempts to gatecrash the party.

Pulling her cloak more carefully around her body, Krelyn stepped out of the shadows of the little alleyway, quietly thrilled that her new mission would take her through the Wall once again. In front of her, the huge, immovable shape of the Wall loomed massively, making her want to gasp. The air quality shifted as she drew nearer, as though it were condensed or cowering before the monstrous barrier. Krelyn had never actually been in a storm, but she thought that this was what the air would feel like before one struck.

The Wall ploughed unstoppably through this border district, sometimes cutting straight through buildings and structures that had once been buildings. It stretched about fifty metres into the air before burying itself into the substructure of the Spire above, forming an impregnable adamantium barrier. There was no way to climb over it, since there was no open space above it _ it was jammed in between two levels of the Spire, and the upper level had had its floor reinforced with adamantium to prevent smugglers and slavers from drilling through from above.

In this district, the buildings of the Spire pressed right up against the surface of the Wall, leaving only a narrow alley that ran along next to it, overhung with balconies and studded with structures that had bored into the admantium to provide extra support for their unusual or aspirational shapes. The sheer sides cast the alley into deep shadow, and reduced the hubbub of the busier neighbouring sectors to faint murmurs.

Krelyn reached out and pressed her fingers against the cold rivets in the adamantium. They were damp with condensation, and Krelyn's touch sent little streams of water cascading down to the ground. She moved her hand slightly and pressed against the metal plate, leaning her weight against it. Just as she thought that she had misremembered, there was a quiet crack

and a hiss of steam. The panel sank back into the Wall revealing a small, almost perfectly cylindrical tunnel.

Something made her hesitate before stepping into the passage. She paused at the entrance and scanned the shadows of the narrow alley that ran alongside the Wall. The air was heavy and damp, but there was something else lingering in the darkness that Krelyn couldn't quite sense. It was something just on the edge of perception, leaving only enough of an impression to betray its presence, but not quite enough to identify it.

A faint noise, like a knife dropping into sand, made her freeze. Whatever it was, it was now directly behind her. Instinctively, her right hand dropped to the trigger of the modified laspistol that hung from her shoulder under her cloak, and her left slipped inside the fatigues of her leg, clasping the hilt of a blade strapped to her thigh. She inhaled silently, bracing her body for the inevitable.

'Are you going in, or not?' slithered a sibilant voice into her ear.

Krelyn held her breath, unsure of how to proceed.

'If you're not going to go through, please stand aside,' hissed the voice with impatient but polished politeness.

'I am in no hurry,' hazarded Krelyn, stepping to one side without turning around. 'Please, go ahead of me if you are.'

'I am, thank you,' came the reply, as a damp cloak rushed past Krelyn's cheek. Even from this intimate distance, she could only just make out the shape of a stooped man hurrying down the tunnel. His cloak was long and impossibly dark, just like her own, and it shielded him from the attentions of the already dim light.

She watched the man take a few steps and then vanish in the darkness. She clicked her visor onto infra-red, but the thermal balancing of the Delaque cloak meant that she could only see him for another step or two before he was utterly invisible. Nonetheless, Krelyn continued to stare, checking the tunnel for signs of anything suspicious. There was nothing. lust darkness and hints of shadows.

Then suddenly there was a face, bright and blaring with heat immediately in front of her. Krelyn gasped and jumped backwards, clicking her visor back to normal and staring straight into the face of the venator emerging from the tunnel, a red snake seemed to writhe under his eyes. As she flew backwards she smashed into something heavy behind her

and felt it collapse under her weight. She stumbled on whatever it was and then fell back on top of it.

'Get off,' cried an annoyed, feminine voice from below her, and a pair of small hands shoved her to one side, rolling her unceremoniously onto her belly.

Before Krelyn could spring back onto her feet, the source of the voice had already vanished into the tunnel with her cloak fluttering dramatically in her wake, and the owner of the face that had made her jump had similarly vanished into the streets of the Spire.

Brushing herself down, Krelyn realised with a mixture of disappointment and relish that she had gotten rusty in the Spire, but that her next few steps would take her back to her spiritual home. She had no idea how the Delaque gangs of Hive City would react to her return, especially the Red Snakes themselves, and she knew that even House Ko'iron's new allies would be unlikely to welcome her with open arms, but she ducked her head and dashed forward into the tunnel through the Wall.

IT DIDN'T MATTER how many times he looked at it, his desk was completely empty. There were no document pouches waiting for him, and no requisition papers for him to use to equip himself for his journey. For the second time in as many weeks, Zefer was utterly crestfallen. He had been certain as he had walked out between the great, shimmering doors of Gwentria's Palace the previous night that the urgency of his mission had been understood. He had thought that, at the very least, his mission papers would be waiting for him when he turned up at work the next day or, more likely, that a representative from the Provisions Office would be dispatched to ask what he required.

Instead, Zefer slumped into his little booth and everything looked much as it had the previous day, and the day before that. The only difference being that Zefer himself was dejected and annoyed. He deliberately placed his stylus on the desk with the tip pointing in the wrong direction, and then sneered at it as though he had made an important point. Then he stood up irritably, looking around the huge librarium reading room across the tops of the hundreds of little work-booths. He grunted audibly and sat down again.

After a few agitated minutes, he pushed his chair back and stormed off towards the desk of the senioris with whom he had talked the day before.

'UM,' HE STARTED, conscious that the conversation had probably been derailed already by that opening. 'Um, I was wondering whether you had received any...' He trailed off, realising that he was not quite sure what he expected to have arrived. 'That is, have you received anything for me? Anything from the Office of Princess Gwentria, I mean. I saw her yesterday... you may remember. You stamped my pass. Erm, I spoke to you.'

The senioris didn't even look up from his desk, but the top of his head managed to emanate condescension. 'What are you talking about, Curator Tyranus?'

Zefer realised that it had all come out backwards, but he was sure that the official was just being deliberately obstreperous. The senioris had probably never even met the princess, and would certainly not have expected to have seen Zefer back from her offices so quickly. He probably hoped never to see Zefer again.

'I thought that I had dealt with you yesterday, Tyranus. I certainly didn't expect to see you again so soon. Are you sure that you went to the right place with that pass?' asked the senioris, his stylus scratching to a halt as he raised his head slightly to peer up at Zefer, one eyebrow raised.

'Yes, senioris, I did exactly as you instructed. When I saw Her Excellency the Princess Gwentria, Matriarchal Heir to the Ancient and Glorious House of Ko'iron' - he decided to give her the full title not just for the sake of form, but mostly to underline the significance of the fact that he had actually met her (he decided not to mention the fact that she was just a little girl) - 'she gave me instructions for a research trip. I assumed that this would have been communicated to you already' Zefer had puffed out his chest and was trying to look down his nose at the 'Duty Senioris,' whatever his name was. However, the official didn't seem particularly impressed and, slightly disarmed, Zefer felt a sudden pang of doubt that this might not actually be the same senioris as the one he had seen the day before. Looking around at the other seniorises in the area, he

realised that he couldn't really differentiate between any of them; none of their desks had name-plates, only their titles, which were all the same.

'No, there is no reason that I would hear anything about your visit at all. Any requisitions for provisions or travel permits would be sent directly to the Historical Provisions Office, of course,' said the senioris impassively, dropping his attention back down to the documents on his desk. He made a little squiggle on one with his stylus, then stamped it and dropped it onto a growing pile of similar documents on the floor next to his desk.

'Of course,' said Zefer, trying to make it sound like he had known that all along. It wasn't very convincing, and he cringed slightly as the words came out. 'I'll be off to the HPO then,' he added, thinking that the acronym might recover some form of nonchalance.

The senioris made no response at all. Zefer hesitated for a moment, then turned and shuffled back down the corridor towards his little booth.

TWO MORE AGENTS passed her as she made her way through the tunnel. She didn't see them and she was sure that they didn't see her, but there had been a whispered acknowledgement as their shadows had merged: the invisible nod of an unspoken confraternity.

The tunnel was longer than Krelyn remembered, and certainly longer than the Wall was wide, but when she reached the end she realised why. The mouth of the tunnel emerged into the commotion of Hive City just above the revolving fan of an air-vent. The tunnel was hidden behind a giant vertical pipe that led up from the fan and through the uneven ceiling. A series of pitons had been hammered into the back of the pipe to provide the suggestion of a ladder for the Red Snake agents to use to gain access to the tunnel. Each piton bore the tiny red snake of the Delaque family crest. Rolling up her sleeve, Krelyn paused for a moment to compare the mark to the tattoo that ran along the inner side of her left forearm.

Krelyn climbed down the hidden side of the pipe and slipped out from behind it, crouching into the narrow trough defined by the downward curve of one of the horizontal ventilation pipes and the roughly riveted wall behind it. She was right next to the fan, which was positioned at the intersection of two giant horizontal pipes and the vertical one that she had just climbed down.

The slow revolutions of the fan blades beat the air and sent pulses rippling through the metal pipes, but the noise was completely drowned out by the raucous tumult going on in the plaza in front of the vent. Krelyn lifted her head and peered over the curving apex of the pipe smiling broadly at the violent confirmation that she was home again.

As she lifted her head, a tumble of blue-cloaked gangers burst out of the door of a building on the other side of the square followed by a pluming gout of flame. The blue-cloaks dove to the ground, blown off their feet by the concussion, but nobody emerged in pursuit. Instead, a chorus of cheers erupted from Krelyn's right, and she turned her head to see a larger group of similarly blue-coated gangers standing atop the huge horizontal pipe on that side. They started to stamp their feet rhythmically, making the pipe vibrate and rumble.

On the other side of the square, sitting casually on the other horizontal pipe, were a group of ostentatiously clad women. Their silence oozed with condescension and Krelyn could easily see that they were the victorious side in whatever affair was unfolding.

Potentially interesting as the scene might have been, Krelyn had more important things to do than to watch a street brawl - even though she hadn't seen any proper gang warfare for years. Instinctively, her hands traced the shape of the blades strapped in place against her legs and she nodded to herself, delighted that the instinct had returned to her so quickly.

Smiling with contentment, Krelyn slid down the back of the pipe into the shadows underneath it. Landing softly, she pulled her cloak tightly around her to ensure that she would not disturb the fracas in the square, and then she swept along the edge of the plaza and out into the streets of Hive City. She had to make contact with her allies, and quickly.

"WHAT ARE YOU doing here, venator?' Orthios spat the last word as though he were swearing.

'I have come to request your assistance,' replied Krelyn, crouched on the sill of the window through which she'd just climbed, her cloak thrown back over her shoulder so that the people in the street outside would not be able to see her at all.

Orthios laughed, looking around the room at the faces of his comrades in the Snake Charmers gang. 'Excuse me?' he said in amused disbelief. "You have come to request what?'

'Your assistance, if you please,' said Krelyn, refusing to rise to the bait. In a smooth movement, she vaulted down from the window and landed gendy in the centre of the group of gangers. Despite their superior numbers, the men backed away slighdy when she landed. If this intruder had somehow managed to penetrate to the heart of Orthios's gang house, die Snake Charmers' Basket, as it was known, then she was probably a dangerous woman.

'Yes, I thought diat was what you said,' mused Orthios, taking a step towards Krelyn and propping himself up on his chainsword, as though it were a walking stick. 'I just don't understand why you would be stupid enough to say such a thing.'

Unphased, Krelyn took two confident steps forward, bringing her face to within centimetres of the ganger's. 'Because, Orthios, I bring the seal of House Ko'iron, and you are obliged to assist me, whether I request it or not,' With that, Krelyn flashed open her cloak and revealed the Ko'iron crest hanging as a medallion against her chest.

She had not been looking forward to this moment, and had known that it was a big risk to take, particularly so early on in her mission, but she had nowhere else to go. There was no way that she could have returned to the safe house of the Red Snakes - her own Delaque gang - their response would be even more unpredictable than that of these Snake Charmers of House Orlock. In any case, in theory at least (and in law at best) this Orlock gang was obliged to help her. A number of years earlier, the Orlocks had wrested the lucrative Ko'iron Contract from the Delaque and, in the process, they had bound themselves to the Ko'iron as allies. As a pledged servant of House Ko'iron, Krelyn was entitled to shelter and support from this gang. An unfortunate side-effect of the transference of the Ko'iron Contract, of course, was the escalation of hostilities between Delaque and Orlock gangs in this part of Hive City - and that meant between the Red Snakes and the Snake Charmers. Krelyn, who wore her Delaque lineage like a great black cloak around her body, was just about the last person that Orthios wanted to see in his private meeting chamber.

'This had better not be some kind of Delaque trickery, venator, or you will pay with your life,' muttered Orthios as he grabbed hold of the medallion and studied it closely. The Delaque had a well-deserved reputation for deception and underhandedness, and Orthios had already lost too many men to their treacherous schemes since House Orlock had undercut the Delaque and squeezed them out of their trade agreement with the affluent Noble House of Ko'iron.

Behind him, Orthios's comrades shifted uneasily, adjusting their red bandanas and checking their weapons noisily to indicate their own distrust.

'It is no trick,' replied Krelyn evenly, holding Orthios's eyes with her own but concentrating on the movements of the other gangers in her peripheral vision. Under her cloak, her right hand rested lighdy on the stock of her laspistol. 'I want to be here even less than you want me here,' she continued honestly. 'But, since the Delaque are no longer the allies of House Ko'iron, I am left in something of a predicament when it comes to choosing my friends.'

'I did not know that the Noble House retained the services of any of you after the transferral of the contract,' said Orthios, releasing Krelyn's medallion and taking a step back, dragging the teeth of his chainsword along the metal floor.

'Just me, I'm afraid,' conceded Krelyn, her left hand ready at the hilt of a blade in a holster on her lower back. 'My oath was already taken, and Prince Jurod would not release me from it. It seems that he thought I could perform functions that his new Orlock lackeys could not,' The insult was a calculated risk - the Snake Charmers would be even more suspicious if she pretended to be nice.

Orthios hefted his chainsword into the air and it spluttered to life, sending a thin drizzle of blood splattering across the floor towards Krelyn. It was old blood, dark and coagulated, presumably left over from the last time the sword had been used. Then the whirring died and Orthios dropped the blade back against his shoulder. With a broad grin, he stepped forward and slapped Krelyn on arm.

'Well, my venator friend, what brings you down from the airy splendour of the Spire?' As he spoke, he slipped his arm around Krelyn's shoulders and led her off towards the irregularly shaped table at the other side of the room. Even through her inexplicable cloak, Orthios could feel the tension

in Krelyn's knotted shoulders. 'Come, come, relax,' he said with a slighdy forced laugh. You are amongst friends here.'

The other gangers followed their leader at a safe distance, circling around the table to take up positions on the far side as Orthios pulled out a chair for their guest. The table was a torn and jagged sheet of adamantium, presumably it had been ripped out of some other structure and then brought to this gang house as a temporary expedient. Krelyn studied the pockmarked surface as she sat down, wondering whether things had really got so bad for the Snake Charmers that they had to use waste material for their tables. Perhaps they were not doing so well in the war against her Delaque.

Orthios sat opposite and spread his palms flat against the table, as though to demonstrate that there was no weapon in them. For a moment he sat in silence, drumming his fingers against the metal as the rest of his comrades sat down. Krelyn watched him carefully, letting the others move around her peripheral vision, confident that she could deal with anything that the table might hide. She watched Orthios's fingers tapping out a syncopated rhythm and wished that he would stop, but then she noticed something else. Narrowing her eyes, her visor clicked up the magnification and Orthios's fingertips seemed to zoom towards her face. Underneath them, subject to the repeated pummelling of his dirty finger nails, Krelyn saw the red snake of House Delaque etched into the adamantium.

The tension dropped out of her shoulders and she allowed herself to relax for the first time. Orthios smiled at her across the table, realising that she had finally seen what he had wanted her to see. He nodded, returning her insult with firm good humour - Ko'iron's new Orlock allies were easily a match for its former Delaque lackeys.

She returned the nod, grateful that they had reached an understanding without bloodshed.

'If you are all sitting comfortably, gentlemen, I shall begin,' said Krelyn, shuffling the story of Curator Tyranus and his book into an abbreviated form in her mind.

'BUT YOUR PASS says that you are CC9FB2, Curator Tyranus,' said the tubby provisor in the HPO. Zefer couldn't tell whether the man was sitting down or not, since his roughly spherical shape seemed to betray nothing of his posture behind the desk. 'It looks to me as though somebody simply crossed out your number and then wrote in another one. Why should I believe that you are, in fact, CCA04 as you claim?'

Zefer clenched his jaw. 'I don't see why it should matter to you what my number is, provisor,' he said. 'I, for example, care not what my number is, only that I am Zefer Tyranus, curator of the Historical Research Section on a mission for Her Excellency the Princess Gwentria, Matriarchal Heir to the Ancient and Glorious House of Ko'iron. That is what is important. The number is not.' Zefer spoke with a flat hope born of resignation.

The provisor moved towards the edge of his desk, which led Zefer to conclude that he had probably been standing up until this point. His head was bowed and his hands were clasped behind his back. 'I can see your point, Curator Tyranus, but you must also understand mine.' At that, the squat provisor looked up at Zefer as though he were about to relate something far more important than anything that Zefer himself had just said. Yet again, Zefer was slightly taken aback by the complete lack of impact that his mission appeared to have on the officials of House Ko'iron.

'You see, whilst I can understand that your identity as Curator Zefer Tyranus is the most important thing to you personally - since you *are* Curator Tyranus himself - you must try to appreciate that it makes no difference to me in any way at all who you actually *are*, but only who you are *to me*. This, I think, is true of all human relations, and not just those of a professional nature such as we are encountering today. And the fact of the matter remains that *to me* you are CC9FB2, and there are no provisions allocated for you here.' As he spoke, the round little man paced backwards and forwards behind his desk, bouncing his clasped hands off the small of his back.

'I can appreciate your position, provisor...' Zefer trailed off as he realised how much more effective his arguments would be if he knew the names of the people he was talking to. That, he realised suddenly, was probably why the plaques on the desks of senior officials only ever showed their titles. 'If, as you say, it is really of no consequence to you who I am and only who I am to you, could we not proceed from this point as though I had not

showed you a paper pass at all and begin our relationship again from the start?'

The provisor stopped pacing for a moment, apparently thinking about Zefer's question. His smooth, sweaty brow wrinkled for a moment, and ffien he reached a decision. "Very well,' he said. 'I see no reason why not.'

'Excellent, thank you,' replied Zefer, eager to press on before the little man's brain caught up with events. 'Hello provisor. I am Curator Zefer Tyranus of the Historical Research Section on a mission for the Princess Gwentria herself. She has given me the number CCA04 and instructed me to collect supplies from you. I'm afraid that I have lost my paper pass.'

'I see. Welcome CCA04. Let me just check and see whether there is anything for you,' said the provisor formally, turning sharply from his desk and bobbing off through the door behind it. A few moments later, he returned.

'No, CCA04,1 am afraid that there is nothing here for you.'

'What?' cried Zefer, slapping his palm to his forehead in disbelief. 'What? If there wasn't anything here for CCA04 either, why did we have to go through all this?'

'As I believe I explained,' said the provisor, upset by Zefer's manner, 'I am obliged to follow correct procedure here, and I could not check for items for CCA04 until CCA04 turned up to ask for them. Only a moment ago, you were CC9FB2, so you can understand my reluctance to divulge any such information at that time. I'm sure that you would do no less, curator. Besides, I still don't really believe that you are CCA04 at all.'

'If you don't believe me, does that mean that you're not really telling me the truth about whether there are any supplies for me?' asked Zefer, exasperated.

'As far as I am concerned, I can honestly tell you that there are no supplies for you here,' said the provisor carefully. You might try the Wall Provisions Office. If your mission is likely to take you through the Wall, that is probably where your supplies would have been sent.'

Zefer just stared at the near-spherical man. Then, without saying a word, he turned and walked out of the HPO, trudging slowly towards the edge of the Ko'iron district, the Wall and the Spiral Gates that led down into Hive City. He was exhausted already, and he hadn't even left home yet. In an

attempt to cheer himself up, he told himself that things could only get better.

SPIRAL GATES

A CHORUS OF candles flickered around the perimeter of the room, filling the space with dancing shadows and ribbons of warm light. The orange flames bounced off the dull metal walls, as though their lives were diminished with each reflection, leaving the room in virtual darkness despite the hundreds of points of light.

Kneeling in the centre of the floor with his unmasked face raised in rapture at the image of the Undying Emperor that hung from the ceiling before him, glowing as though ablaze, Triar muttered his silent prayers while his blue eyes twinkled in the flickering light. Spread on the floor under his knees were the charred and burnt remains of his cloak, giving off the faint stench of ruin.

There was a hiss from the far corner of the room, as though a snake were tasting the air. Triar inclined his head slightly to the side, but did not look round. Even if he had, he would not have been able to see the cloaked venator standing motionless in the deep shadows beyond the ring of candles, with his light-absorbent cloak wrapped securely around him.

'You're late,' whispered Triar, returning his attention to the icon of the Emperor.

There was a faint shuffling sound, as though the cloaked man had shifted his balance in discomfort or self-consciousness. 'It has been a busy day,' he breathed, not really making an excuse, just stating the facts.

'Indeed it has, Curion. And an interesting one,' said Triar, keeping his eyes fixed on the holy relic. 'Your information about the Escher witch and her Coven was sound, but you failed to warn me of the danger.'

'It is the information that you pay me for. Your security is not my responsibility,' came the sibilant reply. 'I understand that your gangers did not exactly excel themselves,' continued the voice from the shadows, taunting a little.

'What do you want, Venator Curion?' asked Triar, his patience breaking along with his concentration on the idol.

'I thought I was late, sire,' mocked Curion, stepping out of the shadows and into the flickering light of the Redemptionist shrine. 'I should rather ask you what you want.' The candlelight lapped against his cloak, which seemed to absorb it like a sponge soaking up water. Even as he walked towards the kneeling figure of Triar in the centre of the chamber, Curion remained merely the suggestion of a presence in the room.

Triar ignored the Delaque wit. 'Of course you should,' he replied, straightening his knees and rising to his feet. As he turned casually to face in the direction of Curion's voice, he was startled to discover the venator standing direcdy before him. The red snake tattooed below his dark visor seemed to writhe in the candlelight.

'I have no fear that anything the heretics say contains even the tiniest iota of truth,' began Triar, affecting nonchalance by picking up his blackened, crumbling cloak, brushing it down and folding it into a bundle. 'However, it is easier for the righteous agents of the Emperor to combat the evils of heresy if they are properly informed about their activities.'

'I quite understand,' replied the venator, aware of the importance of sound intelligence. His tone retained an edge of mockery, betraying the fact that he found the Cawdor's devotion to the Cult of Redemption faintly ridiculous. He knew that Triar was aware of his attitude, but he prided himself on the knowledge that his employer needed his services more than he desired his soul.

'If that witch Elria thinks that she has found some evidence that the Undying Emperor was a woman, I need to know what this so-called evidence might be. Of course, I have no fear that it is false, but the power of information only rarely lies in its truth or falsehood,' explained Triar.

Curion watched the Salvationist's leader speak, and nodded, smiling at the redundancy of much of what he said. 'I am sure that you are right,' he said reassuringly.

You would be more sure, venator, if you embraced the truth of Redemption yourself,' snapped Triar, catching the amusement in Curion's tone. His blue eyes shone brightly in the dark room as he stared into the other's visor.

'Belief is not a condition of true service,' countered Curion. They had had this conversation numerous times before. 'You appear to be confusing belief with payment, sire.'

Fixing a smile onto his face, Triar reached into a pouch on his belt and removed a clutch of tiny gems. 'I am not confused, Curion, but neither am I naive,' he said as he handed the stones to the venator.

AS THE MAN tripped, the tray slipped out of his hands and the glasses went flying. He collapsed heavily to the ground, crashing down onto his face in a pool of red liquid and broken glass. A chorale of laughter erupted around him and he staggered back to his feet, blood trickling down his face from the fresh cuts. An extra bout of hilarity greeted him as he spat out a tooth and then scrambled about on the floor trying to retrieve it.

'Where's my drink?' mocked Jermina, tripping the man back into the pool of alcohol and blood. She planted her boot onto his back as he lay prostrate in the puddle, thrashing his limbs around like a floundering fish.

'S-so-so sorry,' spluttered the man, dribbling spittle and blood as he straggled to breath under Jermina's weight.

'Let him go, Jermina,' called Elria. She was leaning on the metal railing around the balcony, watching the preparations for the gang's expedition in the hall below. From the floor, her gangers looked up at her in surprise.

'I need a drink myself,' she said, vaulting off the balcony and landing into a crouch next to the prone servant. 'If we kill all the men in the house, there will be nobody left to bring us drinks.'

The rest of the women laughed, and Jermina lifted her foot off the hapless servant, who pulled himself up onto his knees and crawled towards Elria's feet. As he reached his hands out to grasp her ankles, Elria stepped back, making him overbalance and fall back onto his face.

'I am not forgiving you, slave, I am simply saving you,' she said without pity as a pulse of chuckles rippled around the hall. 'You may yet live to wish that I had not.' As she spoke, her blue dreadlocks seemed to wave and animate all by themselves, as though thirsting for the blood that oozed from the man's face.

'Now, go and get a fresh set of drinks!' said Jermina, prodding the man in the ribs with the tip of her boot.

Without a word, the man dragged himself to his feet and executed a drab and exhausted bow, streams of blood and drink spilling over his body. Then he turned and limped pathetically out of the hall, prodded and poked by each of The Coven's gangers as he passed them.

'Are we ready to go?' asked Elria, turning her attention back to Jermina and gesturing around the jumbled space of the hall.

'Very nearly, mistress,' bowed Jermina, suddenly serious and formal as she noticed the snaking patterns being defined by the boss's hair. That was never a good sign.

The hall was a mess of half packed crates and kitbags. There were weapons strewn over the top of everything, and some were still stored neatly in their racks against the dirty grey walls. Elria's yellow and red banner was draped colourfully down the wall at the end of the hall, fluttering constantly in the drafts that eased through the cracks in the wall behind it. Hanging off the balcony, which swept around three sides of the hall - the fourth, having collapsed years before, sported the banner -were red bandanas and blue cloaks tinged with blood.

There was a jagged hole in the roof, through which trickled a persistent cascade of green water. It collected into a shallow, mouldy fountain in the hall, in which stood a cracked statue of a man lying in submission before a muscular woman with an axe. Her left arm had been broken off long ago, but it had once held the end of a chain that led to a collar around the man's neck.

Elria's eyes lingered on the statue for a moment. She was proud of her family lineage. Neither The Coven nor even House Escher itself may have the documents, histories and librariums of those effete, naval-gazing Noble Houses up in the Spire, but they had long and glorious histories to match any of them. House Escher even surpassed them, she thought, since only Escher was of pure constitution. She didn't need books and monuments to tell her such obvious things. The knowledge was in her blood.

History only had significance if it gave her power in the present, and the strength of her arm was thus testament to her superior history. Let any man walk into Elria's hall without an army, and she would have him on his face in a pool of his own blood.

It seemed blatantly obvious to her: if an Undying Emperor, or whatever those ridiculous Redemptionists called it, ever really walked the surface of Necromunda, that Emperor must have been a woman. She could feel it in her blood, just as certainly as that servant could feel his inferiority in the blood he left coagulating on the metal deck.

And then her informant had come to her with whisperings of a piece of archeotech, hidden in the depths of the Underhive, an artefact that might prove to the weak willed Redemptionists, to Triar's pathetic Salvationist gang, and to the ridiculous Noble Houses that He was in reality a She. It was pathetic that anyone would require proof, as though Elria's own strength were not proof enough. But proof could open a lot of doors, perhaps even the great Spiral Gates themselves, and Elria was not so entrapped by the power of violence that she did not occasionally dream of the fresh air and natural light enjoyed by the feeble unworthies on the other side of the Wall. If nothing else, material proof would certainly devastate that irritating, pompous Salvationist gang leader, Triar; it would be worth an expedition into the Underhive just to see the expression on his face when she came back with the artefact.

A flutter of motion snapped Elria out of her reverie. Without a moment's hesitation, she slid her favourite blades out of their fixings in her hair as she took three skipping steps backwards. Warned by the alert of their leader, the rest of the gangers snatched up weapons from the floor and racked them purposefully, their aim focussed on the position that Elria had just vacated.

Plummeting down from the rough hole in the ceiling was a solitary, cloaked figure. Its arms were outstretched into the shape of a cross; the corners of the voluminous cape were caught in the figure's hands, and it ballooned up like a parachute, slowing the figure's descent.

With a solid, metallic thud, the dropping figure hit the ground in the middle of the hall, its cloak draped evenly around it, hiding the crouched body completely. The gangers fanned out in a ring around the intruder, unsure of whether it had survived the fall, with their weapons trained on the impossibly black fabric of the cape.

'Mistress Elria,' came a female voice from under the folds of the cloak. 'I bring news from the Spire.' The figure unfolded itself from the ground, standing to face the Coven's leader and executing a curt bow.

With a signal from Elria, the gangers relaxed their weapons.

'We are about to depart, Venator Orphae. Your timing is... dramatic,' said Elria, choosing her words thoughtfully.

'You will want to hear this news before you leave, mistress,' replied the cloaked agent.

Elria looked into Orphae's face and tried to interpret her expression. The dark Delaque visors made it almost impossible to judge their emotions, and Elria often wondered whether they actually had any. This was not the first time that Elria had wished that her spy worked for something other than profit - Orphae was a powerful and skilled woman. She should be an Escher.

"Will I, indeed?' replied Elria, taking a couple of steps forward and pressing a cluster of crystals into Orphae's cupped hand. She knew better than to doubt Orphae's word. 'Do tell.'

'No, THERE is definitely nothing here for CCA04,' said the provisor in the Ko'iron Wall Provisions Office. She was clearly growing agitated by all of Zefer's questions, and his insistence that there should be equipment waiting for him.

'Are you quite sure?' asked Zefer again. 'What about CC9FB2?'

'Even if there were equipment for that number, I would not expect it to appear for the next year or two. The last person to receive provisions from us was... let me see...' The provisor rummaged through a giant filing cabinet at the back of the little room, trying to be helpful. She was a huge woman, and the massive cabinet looked decided fragile as she rifled through it. The scene was comical, reflected Zefer, as he recalled the tiny little man in the huge HPO and overlaid the memory atop this giant woman in the tiny little KWPO.

'Ah, yes, here it is,' bellowed the provisor. 'CC5A1. That was the last person. A mistress Thelda Grundark. Oh, it seems that she never turned up to collect her things,' continued the woman with a scarily broad smile.

'I think that she probably died before she could get here,' said Zefer with feeling, thinking back to the old lady who had collapsed as she left the offices of Princess Gwentria.

'Oh dear, well I wish that somebody had told me. I could have thrown this file away. The Emperor knows that it is hard enough to keep this place tidy without redundant files cluttering the place up,' As she spoke, she

tugged the file out of the cabinet and flung it into a gaping waste-shoot in the wall next to her. Turning to make her way back to the little desk, the monstrous woman tripped on the corner of the cabinet and lurched forward. As she fell, she twisted around and grabbed hold of the huge filing cabinet, which upended and crashed down on top of her.

Zefer rushed round the little desk to help the woman out from under the weight, ignoring her protestations that he was not authorised to be on that side of the provisor's desk. He leant his shoulder against the bulk of the filing cabinet and pushed his weight at it, fearing that he might be too weak to shift it. However, almost as soon as he touched it, it slid freely off the woman and smashed onto the floor next to her. All of the drawers opened in a cacophony of clatter, but nothing fell out. It was completely empty.

'No no, you mustn't be over here,' bellowed the woman, clambering back onto her feet and shoving Zefer roughly back to the other side of the desk. Once she was satisfied that he was safely back where he should be, she turned and picked up the filing cabinet all by herself and stood it back in the corner.

'That's empty!' cried Zefer, still trying to process the new information.

'Yes, it is now!' retorted the provisor triumphantly, brushing herself down after her tumble. 'Now that somebody has told me about CC5A1.'

'So, are you saying that nobody has any provisions waiting for them here?'

'Not on this side of the Wall, no,' replied the woman, apparently pleased to be of help.

'Not on this side of the Wall?' queried Zefer, unsure what the provisor might be referring to.

'Yes,' explained the huge woman, leaning forward against the desk and buckling its legs slightly. 'There is another provisions office on the other side of the Wall. The Hive City WPO. It is much bigger and busier than this one, of course. There's not much call for provisions for people *leaving* the Spire, curator. People don't tend to want to do that. But everyone wants to come up here, for some reason.'

'I see. So, are you saying that my paperwork and provisions are likely to be waiting for me on the other side?' asked Zefer tentatively.

'It is certainly possible.'

'Can you check?'

'No. No, I can't check for you, I'm afraid. You see, I am not authorised to pass through the Spiral Gates, and the people who work in the WPO on the other side are certainly not authorised to come up into the Spire. They don't let just anyone through, you know. Or rather,' she added, correcting herself, 'they don't let just anyone into the Spire. Provisors and messengers are not significant enough to be granted access, you see. If I went to check for you, I wouldn't be able to come back again. You'll be fine going down, curator, if you want to go and check the other office for yourself.'

'I see,' said Zefer, trying to understand the logic of what he had just been told. You're saying that they'll let me through into Hive City. Will they also let me come back again?'

When you collect your provisions and paperwork from the WPO, you'll have the correct pass to grant you readmission,' said the provisor simply. 'Besides, didn't you say that your mission was to go down, not up?'

'IT IS NOT only The Coven that is interested in the rumours of this artefact,' reported Curion, tucking the gem stones into a fold in his tunic. 'There is also talk of it amongst the Noble Houses of the Spire. In particular, House Ko'iron has dispatched an agent through the Wall on a mission to retrieve the archeotech.'

'I know better than to ask you how you know this, Curion,' said Triar, gazing into the flickering flame of a candle. 'But it is indeed interesting news. Where is this agent now?'

'I passed her as she made her way through the Wall. When she emerged into the Hive City, she headed for the compound of Orthios and his Snake Charmers.' The venator made the report formally, careful not to betray any emotion at the mention of the gang who had wrenched the Ko'iron Contract from his own Delaque brothers.

At the mention of the Snake Charmers, Triar raised his eyes, wishing not for the first time that he could see Curion's eyes behind his visor. Instead, he could see merely his own reflection, iridescent in the inconstant candlelight.

The feud between the Houses of Delaque and Orlock and their various gangs was no secret, and Triar was not keen to get involved in the wars of

other people. He had enough wars of his own to fight. He had never had reason to doubt the information provided by Curion before, but he was always a little cautious when the information had something to do with Curion's gang-masters in the shadowy House of Delaque. The venator may have been in the employ of The Salvationists for the time being, but Triar was not so naive as to believe that a fist full of jewels would compromise his loyalty to his own house, at the end of the day. Curion was useful, but he was a heretic, after all.

'Do you know the details of her mission?' asked Triar, sidestepping the issue of the Snake Charmers for the time being. 'If you know where she is going, then we will have no need for her, and thus no need to enter into a costly conflict with your Orlock friends.'

'I do not know where she is going,' confessed Curion.

'No, I supposed that you would not,' said Triar with a wry smile.

'However, I also suspect that she does not really know where she is going either,' continued Curion, not rising to the bait. 'She was dispatched after a scholar found reference to the archeotech in an old book in the house librarium. I saw the tome myself, but it was almost impossible to understand. I do not believe that the Ko'iron agent would understand any more of it than myself.'

'So, of what use is she?' asked Triar, raising an eyebrow.

'As I understand it, she is charged with ensuring the success of the mission of another; the scholar himself is to be sent on an acquisitions mission. She may yet prove to be an obstacle to you, if you were interested in acquiring the services of that scholar,' explained Curion.

'I see,' responded Triar, nodding in some amusement at Curion's attempt to keep the information focussed on Orthios's gang. The venator was right, however, that the scholar might be able to help him get to the artefact before the heretic witch, Elria. 'And where is this scholar, of which you speak?'

'His movements have been rather erratic. He appears to be quite skilled in the arts of subterfuge and I have not been able to follow him. I thought it more important to bring you news of the heretic currently being harboured by the Snake Charmers. I am sure that the scholar has not yet passed through the Spiral Gates, but certain that he will do so soon.'

'Then we must prepare a welcome for our honoured guest,' smiled Triar, blowing out the candle and sweeping out of the prayer chamber.

'THERE HAVE BEEN some interesting developments, mistress,' reported Orphae as Elria sank deeply into the cushions on her tarnished throne, below the great banner of her gang. The rest of the gangers had dispersed around the hall, taking up positions within earshot of their leader, reclining across the half-packed kitbags that littered the ground.

The man-servant, or mavant as the Escher were wont to call all men, had returned to the hall with a fresh tray of drinks. His face had been cleaned up, but there were still traces of blood speckled down his sparse clothing. He was walking very carefully, picking his way between the gangers and their kit, trying his best not to be noticed. As he knelt before Elria and extended the tray, his arms trembled so much that the glasses clinked together repeatedly.

'Drink?' asked Elria, directing her question to Orphae but keeping her amused eyes on the tremulous man at her feet.

'No. No, thank you,' replied the venator. Orphae was also watching the subservience of the mavant, but the eyes hidden behind her visor were not filled with amusement. She had never understood the Escher's utter disdain for men but, more than that, she had never been able to work out what sort of man would allow himself to be treated in this way. In fairness, there were hardly any men who would associate themselves with this gang; most held a special place in their hearts for the hate they felt towards the Escher. But this man, this *movant* - how had he come to be a slave of the Escher?.

The gang leader lent forward off her throne and snatched two glasses off the tray, throwing the liquid from one straight to the back of her throat and smashing the glass onto the floor. She slipped the stem of the second glass between her fingers and swirled the red liquid playfully, whispering something that only the mavant could hear.

'What developments?' she asked, reclining back into the throne and pushing the mavant away with the sole of her foot. He scurried off, with relief dropping off him like perspiration.

'The curator who discovered the new pages appears to be in the process of leaving the Spire,' reported the venator, bowed on one knee to the side of the throne.

'And where is this woman going?' asked Elria, toying absently with her drink.

'The curator is a man, mistress,' corrected Orphae, wincing slightly.

'I see,' Elria downed her drink and threw the glass across the hall towards the mavant, who was serving the other gangers on his hands and knees.

'I am not sure where he is going, but I suspect that he has been sent by the Ko'iron elders to retrieve the archeotech, of which we have already spoken,' continued Orphae.

'He is aware, I presume, of the significance of the artefact?' asked Elria, curious to know why a man would want to discover an artefact that proved that the Emperor was a woman.

'For him, mistress, the archeotech will show that House Ko'iron was here right from the foundations of Hive Primus. Just as it is inconsequential to you that the woman in question may have been a Ko'iron, so it is inconsequential to him that the Ko'iron lineage is matriarchal,' explained Orphae, not relishing the prospect of a debate on gender politics with an Escher gang leader. She realised that Elria had interpreted her account of the content of the lost pages to mean that the artefact would show that the Emperor himself was this Ko'iron woman, which was not quite what she (or the book, she presumed) had meant. 'The significance for us,' she continued, trying to steer the subject back round to the matter at hand, 'is that he is likely to know where to look. As I told you before, the *Paradoxes of the Spire* made little sense to me - he is our best hope,'

Elria shook her head in disappointment. She had heard a great deal about the Noble House of Ko'iron, and she had secretly held out the hope that it was a potential ally of the Escher. It was currently one of the only genuinely matriarchal institutions in the Hive, outside those of the Escher themselves. However, it seemed that she had overestimated their political convictions. But, as Orphae had implied, House Ko'iron's motivations were irrelevant. Weeks before, Orphae had related the book's account of a time in the ancient past, before Hive Primus was the monstrosity that it had since become, when 'a powerful woman walked at the foundations' of

Necromunda. Orphae had tried to suggest that this woman was the Ko'iron martriarch, standing at the Emperor's side, but Elria knew in her soul that this woman was the Emperor herself.

'Then we must find this mavant, Orphae.'

'Things are not quite so simple, mistress. I have reason to believe that an agent of House Ko'iron has already descended into the realm of Orthios's Orlock gang, the Snake Charmers. We should assume that she will be seeking the aid of Ko'iron's new allies.' Orphae's voice was low and earnest, but Elria could not help but laugh.

'I see!' she joked. 'So, you would have us attack the Snake Charmers?' Elria was well aware of the Delaque's distaste for House Ko'iron's new allies.

'I am merely a source of information, mistress, not of strategy. You must do with this information whatever you see fit,' demurred the venator, bowed with her face hidden.

'Has this scholar yet come through the Spiral Gates?' asked Elria, beckoning to the mavant for another drink.

'No, mistress. Not yet.'

DESPITE THE FACT that they were the most massive structures that he had ever seen in his life, Zefer stumbled across the Spiral Gates without at first noticing them. He had never been that far from the Ko'iron precinct before, and everything was a wonder to him as he walked through the wide, pristine, statue-lined boulevards.

The streets themselves were paved with marble, and the colonnades stretched magnificently into an only barely visible ceiling. Bright lamps burnt on elegantly twisting poles, filling the wide spaces with brilliant light, which bounced and reflected gloriously off all the marble structures. People thronged through the arcades and pergolas, dressed in luxuriant, plush fabrics, bustling with colour and fragrant with exotic toxins.

Zefer had stumbled through the sights in a blur of amazement, spinning on his heels as each successive beauty passed him by. He was in a spell, enchanted by the sights and sounds of the Spire that he had hardly even noticed whilst cooped up in the dusty seclusion of the Ko'iron librarium, glorious as that was. If anything, these avenues and concourses leading to

the Spiral Gates were even more magnificent than Gwen-tria's Palace, which had been majestic beyond Zefer's wildest dreams.

Before he had even thought about finding his bearings, Zefer was standing in the middle of a vast piazza, gazing back down the grand Helmawr Boulevard, along which he had just drifted. The crowds were thinner in the huge open space, and they got sparser as Zefer backed his way further into it, gazing back along the regal splendour of the boulevard as he went. At the end of the boulevard, at the point where it spilt into the plaza like a great river into the ocean, rose a fifty metre tall statue of Lord Gerontius Helmawr himself, Guardian of Necromunda in the Holy Name of the Undying Emperor.

While he had been strolling in Helmawr Boulevard itself, Zefer had not even noticed the huge statue. But now, walking backwards through the grand piazza and staring back along that street into the Spire, Lord Gerontius seemed to tower over the scene and dominate the vista, his long sword brandished heroically in the air. The shadow of the great man lay across the resplendent scene behind him like a veil over the face of a bride.

Taking another step back as he gazed forward, Zefer's heel crunched into something behind him. He lost his balance immediately, his arms flapping wildly at his sides as he fought against his own momentum, trying to lift his body on wings that he didn't have. But his efforts were futile and he fell, succeeding only in twisting his body around so that he fell straight onto his face.

Still lying on the flagstones, with blood trickling out of his broken nose onto the white rock, Zefer lifted his head and, through the blur of pain-induced tears, he saw the Spiral Gates for the first time. He was barely ten metres away from them.

The arched double-gates rose nearly one hundred metres into the air, supported by vast golden hinges on each side. Their surface gleamed with spiralling pillars of silver and gold, each intertwined with the other into a single, giant plait. Where the threads of precious metal wove together, there were gemstones inset into the structure to fill the gaps. The light that poured out of the Spire crashed against the glorious gates in explosions of colour and blinding brilliance, as though a dazzling star had been harnessed into the structure of the Wall.

Zefer lay prostrate on the ground, with blood gushing out of his nose and tears running down his cheeks, staring at the most incredible sight he had ever seen, almost forgetting to breath.

'Oi! You can't bleed there. You'll stain the marble.' Something was prodding him in the ribs.

'Oi, you! You can't bleed there. Are you deaf? Get up.' The prodding became more insistent and then it was suddenly replaced by hands that gripped his shoulders and dragged him to his feet.

What's wrong with you?' said the guard. It was not a question.

'I'm... I tripped,' said Zefer, still gazing at the gates. 'Are those the Spiral Gates?' As soon as he said the words he felt stupid.

Yep, that's them,' said the guard, apparently not noticing the inanity of the question.

'They're... they're breathtaking,' managed Zefer, wiping the blood from his nose with his sleeve, and then wincing in pain as the broken cartilage ground against his nose-bridge.

'Yep, they're pretty nice,' replied the guard, nodding.

Are you one of the guards?' asked Zefer, finally looking at the man. He was shorter than Zefer, but broader in the shoulders. He wore ceremonial armour that might have been made of gold, on top of a green under-tunic. Around his shoulder he had slung a brown leather satchel. By far his most prominent feature was the good natured smile that creased his face from one ear to the other.

Yep, I'm the guard,' replied the guard.

'*The* guard?' queried Zefer, looking around for the others,

'That's right. Until Hedred get's here in a couple of hours, that is. I'm the afternoon guard, you see,' he explained earnestly.

'I see,' replied Zefer, not quite sure that he did. 'Listen, I'm not being rude or anything, but I thought that the Spiral Gates were... well, well guarded.'

'Oh yes, I see, sir,' said the guard, not at all insulted. 'Thank you, sir.'

'No, no,' said Zefer, conscious that he was making himself understood. 'I rather thought that there'd be more of you.'

'No need, sir,' said the guard cheerfully. 'Nobody ever wants to go through the gates from this side,' he added, laughing happily. 'Now, if you

were on the other side, sir, that would be a different matter entirely. There's *lots* of guards on that side. *Lots*.'

'I see,' replied Zefer, looking around. The guard appeared to be right. The piazza was virtually empty on this side, with nobody at all near the gates themselves. 'So, if I wanted to go through the gates, would I have to talk to you about it?'

'I'd say you should talk to a doctor about it!' laughed the guard good naturedly. Then he stopped laughing. 'You serious, sir?'

'Yes.'

'Well then, sir, you'd better come with me,' said the guard, a smart formality snapping into his manner as he turned and marched off towards the side of the gates.

CUT INTO THE adamantium of the Wall itself, hidden behind one of the huge pillars that supported the great golden hinges of the Spiral Gates themselves, was a tiny, buckled and patched cast-metal door.

'You'd better go through there, sir,' said the guard, indicating the little door. We never open the big ones.'

'I see,' said Zefer, adjusting his nose and peering at the incongruously shabby metal. 'And when I come back, do I come back through here too?'

'No, sir. People coming up into the Spire go through the Spiral Gates themselves, sir,' said the guard, puffing out his chest proudly.

'But, didn't you just say that you never open those gates?'

'That's right, sir,' nodded the guard affirmatively.

'I see.'

The guard pulled an oversized key from his satchel and stooped down to slot it into the keyhole in the little door. 'You're sure, sir?'

Zefer just nodded wordlessly, clenching his jaw and exhaling through his nose in an attempt to muster his courage. The key clicked round in the lock with a resounding clunk making him start abruptly, his nerves suddenly shot.

A wave of sound crashed against the little door, literally blowing it open and sending the guard staggering back under the force. He stood there braced against the door as the torrent of sound funnelled through the tiny hole in the Wall. The sounds of heavy machinery pounded through the gap,

punctuated by yells and screams of hundreds of voices. Zefer swayed weakly in the onslaught, feeling slightly nauseous.

'Well? Are you going or not?' yelled the guard, struggling to make himself heard over the din.

Zefer stared through the doorway, tasting the squalid stench of stale air that blew out of the darkness of the tunnel beyond. The noise was deafening - louder than anything he had ever heard in the Spire. He turned his head to look back into the unspeakable beauty of the piazza, with the towering statue of Lord Gerontius glaring down at him. And he shook his head in disbelief at what he was about to do.

'Yes,' he said resolutely, ducking down into the doorway. 'I'm going,' And he went.

THE TUNNEL THROUGH the Wall grew noisier, smellier, narrower and lower as it progressed, until it finally terminated in a metal grille, no more than a metre square. Zefer dragged himself towards it on his elbows, pulling his body along behind him like a dead weight. He pressed his face up against the grille and peered out.

All he could see in front of the exit was a row of unmoving, dirty black boots but the most unholy cacophony that Zefer had ever heard was emanating from the other side. He coughed politely, waiting for somebody to notice him. Then he called out. Then he shouted, trying to make himself heard above the din. Finally, gripping hold of the grille with his fingers and lifting his face as high as he could, he screamed.

One pair of boots twisted round and came towards the grille. After a few moments, a face came down from above them and peered into the tunnel.

'By the Emperor!' said the grimy, scarred face of the guardsman. 'What in the world are you doing there?'

'I'd like to get out, if you please,' said Zefer, wide-eyed with excitement and fear.

'I'll bet you would... sir.' The guard added the last word as though he had dredged it up from the furthest recesses of his memory. 'Hold on a sec. I'm not sure that I have the key. Oh, no, here it is,' he said as he slipped it into the rusty lock. 'I've just never had the call to use it before, see... sir.'

The guardsman played with the lock for a little while, trying to get the old mechanism to work. In the end he just smashed it off with the butt of his gun and swung the grille open.

'Come on out, then,' he said in a friendly tone.

Zefer climbed out of the little hole in the Wall and clambered to his feet, finding himself behind a line of armed guardsmen that stretched as far as his eyes could see in both directions. The guard who had let him through had already slammed the grille shut and jammed a huge padlock into place.

Looking over to his right, Zefer could see the back of the Spiral Gates, dirty and pockmarked, but with tiny flecks of shiny metal glinting here and there. Before them a full scale riot was in progress, with hundreds of people pressing into the little open space that served as a plaza. The momentum of the crowd pushed towards the gates, but the guardsmen in front of them had their weapons drawn, and they were laying down a constant stream of fire into the crowd, felling row after row of screaming rioters. The line of guards was three men deep, so that they could rotate as the front line began to run low on ammunition. The plaza was in chaos, with guardsmen and rioters hacking at each other with machetes and bludgeoning with pipes, leaving growing numbers of dead bodies to mount into piles before the gates.

'What's going on?' shouted Zefer to the guard next to him, horrified.

What? What do you mean?' yelled the guard, leaning his mouth right up to Zefer's ear to make sure that he would hear.

'This... this riot,' said Zefer, not really sure what to call it as he waved his arm vaguely at the mass of violence in front of the gates.

'Oh, that,' replied the guard, nodding casually. 'Yeah, it's quiet today. Welcome to Hive City... sir.'

THE HC

THE DOOR HISSED shut behind him, dulling the cacophony of the riot outside, but not silencing it completely. As he stood in the doorway, stooped in concentration, brushing the soot and dirt from his robes, Zefer muttered to himself in disbelief. He mumbled and shook his head from side to side, his eyes bulging hysterically as he obsessively patted down the torn, stained fabric of his curator's robes. Fixating on one spot where the threads had worn through and a dull red stain had bled out into the cloth, Zefer scrubbed and scrubbed with his fingers, spitting over and over again. But it hurt when he scrubbed and the red stain seemed to grow rather than shrink. Peering even more closely, almost bending double to bring his face within centimetres of his knee, he saw that the stain was actually his bloodied kneecap, and that there was simply a large hole in the material of his robe, with its edges stuck into the coagulated blood around the wound.

Zefer just stared at his skinless knee, and tears started to well up in his eyes. It was all just too much for him. First there had been the excitement of his discoveries in *The Paradoxes of the Spire*, and then there had been all the furore about getting somebody to acknowledge his discoveries. He had been all the way up to the throne room of Princess Gwentria's palace, and then had even come down through the Wall into Hive City. And what a place this was. Over the last few weeks, he had hardly slept at all and, now that he was here, with a riot blazing in the corpse-strewn plaza outside, events were finally catching up with him. Only three weeks ago, the most exciting moment of his life had been spending seven extra minutes reading a book in the librarium.

What am I doing here? he thought, as he collapsed into a crumpled heap on the floor, with tears cutting trails of cleanliness down his grime-encrusted face.

What are you doing here?'

It took Zefer several seconds to realise that the voice was not in his head.

Slowly, he lifted his face from the floor and looked up towards the source of the voice, still slumped on his hands and knees. For the first time, he realised that he was in a long, narrow waiting room. There were seats running the lengths of both sides, each one occupied by progressively less sanitary-looking people. At the far end, perhaps eighty metres away, was a single counter that ran across the width of the room. Leaning on it from behind was a firmly muscled figure of indeterminate gender. Its skin was a shocking blue, as though densely tattooed from head to toe in solid colour, and its hair was a dirty yellow mop. A sprinkling of metal fragments encrusted its right arm, which was pointed directly at Zefer. Above its shoulders hung two security drones, bristling with camera lenses and gun barrels, which were also pointed directly at Zefer.

Shaking his head and laughing hysterically, Zefer's mind spiralled with answers to the deceptively simple question.

'I'm... I'm CC9FB2,' he began, but then changed his mind. 'I'm CCA04, here to collect my papers and provisions.' As he spoke he grinned and pulled himself up to his feet. 'I'm from the Spire, on a mission for Her Excellency the Princess Gwentria, Matriarchal Heir to the Ancient and Glorious House Ko'iron.' If titles hadn't made any difference to the officials in the Spire, Zefer was sure that they would have some intimidating effect on the grubby and unscrupulous creatures before him now. After all, they had to mean something to someone other than him.

'What?' bellowed the figure at the desk. 'You need up speak up, man, or down counter come and me talk.' The voice echoed faintly through the corridor-like room, but some of the sound was absorbed by the bodies of the other people who were waiting. From the way fhat the official's neck strained, Zefer could tell that it was yelling, but he could hardly make out what was being said. For a brief moment, the memory of little Princess Gwentria asking him to make echoes flickered in his mind.

The man behind the desk (Zefer had decided to consider the muscular and intimidating figure a man) was not the only one to notice Zefer's surprising appearance. As he shuffled through the waiting room, Zefer was intensely aware of all the eyes watching him. The entire room was in

silence, and Zefer could clearly hear his own nervous, heavy breathing against the muffled, background booming of the riot outside. He hoped that nobody else could hear his anxiety, but he was sure that they could.

He was equally sure that he must have cut a bizarre looking figure as he shuffled along in between the parallel lines of seated locals. This may have been the first time that some of the people had seen a curator from the Spire, and even his long, grey, curator's robes must have seemed odd to them. Zefer scanned his eyes over the faces that stared at him; they were attached to rough, scarred, dirty people with wild eyes, elaborate tattoos and ostentatious piercings. There were bright red bandanas and grubby, colourful cloaks under which glinted the half-hidden menace of bladed weapons. Never before in his life had Zefer come across such people, not even in the salubrious atmosphere of the Quake Tavern. With all the grime and the bloodstains on his clothes, Zefer wouldn't exactly have felt at home in the Quake at the moment.

'I'm CCA04,' said Zefer quietly, leaning onto the desk, suddenly realising that it may be better if the other people in the waiting room didn't overhear him. Tm from the Spire. There may be some documents and provisions for me.'

What name?' barked the blue man, his black pupils set within startling white irises flicking up and down to take in Zefer's broken form.

'What?'

You-name. What?' said the man simply, in an abrupt dialect that Zefer had never heard before.

'I'...' Zefer looked back over his shoulder at the people in the waiting room. Hundreds of eyes flicked self-consciously to the floor, to the occasional pictures on the wall, or suddenly took deep interest in the pattern of light fixtures on the ceiling.

Zefer leaned even further across the desk. 'Zefer Tyranus,' he whispered, wincing slighdy at how loud his voice seemed in the cavernous room. 'Don't you need my number?'

'No. Here, no number. Just you-name,' said the blue man firmly. 'Number is Spire thing. Hive City have you-names.'

SLOUCHED INTO HIS chair in the Hive City WPO, Koorl was nodding on the edge of sleep. It may have been a boring assignment, but at least it was warm and dry in there, and it saved him from his place in the riot rota.

It was the first time that he had been in an authentic Hive City office of any kind; there were precious few of them where he was from, and Koorl had never really seen the point of them. The further away from the Wall you went, the fewer official premises you would find. But you couldn't get any closer to the Wall than the WPO, which was actually built into the substance of the Wall itself, tucked up against its sheer side, just along from the Plaza of the Spiral Gates. It was always busy, stuffed to bursting with people trying to scam passes into the Spire. The riots in the plaza outside were testament to the invariable failure of virtually all such attempts.

Koorl had burst into the waiting room, expecting to find the kind of raucous rabble that he was used to in the rest of Hive City. He had literally kicked open the door, swearing loudly at an Orlock who had been trying to shoulder his way around him. The silence of the waiting room had hit him like a wave, and he had dropped his head and shuffled over to one of the seats, biting back his shock and anger at having to share the space with Orlocks, Escher and even Goliaths. He noted with interest that there didn't seem to be any Delaque representatives in the room. The official line was that such communal spaces would help to ease the frictions between the great gang houses, but the riots out front provided plentiful evidence that it wasn't working.

The whole place seemed unbelievably artificial, and Koorl had sat uncomfortably sandwiched between a huge ganger, with rows of metal spikes grafted into his arms, and a robust Orlock, with a grubby bandana and daggers stitched into his vest like fashion accessories.

After nearly an hour of alert agitation and staring people down, he realised that nobody was going to cause any problems in the WPO itself, and he settled in to catch up on some sleep. It was then that the door squeaked open and the wretched man in effeminate grey robes staggered in, crying like a girl and talking to himself.

Koorl listened to the bizarre looking stranger yell across the waiting room, shouting some kind of code number. And he watched the man shuffle slowly through the room, wondering all the time whether he was

the man that Triar had sent him to find. He was certainly different from all the other people in the WPO, and he seemed to speak with an odd, pompous lilt that made him seem both incomprehensible and instantly loathsome.

Shifting his attention from the shuffling stranger to the faces of the other people in the waiting room, Koorl noticed that everybody was watching him. Rather than fixing their eyes deliberately on the scuff-marks that criss-crossed the metal floor, trying hard not to meet the gaze of anyone else in case they took offence and poked their eyes out with their thumbs, every head in the room traced the pathetic gait of the bedraggled, grey stranger. Silence gripped the atmosphere of the room as though it were trying to strangle it.

The stranger appeared conscious that everyone was watching him, and he leant over the reception desk to talk with the provisor in conspiratorially low tones. But the gangers in the waiting room were accustomed to filtering out huge amounts of background noise as they spoke - nowhere in HC was as quiet as this room - so even the faintest whispers seemed to boom like shouts in this strangled atmosphere. Besides, the man's voice carried clearly through the hushed, echoing waiting room, and Koorl was not the only one to leap to his feet and dash out of the door into the street outside when he heard the man speak his name.

'NO. TYRANUS, NOTHING,' said the androgynous blue figure without moving.

Zefer turned back to look at the provisor, his attention having been momentarily distracted by the flood of people who had suddenly sprung to their feet and fled the WPO. They had all done it at the same time, as though released by some invisible signal.

'What? But you haven't even looked,' complained Zefer, feeling his heart sink into the pit of his stomach.

'No need look,' replied the provisor, throwing his left arm out to the side to indicate a small, empty shelving unit. 'Nothing there,' he added, as though an explanation were needed.

'But what about that side,' asked Zefer, pointing to the stacks and stacks of documents, folders and packages on the provisor's right.

'HC to Spire. Not you,' The blue provisor shrugged, and Zefer wondered whether there was meant to be any sympathy in the gesture.

The empty shelves stared back at him ominously, taunting him with the blatant reality of their condition.

'But there must be something,' said Zefer, slumping forward against the counter with his tear-streaked head in his hands. 'There must be something.'

'No. Nothing,' replied the provisor flatly, and Zefer realised that there had not been any sympathy in his shrug.

'But I have to be able to go back. You'll let me back through, right?' said Zefer, lifting his hysterical eyes to meet the shocking white irises of the blue provisor.

'No pass. No passage.' For the first time in weeks, perhaps in his whole life, Zefer heard a simple, sensible and logical explanation tumbled from the mouth of a Hive official. The man's expression was blank and unmoved, but Zefer thought that he could sense a hint of vitriolic satisfaction under the blue surface. It occurred to him, at last, that the people of HC might not be pleased to have him descend from heaven into their midst. They might resent him. They might just think that he was stupid. Perhaps he was.

'Can I wait?' asked Zefer hopefully. 'It must take time for documents to come down through the Wall, right? The provisor in the Spire explained that it was sometimes hard to get messengers through the gates. My papers could still be on their way, right?' Since the man behind the desk did not appear willing to offer Zefer any solace, he decided to offer it to himself.

'Sure. Wait,' A finely muscled blue arm waved casually in the direction of the chairs in the waiting room, and Zefer turned to see that the packed waiting room was now completely empty. Suddenly, Zefer noticed that he could hear the whirring of he camera lenses in the security drones that hung above the provisor's desk and, at the same moment, he realised why. The background din of the riot outside had stopped. An incredible silence descended on the WPO, and even the almost inhumanly calm provisor looked uneasy.

Nodding quietly, Zefer virtually tip-toed over to the nearest chair, wanting to stay as close to the desk as he possibly could. Just as he was about to sit down, the provisor's voice shattered the silence and made Zefer spin nervously.

'Tyranus?'

'Yes. Yes, that's me,' replied Zefer, suppressing his excitement in case it was a false alarm. As he turned back to face the blue figure at the desk, he saw that it was holding out a small, white envelope.

'Was waiting. Top shelf. Not see it. Apologies,' explained the provisor without any outward signs of contrition. Instead, the man was looking nervously around the waiting room, checking back over his shoulder from time to time as though expecting to see a platoon of Helmawr guardsmen come storming out of the storeroom.

Zefer almost skipped back to the desk, feeling the weight of panic and disappointment dropping off him, as though he had suddenly been freed from the restrictions of gravity itself. He snatched the envelope out of the provisor's hand and read the neat calligraphy on its face: *Zefer Tyranus, Ko'iron Curator - First Class*. A broad smile broke out across his face as he realised that, somewhere along the line, he had been promoted from his designation as a second class curator. When he got back to the librarium, he would have access to the very highest levels - perhaps even to levels above the permanent cloud line.

He turned the pristine envelope over and over in his hands, looking for the blue Ko'iron seal, but it was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there was a tiny red icon stamped across the seal, which looked like a representation of a little, coiled snake. Zefer presumed that this was the mark of the Wall authorities themselves, and he slipped the envelope up into his sleeve, tucking it into the document pouch that all curators kept in the sleeve of their undergarments.

'Thank you,' he said, bowing formally to the increasingly shifty, provisor behind the desk. Then, with a newly confident swirl, he spun on his heels

and strode off towards the exit, ready for the start of his little jaunt into Hive City.

A HUGE CRUMPLE of paper and dust tumbled across the empty street in front of him as Zefer stepped out of the WPO. Nothing else was moving, but the side-streets on the far side were congested with people, all of them standing in silence. As Zefer looked up and down the narrow street that ran along the side of the Wall, he saw that crowds of people were blocking the way at the end of the road in both directions.

Not knowing what else to do, Zefer simply stopped moving. He stood, motionless in front of the door to the WPO, fearful that he had walked right into the middle of something. He wondered whether he should quietly take a couple of steps back into the waiting room. He could certainly wait in there, until whatever was going on out here had finished. That's what it was for, after all.

Slowly, without wanting to make any sudden movements, Zefer moved his foot back towards the door behind him. At the same time, a murmur arose from the crowds, as though there had been a collective intake of breath. Zefer froze again, bringing his rear foot back in line with the other one. There was silence again.

He tried once more, moving his foot towards the door and then bringing it back again, listening to the tension rise and fall in the crowds around him. The realisation was slow and terrifying; he had not stepped into the middle of something, something had collected around him.

Just as the significance of the murmuring crowds began to sink in, there was a stir within the crowd that blocked the street towards the Spiral Gates. The people were jostling against each other, trying to create a passageway between their densely packed forms. As they shuffled, shoved and tripped, Zefer could see the flamboyant flashes of their blue cloaks. It was as though they were wearing a uniform of some kind. He peered into the seething mass with gathering trepidation. For a moment he thought that he caught a glimpse of one of the men from the waiting room.

A great commotion made him snap his head back round to the other end of the street, where a motley assortment of huge, barbarous looking giants were pushing and prodding at each other in a similar way. They appeared to be riddled with piercings and etched from head to toe with tattoos. Zefer could see no sign of the neat uniformity of the blue-cloaks on the other side, but he supposed that it was possible that this was a uniform in itself.

He had seen people of a similar appearance before, although he could not quite place the memory in his exhausted brain.

'May I bid you welcome!' yelled one of the blue-cloaks, now standing out in front of the crowd near the gates. Zefer wondered why his welcome needed to be shouted from so far away, but he was relieved to know that this was a welcoming party of some kind. It made sense, he supposed, that the people of the Hive City would want to welcome an official from the gleaming Spire. He had just been so caught up in his own, petty, bureaucratic concerns that he had forgotten how much of an event his arrival would probably be for the locals.

'You may not!' boomed a crude, metallic voice from the giants, almost giving Zefer whiplash as he spun to meet the noise. The speaker was the largest human being that Zefer had ever seen. He must have been more than two metres tall - a clear head taller than the others in his gang, who were in turn head and shoulders taller than anyone else. As far as Zefer could see, the man's jaw was made of some kind of metal, bolted into the side of his head, and his hairless scalp glinted like a sheet of adamantium. Fat chains the thickness of his arms were wrapped around his neck, punctuated with spikes and what looked like fragments of bone. The man's arms were tense with the weight of a huge gun, almost as big as him, which he made no attempt to hide from the authorities... wherever they were. The mass of huge heavies behind him was swaying with motion, pounding clubs and pipes into their palms and tossing blades menacingly from one hand to the other; impatient chuckles rolled out of them.

'Curator of Ko'iron,' called the man in the blue-cloak, using a mode of address with which Zefer was not familiar. Zefer turned back to face him. 'I place myself, my men - The Salvationists - and the patronage of House Cawdor at your service,' continued the man, sweeping his cloak into a deep bow. Slightly concerned by the unorthodox greeting, Zefer nodded a return greeting, relieved that the man's intentions were good.

'Triar Cawdor!' yelled the metal-jawed man, making Zefer spin back to face the jostling giants. He didn't look even nearly as friendly as the man with the cloak, but the massive ganger was not looking at Zefer. His eyes were set on the opposing orator and animosity lanced out of them. Zefer was relieved that the man's hatred was focussed elsewhere, but it gradually dawned on him that he was, indeed, trapped in the middle.

'Triar Cawdor! You will not take this man. He's mine!' The voice resonated through the street, bouncing off the Wall and making it vibrate like an amplifier. As he spoke, he took a couple of steps forward, racking the mechanism of his autocannon.

'Uglar Goliath, how charming to see you so high in the hive,' countered Triar, his voice slipping smoothly along the street, like oil over metal. 'I didn't realise that you and your Subversives ever made it out of your pit. How delightful that you find the time for a trip into town from time to time.'

Even from where he stood, Zefer could see the twinkle in the eyes of Triar. There was a confidence in that gaze that Zefer could not understand in the face of the threatening forms of the Goliath gangers opposing him - the Subversives towered over the Salvationists in physical stature.

'Perhaps we should ask this gentleman whether he would rather join us,' continued Triar, gesturing openly with his empty arms, 'or whether he would like to go down into the cesspits with you?'

Zefer's eyes bulged and he felt his heart pumping faster and faster. There was absolutely no way that he wanted to make a decision about this. He didn't want to have anything to do with it at all. If he thought that he could get away with it, he would have simply turned and gone back into the WPO waiting room. The thought of having to go anywhere at all with the giant Uglar filled him with horror, but there was something about the glint in Triar's eyes that scared him even more.

'No. No choices!' thundered Uglar, his forward momentum pushing him into a run. With an excited cheer, the rest of his gang erupted into motion, yelling and braying like huge lumbering animals as they started to close the gap between them and Zefer.

STRUGGLING FOR BREATH, Zefer snapped his head from one side to the other, watching the two gangs storming towards him along the street. The Subversives had a head start, but they were heavier and slower than the lithe blue-cloaked men of Triar's gang. The Salvationist gangers were streaming towards him with their capes billowing out behind them like wings. From under their cloaks they had produced a dizzying array of weapons, which they flourished with well practiced skill as they ran.

Under his feet, Zefer could feel the metal road vibrating under the thunderous charges. Instinctively, he backed up towards the Wall until he felt the adaman-tium pressing against his shoulders. He watched the opposing gangs charging towards him with terror bursting out of his eyes, twitching his head from side to side and hyperventilating. His jaunt into Hive City had not started quite as he had planned.

A fraction of a second later and Uglar pounded up to him, flipping his huge autocannon onto his shoulder and firing out a tree-trunk arm towards Zefer, his hand open and reaching towards Zefer's neck. The curator screamed, closing his eyes and waiting for the end.

There was a loud crunch, and a spray of liquid splashed against his face. Zefer opened one eye experimentally and then screamed again. Uglar was staggering back away from him with a huge gash sliced across his chest; blood was spurting out of it and showering all over Zefer. A smaller man would be dead already.

Triar's blade flashed again, sparking against the heavy chains around Uglar's neck and severing the straps around the massive autocannon, which clattered down to the ground before the Subversive could catch it.

The Salvationist gang-leader was a blur of motion, spinning with long-bladed daggers in both hands, slicing the air all around the staggering figure of Uglar. For an instant, Triar froze, letting his long cloak whip round behind him as he balanced his blades for the final strike. But, at exactly that moment, the wave of gangers from the Subversives caught up with their leader and burst past him, bearing down on Triar. Simultaneously, the blue Salvationist tide crashed past Triar and smashed into the Subversives in a frenzy of metal. Triar and Uglar were engulfed in the tumult and dragged away from each other in the backwash, leaving Zefer standing in the middle like an island.

Zefer had seen blades before, and he had seen flames on the candles in the librarium and in the antique fireplace in the front bar of the Quake Tavern, but he had never seen blades being jabbed into human stomachs or flames jetting out of weapons and dousing the screaming forms of people writhing on the ground. He pressed his shoulders back against the Wall, praying to the Undying Emperor to make him ethereal so that he might fall through it back into the Spire.

The two gangs ploughed into each other and the street was immediately transformed into a battleground, making the riot at the gates earlier look like a child's birthday party. Shotguns coughed and autoguns barked, riddling the air with lethal fragments, cut through by the sizzling hiss of laspistols. Despite the close range, the gangers brought all of their weapons to bear at once, hacking with blades, pounding with bludgeons, and snapping off projectiles in all directions at once. The smoky discharge from the firearms hazed into the air, progressively clouding everyone's vision. In between his terror and his panic, Zefer found himself wondering how the gangers avoided damaging others in their own gang.

A sudden blast of concussion threw Zefer's head back against the Wall and he felt his knees give way. As he slumped down the Wall, collapsing onto the ground as his legs failed beneath him, a strong arm caught him. The arm was muscled but hairless, with intricate tattoos snaking all over it. Dazed and confused, with his strength deserting him, Zefer looked up along the arm and into a pair of burning red eyes, around which seemed to hiss and writhe a brood of bright blue snakes. Then he passed out.

'THERE IS NOTHING that we can do,' said Orthios, shaking his head and sitting back onto the flat metal roof.

"What do you mean, nothing?' spat Krelyn, convinced that the leader of the Snake Charmers was being deliberately lax. 'We *must* recover that man, don't you understand?'

Krelyn took a step forward, right up to the edge of the roof, and looked down into the street. The blue cloaks of the Salvationist gangers were pouring along the road into the immovable might of the Subversives. Their leaders were already locked in combat, directly in front of a petrified Tyranus. In a few seconds there would be the rare sight of an all out gang war in the street next to the Wall.

'We will not die on your whim, Red Snake. Enough of us have already died at your hands,' said Orthios, clasping his hands behind his head and lying back on the roof. If he had remembered to bring his tox-sticks, he would have smoked one.

'This has nothing to do with the Red Snakes, Orthios. This is about House Ko'iron, of whom we are both servants.' Even after she had

explained about her mission, and the possible importance of Curator Tyranus's discoveries, Krelyn had suspected that Orthios had remained suspicious of her. It hadn't helped that she had been unable to explain the content of the newly discovered pages of *The Paradoxes of the Spire*. Her ignorance had seemed shifty and obfuscatory, and her insistence that she was not well enough educated to understand the significance of the lines had looked like false-modesty to a gang of illiterate thugs; the Delaque were well known for their wit and intelligence.

'As I said, there is nothing that we can do here,' repeated Orthios, staring up at the dancing shadows and the reflections of flames that flickered on the underside of the next level of the hive above the rooftop. He was bathing in the echoes of the fight below.

'Will none of you fulfil your oaths?' asked Krelyn, turning and facing the other gangers of the Snake Charmers on the roof. But they were all already imitating their leader and lounging casually. Some of them had broken out their tox-sticks and were smoking happily, dangling their legs over the side of the roof and watching the gang war raging below them. One or two were taking bets on the outcome.

Shaking her head in despair, Krelyn turned back to the scene in the street just in time to see the women of The Coven charge out of the side streets into the fray. Despite her frustrations, Krelyn could not help but be impressed: they were much more organised than either of the other gangs, who simply hacked into each other with varying degrees of individual skill and strength. The Coven's gangers seemed to have a strategy: pouring out of three separate sidestreets and fighting their way into a single united incision, piercing the battle like a dagger into its soft underbelly. In less than a minute, the tip of the dagger was approaching Zefer and then, out of nowhere, a huge fireball erupted from the road directly in front of him. Salvationist and Subversive gangers scattered out of the flames while one of The

Coven's women leapt forward into them, her shocking blue dreadlocks thrashing in the smoke behind her.

In a matter of seconds, the Escher warrior had grasped hold of Zefer and carried him back through the flames into the heart of The Coven's incision. Then, almost as though the scene were thrown into reverse, the women fought a controlled withdrawal. To Krelyn, from the vantage of the

rooftop, it looked like a death-dealing dagger was being slowly extracted from the corpse of the battle, as the forces of The Coven pulled out of the fight and bled back into the side streets from whence they had come.

The gang war in the street raged on, as though none of the gangers had yet noticed that the purpose of their fight was already lost. Zefer had gone, stolen by the women's raid. Krelyn watched for another few seconds, intrigued to see the relish with which the gangers threw memselves into combat - she wondered whether they simply didn't care that the curator was no longer there. The Snake Charmers sitting on the edge of the roof, whooping and whistling at the action, certainly suggested that battle had an energy of its own in these parts.

Turning her attention away from the streetfight with a sudden and decisive twist of her body, which sent her cloak fluttering out into a whirl around her, Krelyn started to track the passage of the Escher kidnappers. She ran along the rim of the roof, her visor clicking and whirring as it zoomed down to street level, working to pick out the figure of Zefer in the seething side streets.

Reaching the edge of the building, Krelyn sprang into the air, spreading her cloak out behind her like a sail, and flew across to the next rooftop, trying to keep her targets in view. But the streets were high and narrow, and they were increasing busy with people. The women from The Coven kept running through the blind spot in Krelyn's goggles, making her swear and twitch her line of sight. Every time she did it, one or two of the women would vanish, as though into thin air, presumably slipping into even narrower side streets.

Jumping building after building, Krelyn tracked the kidnappers through the increasingly narrow, labyrinthine streets of the Wall Quadrant of Hive City. After a few minutes, there were only a couple of Coven gangers left, one of them carrying the unconscious curator like a baby. Gradually, the ceiling above the rooftops started to drop, squeezing the gap between it and the roofs on which Krelyn was running. She could clearly see that the ceiling of the city quadrant was uneven and fractured, as though hive-quakes had shattered the structure over and over again.

She vaulted from the apex of a tiled roof, bicycling her legs and spinning her arms to give her extra momentum, keeping her eyes fixed on the slumped figure of Zefer below her. As she flew, her hand smacked

against the adamantium ceiling, scraping the skin off her fingers and upsetting her balance. She tugged her hand back, wincing in pain, and her momentum faltered; she started to fall. Tumbling and reaching, Krelyn caught hold of one of the structural trusses that crisscrossed the streets, catching her weight and swinging herself around on top of it. Immediately she scanned the darkness of the alleyway below her, but there was no sign of the curator or his captors. Not only had the Snake Charmers failed to fight, but she had lost her man.

MAVANT

CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNED SLOWLY and reluctantly to Zefer, as he pulled the covers up around him, languishing in their warmth and security. For a while he simply lay there, his eyes firmly closed, not wanting to know what he would see when he opened them. In the darkness he could imagine that the bedding was that of the Quake Tavern, and that the commotion he could hear in the background was merely a lively night down in the bar.

Drifting on the edge of sleep, he found himself wondering whether he had left his stylus out on his desk on level seventy-three of the librarium. Despite his current situation, he was anxious about it, and he rolled fitfully because of the failure of his memory. Then, almost involuntarily, his eyes flicked open as he realised how ridiculous his concern was. A guttural convulsion gripped him and he coughed, trying to suppress it and feeling his diaphragm wrench painfully. He realised that he was trying to laugh, and that horrified him. Another convulsion pulsed through his abdomen, and he snorted painfully, feeling a thread of blood trickle out of his nose.

Trying not to draw any attention to himself, he was laughing and coughing up blood. His eyes were wide now, as his mind raced to find reasons - any reason at all - for his mirth. In a dark corner of his brain, he realised that it was probably hysteria, but an internal voice mocked him about the banality of his concerns about the stylus. It was as though his mind was being split in two by the events around him.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to remember the librarium. He forced images of book stacks, candles and misty daylight into his fractured mind. He dragged the memory of the luxurious carpet in the Quake's bedchambers before his eyes and saw the beautiful figure of the lady in the strategically ill-fitting red shirt in the bar. But, as he concentrated, screwing up his eyes with the effort, Prince Jurod roared through the

scenes on the immense engine that Zefer had seen on the fresco in Gwentria's palace. The spiked ram pierced the beautiful woman through her stomach, dyeing her red shirt a deeper shade of blood. The giant tires ripped up the deep pile carpet and crushed the spindly desks of the libarium, knocking the candles flying into blazing fires in the bookstacks. Finally, Jurod dismounted and strode towards Zefer's desk. He picked up the errant stylus and, turning to face directly into Zefer's mind, he snapped it in two.

'No!' screamed Zefer, wrenching himself out of sleep and sitting bolt upright. The sudden movement made him wince with pain as his broken ribs ground and splintered. Tears cascaded freely down his face, but he wasn't sure why: it could have been the pain; it could have been the sense of loss and of being lost; but a dark part of Zefer stirred in the depths of his psyche, and it could have been fear of that.

'Looks like he's awake.' The voice was nearby, but Zefer couldn't see its source and didn't recognise the tone.

'Yep, we'd better get him out of those clothes before Elria gets back,' said another, a bit louder than the first, as though moving closer.

Zefer twitched his head nervously from side to side, trying to take in his surroundings. He appeared to be lying in between a couple of huge kitbags, which seemed to be stuffed with hard, metallic objects. They chinked and clunked as he shifted his weight against them. To his right was a dirty metal wall, cast in deep shadow by what looked like a balcony overhead. Turning painfully to his left, he saw that he was at the edge of a huge hall, speckled with kitbags and weapons, with a balcony running around three sides of it. Sitting casually on some of the bags were implausibly well-muscled women with shockingly coloured hair and rich tattoos scribbled all over their shamelessly exposed flesh. Zefer gawped.

A hand gripped his shoulder and Zefer's neck spun round instinctively. He cried out in pain as the sudden motion sent javelins of agony down his spine, and he slumped back onto the ground, whimpering.

'Easy' said the man as he climbed over the kitbags, pressing gently down on Zefer's shoulder. 'You're in a bad state as it is. There's no need to be hurting yourself even more.'

Zefer peered up into the bloody face of the man. He had a couple of teeth missing and a series of scars cut into his face. There were some

small circular burns on his skin that looked like they had been caused by tox-sticks. But his eyes seemed to smile compassionately, as though he understood everything.

We need to get you out of those clothes, before the mistress returns. You will not want to displease her. At least, not while you are still so weak, eh?' The man winked and nudged Zefer with his elbow.

'What?' asked Zefer, confused and vague. Out of all the thoughts spiralling around inside his head, he was most acutely conscious of the fact that he had said 'what' more often over the last day than in the whole of the rest of his life put together. 'My clothes?' he asked, uncertainly peering down along his own body and seeing the ripped, threadbare cloth, tinged with blood. "The mistress?' Finally his brain had locked onto the most pressing question.

'Never mind about that now,' said the man, scooping his arm around Zefer's shoulders and helping him to his feet. In the background, Zefer could hear a halfhearted cheer raised from the women in the rest of the hall.

'Just ignore them,' reassured the toothless grin. 'We'll make you presentable in no time at all. Can you walk?'

'Yes. Yes, I think so,' said Zefer hesitantly, leaning most of his weight against his new friend. As the two of them faltered, another arm swooped in from the other side, catching Zefer before his stumble became a fall.

'Easy there, friend,' said the second man, stooped and bleeding freshly from a broken nose. Like the first, this man was smiling broadly, clearly happy to see Zefer, and sincerely keen to help him. 'Let's get you changed.'

UNCONCERNED ABOUT THE stealth of her entry, Krelyn vaulted through the window, turning a slowly revolving somersault before landing into a crouch in the middle of the adamantium fragment that served as the Snake Charmers' conference table. The gangers seated around the perimeter leapt to their feet, staggering back away from the intruder. Only Orthios remained seated, apparently unsurprised by the arrival of their newest ally.

Venator Krelyn, how nice of you to join us, *again*,' smiled the gang leader, rocking back casually in his chair.

'Orthios,' nodded Krelyn, determined to maintain at least the appearance of composure, despite her desperation. 'I realise that it pleases you to have me here asking you for help-'

'Begging,' interrupted Orthios, flicking a tox-stick into his mouth. One of the gangers at his side hefted a two-handed heavy flamer and lit the little narcotic tube with its pilot-light.

'*Asking* for your help,' continued Krelyn with firm resolution. 'But, the fact of this matter is that by obstructing me, you are also obstructing Prince Jurod of House Ko'iron, whom, I might remind you, you are pledged to obey under the terms of the Ko'iron contract.' She was standing now, and staring down at the smoker as he rocked in his chair. 'If you breach the contract you will lose it.' She let the menace hang in the air, as though it infused itself with the smoke.

'My dear venator,' oozed Orthios, drawing heavily on his tox-stick, 'you are neglecting a number of very important factors in our relationship, which, I might add, is not something that I have come to expect from your kind.'

'I have told you, Orthios, I am no longer of the Red Snakes, nor even of House Delaque itself, and I thought myself in trustworthy company. Am I mistaken?' Krelyn bowed slightly, in mock deference.

'It is true that you do not behave as I would expect of the Delaque, Krelyn, but you have been away a long time. You may be rusty. Or you may be clever. I know not which, and it bothers me even less than I know.

'My point here is simple. I could see no reason why my gangers should shed their blood at the command of a Del... a Ko'iron agent' - he smiled, correcting himself - 'when there was no obvious threat to the Ko'iron. Your curator means nothing to me, venator. Nothing at all. Elria can have him and I'm sure that he will enjoy himself for a while. Until he dies.'

'Your failure at the Wall will not have gone unnoticed,' replied Krelyn, stepping towards Orthios and dropping onto one knee, flicking a blade from her fatigues up under the chin of the gang leader. The tox-stick trembled momentarily in his lips, but then he breathed a long, slow plume of smoke out into her face. The room echoed with the sound of guns being braced and blades being drawn.

'I am sure that I could persuade the Ko'iron to overlook your unsavoury conduct if you were to help me now,' said Krelyn, keeping her gaze fixed

in the soft browns of Orthios's eyes, whilst mentally tracking the motion of the other gangers in the room. 'All I need is some help to recover Curator Tyranus from the enclave of The Coven. That is all.'

With his chin resting delicately on the tip of Krelyn's dagger, Orthios smiled. 'Ah, so that is all. Your point is well made,' he said, chuckling at his own joke. Krelyn smiled back sarcastically. 'But, I think you will find that my first point still stands: I can see no reason why we should shed our blood against the Escher of The Coven when we have to save ourselves to kill your brothers in the Red Snakes... for the good of your precious House Ko'iron, of course. It is hard to imagine what Prince Jurod could offer us as an incentive to serve a Del... a Ko'iron agent such as yourself. We already have the Ko'iron Contract! And, what's more, Ko'iron *needs* us to fulfil it for them.'

You are too confident, Orthios. There are many other gang-houses who would be more than willing to take on the responsibilities of the contract, and Jurod would have no qualms about terminating his relationship with the Orlocks, if he learned that you were uncooperative. I am sure, for example, that the gangs of House Delaque themselves - including the Red Snakes - would be delighted to return to their duties.' It was a calculated jibe, and Krelyn winced inwardly as she made it and risked linking herself back to her old masters in Orthios's mind.

'No, no, sweet Krelyn, it is you who are too confident.' He was clearly enjoying the poisonous banter, like a chess-player who thinks that he has already won. You see, Prince Jurod - may the Undying Emperor preserve his soul - would only be able to make such a misjudged decision if he were ever informed of our occasional, and entirely justified, reticence.'

Krelyn realised where Orthios was heading with this and she let her eyes glance rapidly around the room while he continued. 'So, you see, there really is no need for us to spill any more of our own blood for the effete snobs of the Spire, since their only source of knowledge about our conduct is already under our control. Witbout their Delaque spies, Ko'iron is without eyes in Hive City. After you are dead, Venator Krelyn, I will send word that we fought to defend you but that you died without imparting any information about your mission. Or perhaps,' he added, a malicious glint sparkling in his eyes, as though something brilliant had just occurred to him, 'I will explain that you were a double agent, and that you were

threatening to sabotage the mutually beneficial terms of the Orlock-Ko'iron Contract, in the hope that the Delaque might once again curry favour.'

Krelyn nodded. She was genuinely impressed. 'It is a good plan, Orthios, worthy of the Delaque themselves.

Knowledge is power, as they say.' As she spoke, her blade drew a trickle of blood from Orthios's throat, but her eyes had already left his face. She was scanning the movements of the other gangers in the room, and noting the distribution of weapons.

ZEFER WAS NOT wholly convinced that his new clothes were any better than his old ones. They seemed tatty and worn - not at all the kind of things that he could wear in the splendid streets of Gwentria's Fringe. Although he had to admit that he wouldn't want to wear his old clothes there in their present state. In any case, he was not in Gwentria's Fringe, and he was not oblivious to the fact that his old clothes did not exactly help him to blend into the streets of Hive City. Part of him wondered whether all the fuss at the Wall had been caused by his inappropriate dress; he had heard stories of people having their heads cut off for wearing the wrong things in the company of Lord Gerontius Helmawr, Guardian of Necromunda in the Holy Name of the Undying Emperor. He hadn't been prepared for the people of Hive City to be so sensitive to fashion errors.

He rolled his shoulders experimentally and regretted it at once, as stabbing pains fired through his ribcage. But, the soft leather jacket flexed comfortably over the fabric of his undergarments: after some protestations, the men had permitted him to retain his curator's undergarments when he explained that they contained pockets and pouches of considerable value; the men had nodded appreciatively, apparently thinking that such storage systems were very sensible.

From the front, the jacket looked like it had been cropped around the waist, but the back dropped into a long tail, like a cape. Various implements had been jammed under his belt, and their hilts were readily accessible because of the short cut of the jacket-front. Zefer wasn't sure what all the hilts were attached to, but he nodded in sudden appreciation at

the design of the jacket. It made sense, and that realisation touched something half asleep in his mind.

His boots were also of leather, and they were covered in a lattice of buckles and ties, into which had been fixed short daggers, the like of which Zefer had never seen before.

Finally, after he had finished admiring his new look, Zefer noticed the smell. His new clothes stunk. There was the stench of dead animal about them - something that he had only read about in books. And there was also the smell of dried blood. Searching the coat, Zefer found three slits above his kidneys, each about the width of a broad-bladed dagger. The cuts were rimmed with spongy, coagulated blood.

'Good coat, that one,' said one of the men, as he cast Zefer's old, shapeless, grey smock into the burner. 'Belonged to Seraphia. She was quite something, that one.'

'What happened to her?' asked Zefer, not really wanting to know the answer.

'She died in the brawl at the Wall. Mistress Elria's burning her now,' explained the man with the broken nose eagerly. 'She'll be back soon, don't worry.'

'Mistress Elria?' asked Zefer, picking at the coagulated blood to try and dislodge it.

The two men stopped dead, as though they had just heard the worst possible heresy.

'Mistress Elria is the leader of The Coven, *friend*! The last word had become a question, as though Zefer had somehow stepped outside its usual parameters. 'She is a great warrior... and a *wyrd*.'

This was all getting a bit too much for Zefer. 'A weird?'

'No, no, a *wyrd*. You'll see. It's fantastic. She's amazing,' Both of the men were nodding with such enthusiasm that the various wounds on their faces started to bleed again. 'She can make fire.'

'Enough!' came a powerful, even voice from the hall behind them. 'Bring the curator. We should be going.'

'It's her! She's back,' Zefer couldn't tell which of the men was speaking. Perhaps it was both of them. Their features were suddenly animated, as though the sun had finally risen after a barren night. 'Come, come.'

The men stooped into hunched postures and shuffled along next to Zefer, guiding him back into the hall, where he had awoken only an hour earlier. They limped and larked around his feet, suddenly like deformed jesters. And, as the three of them entered the hall, a chorus of jeers erupted from the gang of woman that, literally, lay in wait. A few thrown scraps of food splashed against the man-servants, to the great delight of the women and, apparently, the men themselves. Zefer noticed that none of the projectiles struck him, and he wondered whether this was the product of luck or skill. He stood upright between the faux hunchbacks, and absorbed the scene before him.

At the far side of the hall, under the fluttering reds and yellows of a great banner, one of the women leapt forward off a huge, rusty chair, which might have been a throne of some kind. Her hair seemed alive with blue snakes, and her eyes burned red as she strode across the hall towards him. When Zefer met her eyes, he found himself utterly unable to look anywhere else. The other women might all have spontaneously disappeared, for all he knew.

The scene seemed to shift into slow motion, and Zefer watched the incredible woman stride towards him as though that was the only thing happening in the whole of Necromunda. With an abruptness of motion that shattered his amazed reverie, the woman kicked out with one leg and then spun to kick with the other. Zefer heard two loud crunches and yelps of pain, followed by dull thuds as the two man servants on either side of him flew back under the abuse and smashed against the wall.

Just as Zefer braced himself for the inevitable assault, he heard the spluttered, mumbled thanks of the men together with the malicious jeers of the other gangers. Without a word, the blue haired, red eyed woman in front of him stared into his face, as though searching for something in his soul.

'I am Zefer Tyranus, Curator of House Ko'iron, First Class,' said Zefer unevenly, attempting to inject some pride into the first public announcement of his recent promotion. His voice trembled, but not as much as he expected.

'We know who you are, *mister* Tyranus,' replied Elria in curious, dulcet tones, edged with acid. 'And we know why you are here.' She was walking in a slow circle around Zefer, and he was not enjoying it.

'I am confused, however,' continued the gang leader. Why would the Noble House Ko'iron dispatch its agent so woefully unprepared for his journey into the Under-hive?'

Zefer started slightly and gulped. 'The Underhive?' Collecting himself, he added: 'I too found it odd that my supplies were not waiting for me at the WPO.'

Elria nodded slowly, as though assessing the response. 'No matter,' she said. 'You are better equipped now.' She looked him up and down one more time. You will do.'

'Thank you,' replied Zefer, unsure of what else he could say.

'I should apologise for our sparse hospitality, but we are unused to *male* company of your kind and, in any event, we are in a hurry, as you will appreciate.' Zefer couldn't quite look at Elria. It was as though she were coiled, ready to pounce into his mind at the slightest opening. Her eyes patrolled around his face, looking for gaps, and Zefer kept his gaze fractionally averted all the time. It was obvious that she didn't trust him, which was understandable, although he suspected that it was for reasons that he would never fathom.

'*We* should get going,' she said, without making any sign of moving.

'Where are we going, Mistress Elria?' asked Zefer, repeating the title that he had heard from the men earlier.

'Why don't you tell me? You're the expert,' said Elria, her tongue hissing with acid.

'What?' Zefer cursed in his head, disappointed that he had said that word again. 'I'm not sure what you mean, Mistress Elria. How am *I* supposed to know where *you* are heading?' He was genuinely confused.

'It is simple: we are going to follow you,' explained Elria, as though to a child.

'But I have no idea where I'm going. I don't even know where I am,' countered Zefer. He realised that everything he was saying was true, and panic started to well in his stomach again.

The gang leader laughed, looking back around to the other women, who laughed with her. 'Do you really expect me to believe that the mighty House Ko'iron would be so stupid as to send a curator who didn't know their way?' She laughed again. 'Do you take me for a fool?'

'He knows the way,' hissed another voice from the shadows under the balcony, and Zefer turned to see another women apparently step into existence as she came into the light. She was wrapped in an impossibly black cloak that seemed to defy his gaze, and her eyes were hidden behind a dark blue visor. 'He even took notes of the directions in the notebook which he keeps in his undergarments.'

'Ah, my sweet Orphae, your timing is immaculate, as always,' said Elria, without taking her eyes off Zefer, but raising an amused eyebrow at the new information.

THE BLADE SLID slowly forward and Orthios's eyes bulged. The muscles of his jaw bunched momentarily, as though he wanted to scream, but then they fell slack as the dagger severed them. There was no great fountain of blood - Krelyn knew infinitely more subtle methods of death - but a wide stream oozed out from around the blade and coursed down Orthios's neck onto his chest.

She stared intimately into his fading eyes, with her own hidden behind the dark reflectivity of her visor, and she smiled. 'For House Ko'iron,' she whispered, with her breath caressing his features, watching the shock and incomprehension bleed out of his face.

The intimate scene exploded abruptly, as the other gangers saw the growing pool of blood gathering around the feet of Orthios's chair. In an instant, the chamber was a confusion of red bandanas and flashing weapons, as some of the gangers pounced forward with blades drawn and others held back, bracing their heavy weapons against the walls.

Krelyn held her nerve, crouching on the adamantium table with her blade still pushed into the neck of the gang leader. In her peripheral vision, she could see the gangers fanning out to surround her, and the yells of death filled the air with their outrage. In her chest, her heart was racing, and a thrill tingled her spine like an electric charge. She had been looking forward to this for.years.

The air to her right rippled, as though being shunted towards her. A bludgeon arced horizontally across the table as one of the gangers tried to knock her away from their leader. But Krelyn was ready. In one swift movement, she swept her dagger out of Orthios's neck, sending a rain of

blood spraying across towards her attacker. In the same motion, she flipped into the air, rolling horizontally and kicking out with her left leg. Her foot smashed against the side of Orthios's skull, wrenching his head from his shoulders and sending it flying.

The ganger with the bludgeon recoiled and dropped his weapon as his boss's decapitated head smashed into his face, breaking his nose with a bloody crunch. As he fell to the ground, his comrade instinctively reached out and caught the head, dropping his whirring chainsword in the process.

In the commotion, Krelyn leapt forward, pulling longer bladed swords into each hand from their leg holsters. Her movements were rapid and fluid, spinning the blades into an almost impenetrable sphere around her. She cleared the space between the table and the disarmed ganger in less than a second, piercing him through the stomach with one blade whilst flicking the head out of his hands with the other. Using the impaling sword as a pivot, she turned a curving kick and sent the head arcing across the room towards the stubguners on the other side.

In confusion, the gunners opened up, spraying the flying head with shot. From the side of the room, a great plume of fire jetted out from a heavy flamer and incinerated Orthios's head before it could reach the gangers with the stub guns. The sheet of flame cut the room in half, obscuring everyone's sight of Krelyn. When the flames finally died down, she was gone.

Orthios's riddled and smouldering head crumpled into ash as it thudded to the ground in the middle of the room and, over by the table, his body finally lost its balance and fell off its chair.

Krelyn glanced back into the chamber from the high windowsill and smiled at the chaos that she had unleashed. How she had missed this part of her job while she'd been in the Spire! With a flutter of her cloak, she vaulted out of the window and off into Hive City.

'IT WOULD BE such a shame to mess up those new clothes,' said Elria, eyeing Zefer with an expression that he had never seen before. He suspected that she was lying about the clothes.

'I assure you-'

A metallic clink made everyone spin, turning to the middle of the room next to the huge statue of the chained man. A tiny metal sphere was spinning to a halt on the floor, with a little red light pulsing rhythmically. The next second passed in slow motion. A wave of recognition washed over the faces of the Coven's gangers, and, as one, they dove to the ground.

Zefer watched the sudden urgency of everyone around him. He stood looking at the prostrate forms of the women, moving his head from side to side in bewilderment. The red light on the little spinning orb blinked once more, then it shifted to green.

The next thing he knew, there was an impossibly bright flash and Zefer was flying backwards. He smashed into the wall at the edge of the hall and slumped down into a heap at its base, his consciousness flickering like a candle. He could hear cries and yells, the bangs and rattles of gunfire, and could see the occasional flare of flames misted behind the clouds of smoke.

As the stinking smoke began to settle, Zefer looked up over the clouds and saw teams of giant warriors abseiling down a fat chain that had been dropped through a jagged hole in the ceiling. They looked vaguely familiar, and Zefer realised that they were the Goliafhs from the battle at the Wall.

Fire strafed up from the ground, flashing past the descending figures and blowing chips out of the fabric of the ceiling. One abseiler caught a slug in his arm and was left hanging by the other one until it was shattered by a shotgun burst. But for every Goliath Subversive that fell, two or three more made it down into the smoke cover and Zefer had no idea how many were already in the fog-filled hall.

Silhouettes were moving in the smoke, and Zefer was watching the shadow-puppets hack at each other with axes and swords. He felt utterly disconnected from the cacophony as his eyes stung and streamed in the wisps of smoke. But then, bursting out of the cloud line, Elria came storming towards him with her hair writhing in her wake. Close on her heels was the huge Subversive from the Wall, with bloody bandages tied crudely across his chest, covering the wounds inflicted by the Salvationist ganger earlier on. His massive adaman-tium jaw was wide open and a hideous, bellowing scream was being forced out as he ran, pumping his two-handed autocannon from side to side.

A staccato of fire rattled behind the two charging figures, and another of The Coven's gangers emerge slowly from the cloud-line. A chunky ammunition belt was wrapped around her waist and over her shoulder, and the tip of her heavy stubber was smoking.

Uglar stumbled as the shots impacted on his back. He was close enough for Zefer to see his bright green eyes widen in anger as he tripped and fell forward onto the ground, skidding to a halt as his momentum failed, and the metal plate on his scalp glinted into Zefer's face.

From his crumpled heap against the wall, Zefer watched the scene in horror, as blood started to ooze out of the gaping wounds in the giant warrior's back. But before he could formulate any coherent thoughts of his own, Elria was at his side, slipping her arm around him and trying to drag him to his feet.

'We have to get out of here, curator.'

Zefer simply nodded, wondering why she had bothered to say such a blatantly obvious thing. The battle in the smoke cloud was reaching fever pitch, and he could hardly even hear her voice, despite the fact she was yelling directly into his ear.

'Jermina, take his other arm!' shouted Elria as the ganger with the stubber came rushing over to help her mistress. She slung the huge weapon around onto her back and gripped Zefer under his arm, making him cry out as his ribs stretched apart.

'How did they know about the roof entrance?' yelled Jermina over the din and over Zefer's hanging head.

'There must be a traitor in our midst,' replied Elria, as she ducked her head under Zefer's other arm, making him scream and pass out. 'But this is not the time to worry about that.'

'You're right, Mistress Elria,' came a deep, resonant voice that didn't belong to either of them. They had been so preoccupied with getting Zefer onto his feet that they had not noticed that Uglar had climbed up off the floor.

'He's mine, Uglar,' said Elria with immaculate calm, fixing the huge Subversive with her burning red eyes.

'I don't think so,' boomed Uglar, as a squad of barbaric warriors came storming out of the smokescreen and lined up behind their boss. 'Put him down, and we'll let you live.'

Elria didn't move a muscle - knowing that if she showed any signs of fear, they would take her instantly. But she let her eyes scan backwards and forwards along the line of muscled men before her. Each brandished at least two weapons. Most had blood drenched battleaxes or spiked clubs in one hand and heavy stubbers or autocannons in the other. It took Jermina all of her strength to heft just one of those guns.

Behind the wall of muscle, Elria could hear her gangers fighting desperately against the superior weight of the Goliath gang. Once the brutes had got inside the enclave, the chances of a victory for The Coven had plummeted. She sighed and shook her head, imagining the ridicule that would be heaped on her by the other Escher bosses if they even found out that she had been taken by surprise by the Subversives. Of all the gangs by whom to be ambushed, the huge, hulking, clumsy and loud Goliaths had to be the most embarrassing for an Escher. It was hard to think of anyone that represented the *male* more than Uglar.

A high pitched scream cut through the gunfire and explosions, bringing the battle to a momentary standstill, and Elria realised that her girls were dying. She took one more look at the line of testosterone in front of her, with flames flickering in her irises, and then she stooped back away from Zefer, letting him collapse back onto the ground as lermina followed her lead. Already unconscious, he dropped like a dead weight.

'Take him and go,' she said, keeping her voice velvety and smooth. 'But this is not the end, Uglar of the Goliath.'

Uglar made a motion with his head; one of his goons stepped forward and took hold of Zefer's legs, swinging him over his shoulder with one arm. 'Thank you,' grated Uglar's metal jaw. The muscles on his face twitched grotesquely, and Elria realised that he was trying to smile.

SHE WAS FAR from certain that she was doing the right thing. It had been a long time since she had been properly embroiled in the politics of the HC, and things had certainly changed a lot. The last time that she was down here, the Ko'iron Contract had been held by House Delaque, and the other gangs straggled around the edges picking up the scraps. But now the Orlocks had the contract, even though they didn't appear to know what it meant, and everyone seemed suspicious of the various Delaque gangs.

Actually, people had always been suspicious of the Delaque, so that hadn't changed. What had changed was that the Delaque gangs never used to care that nobody trusted them, because they had the power and the money already. That had changed, it seemed. Now, nobody trusted them, and they probably needed a bit of good will. The Undying Emperor alone knows how much the people of HC needed a bit of good will.

Killing Orthios had seemed like the natural thing to do. He was failing in his duty to the Ko'irons and, furthermore, he was threatening to kill her. Krelyn reassured herself that his death had nothing to do with the little red snake etched into the adamantium sheet that he was using as his table. She killed him as a Ko'-iron agent, not as a Delaque venator or a Red Snake ganger, no matter what her name was, and no matter what her clothing suggested.

Besides, she added in her internal monologue, she needed the practice.

There were a cluster of potential problems, however. Most pressingly, she had failed to recruit any assistance in her quest to appropriate the curator. The Snake Charmers had simply refused. Whilst their refusal had led to certain *complications*, it did leave Krelyn with the problem of whom she could turn to now. She briefly entertained the idea that she might go back to the Delaque masters or to the bosses of the Red Snakes and throw herself on their mercy, but then she realised that they had none. In any case, the Delaque would be the last people who would want to help House Ko'iron at the moment.

Sitting on the roof of the *Breath of Fresh Air*, letting the breeze from the giant ventilation fan on the other side of the plaza wash over her, Krelyn tapped her fist against her head, trying to bang some political sense back into her brain. It had been too long since she last had to think in this way. Life in the Spire had been easy and soft. Too easy.

She stared across at the huge ventilation pipes that dominated the square, and watched the slow revolutions of the four-bladed fan. Should she go back through the tunnel in the Wall, behind the vertical shaft, and tell Prince Jurod that she had lost her mark? No, she couldn't do that. The surviving gangers of the Snake Charmers had to be dealt with, otherwise they might report to House Ko'iron that she had killed Orthios - with a little wit they could easily make it look as though she had defected back to the Red

Snakes as soon as she had re-entered the HC, and used her erstwhile connection with Ko'iron to ingratiate herself into the company of Orthios. Despite those red bandanas cutting off all the oxygen to their brains, Krelyn was sure that even they would be able to think of that. They might even believe it, despite what she said to them. Either way, going back to Jurod now would be a mistake.

As she sat there, the waft of roasting food seeped up out of the door below, along with a constant column of tox-smoke. She breathed it in deeply, remembering the richer, cleaner smells of the Quake Tavern. She hadn't been in the *Fresh Air* for years, but the putrid fragrance brought the good-times flooding back. Although it had never been in Red Snake territory, she had frequented it more often than most other places. It had a peculiarly relaxing atmosphere, and there was always a good fight on tap when you needed one. And drink. Drink like you could never find in the Spire. She remembered that the little barman - Squatz was his name, she thought - he used to say that it was because of his house special brew that his growth had been stunted. And, for some reason that she could no longer fathom, that had made her want to drink a lot of it.

Wondering whether, perhaps, she needed a quick shot of Squatz's special brew to help her settle her thoughts, Kreyn swung her legs off the rooftop and dropped to the ground next to the front door. She pushed it open a crack and breathed in the ghastly, toxic fumes that billowed out into her face. With a smile, she kicked it open and strode into the bar.

THE GANGERS IN the corner were hunched over their drinks and muttering amongst themselves, their faces hidden in the shadows of pale blue, hooded cloaks.

Krelyn recognised them at once as the Salvationist gangers from the Wall, and she noted the blood stains, tears and burns that speckled their capes. They didn't appear to notice her entrance or, if they did, they weren't concerned about her.

Krelyn walked up to the counter and leant her elbow onto it, peering down behind the other side to see whether Squatz was still around. Behind the metal bar were a series of heavy barrels and a single row of bottles, all of which appeared to contain the same, brown, foaming liquid. At fairly

regular intervals, Krelyn could see the butts of guns protruding from under the counter itself, and she smiled as she realised that Squatz himself was permitted to break the house rules regarding firearms. She patted her own laspistol instinctively, and realised that she had still not had it repaired, so she wasn't really breaking the code.

'He's out back,' called one of the gangers, without looking up. 'Getting some more brew.'

Krelyn nodded, but said nothing. She pushed her visor up onto her forehead and rubbed her eyes. She needed a drink. Reaching over behind the bar, she grabbed one of the bottles of brown froth and bit the cork out of its neck. The acrid smell that wafted out of the bottle almost made her vomit, and she smiled faintly at how soft she had become. To spite herself, she placed the bottle to her lips and threw her head back, tipping the liquid straight down her throat. It was vile.

'How is it?' asked Squatz, appearing at the end of the bar and wandering along the counter towards Krelyn.

'Like the nectar of gods,' she replied, grimacing and trying not to gag.

Squatz stopped walking and tilted his head to one side. 'I know you.'

As he spoke, the gangers in the corner fell into silence and their heads twisted round to watch.

'Possibly,' conceded Krelyn. 'I haven't been in here for a while, but I used to be something of a regular.'

'You're with that other venator, right? The one with the little tattoo under his eye.'

As Squatz described the man, an image flashed through Krelyn's mind. She was waiting at the Red Snake tunnel through the Wall, and a venator had sprung out of the darkness with a red snake writhing under his eyes. He had knocked her over and then vanished.

'The red snake,' confirmed Krelyn, slightly hesitantly. 'Like this?' she asked, pushing up her sleeve to reveal her own tattoo.

'Yes,' said a charming voice next to her. 'Just like that.' Before she even knew that he was there, the Salvationist ganger had taken hold of her arm and was tracing the lines of the snake with his fingertip.

Krelyn yanked her arm away, bringing the blade that she had slipped into her other hand straight up to the man's throat, slipping it under the chin of his silver face mask.

'Forgive me,' he said smoothly. 'I am Triar Cawdor, friend of Venator Curion, our mutual acquaintance.'

Krelyn considered his startling blue eyes for a moment, and then flicked her dagger, severing the ties that held the man's mask to his face. Behind the silver, he was a young and handsome ganger, but his eyes contained his real power, and Krelyn was not about to succumb. She withdrew the blade and nodded a silent greeting, not yet willing to disillusion the young gang leader.

'Are you here at Curion's bidding? Do you know what happened to the curator?' asked Triar, relaxing his shoulders a little.

Krelyn dropped her visor back down over her eyes and smiled. 'Yes. Yes, I am, and I do.' She could feel her political cunning running back into her veins like Squatz's special brew. 'The Snake Charmers took him while you were fighting. They were tipped off about the curator by one of their agents from the Spire, and they went to fulfil their obligations under the Ko'iron Contract. They have him in their enclave - I can show you the way.'

Triar looked at her sceptically, but then nodded with resolution. He had been searching for the Snake Charmers' base for years. 'Good. We will go now.'

THE DARKNESS WAS almost complete, and the darker than black robes that shrouded both figures rendered them virtually invisible.

'How are things developing, Curion?' The voice hissed from everywhere at once, and Curion did not know which way to look.

'Exactly according to plan, master,' he replied, bowing his head deferentially to the ground instead of trying to face towards the source of the voice. 'Exactly as you planned.'

BADZONE

THE FLOOR WAS strewn with bodies and puddled with blood. Smoke hazed through the room, rich with the discharge of flamers and shotguns. The walls were pockmarked and lacerated, and the metal furniture had melted into unrecognisable shapes. Crouched in the corner, with the silver glint of a blade in her hand, Krelyn peered down into the face of the last of Orthios's gangers. He was mumbling, inchoate with fear and the certainty of death.

'You should have listened to me,' she hissed in a whisper that only he could hear. Then she slit his throat.

What did he say?' called Triar from the centre of the room. He was bracing a two-handed flamer, sweeping its barrel slowly across the room in case they'd missed someone. A clutch of Salvationist gangers stalked through the mist, their cloaks stirring eddies into the smoke and their masks glinting as they caught moments of light. They prodded at the bodies with daggers to make sure; vengeance was a code of law, and they could not risk survivors escaping to inform the other Orlock gangs.

'The Coven,' said Krelyn, turning her head to face Triar, but letting her body shield his view of the ganger at her knees. Even through the haze, Krelyn could see the startling blue of Triar's eyes flashing behind his silver mask. If anything, they seemed to burn brighter after the battle.

'Elria?' mused Triar. 'Of course, I should have known,' The gang leader turned away and strode off towards the door, his cloak stirring the smoke into a whirl. 'Finish him,' he called back over his shoulder. 'These heretics will meet judgement in the gaze of the Undying Emperor. There are others still awaiting cleansing at the hands of his righteous servants.'

'As you wish,' smiled Krelyn, turning back to the bubbling slash across the Snake Charmer's neck. 'You should have listened to me.'

A RINGING PAIN pulsed in Zefer's ears, as though he had been smashed in the head by something heavy. The muscles in his neck were knotted and they seared with fire at even the thought of movement. He could feel a delicate, cold and wet impact drumming on his temple, as though an icy liquid were dripping from a great height. But he couldn't move.

Experimentally, he opened his eyes, one then the other, convincing himself that deliberate slowness would somehow make the scene more palatable. It didn't work.

He awoke to find himself slumped into the corner of a small, dark cell. The walls were rough and uneven, as though they had been dug out of rock, not at all like the smooth metal structures that he was used to. And they seemed to glisten with moisture.

Without moving his head or heck, Zefer cast his eyes around, trying to work out where the light was coming from. It was faint and tinged with green, but there was enough to make the water on the walls glint and sparkle.

As far as he could see, the cell was completely sealed. There was no way for light to get in. He couldn't even see a door, although common sense and a faint draft across the floor told him that there must be one. The eerie, greenish light seemed to be emanating from the droplets of liquid on the walls. Tiny, dull stars trickled down into glowing pools on the rocky floor.

Tentatively, he brought his hand up in front of his face, as though seeking reassurance that he was really there, wherever there was. His hand pulsed gently in the green light, itself speckled with droplets, and a trickle of the strange liquid was running down his arm from his shoulder. The cold dripping on his temple told him the source.

Straining the muscles in his neck, he sniffed at the liquid on his finger tips, remembering in a flash of melancholy how he used to sniff at the pages of the books in the librarium. The green water was sticky and viscous, and it smelt sweet, like a rich perfume that had been condensed into treacle.

He had no idea what it was, and he dropped his arm back to the ground, letting his head fall back against the wall with a dull thud. Without any sense of where he was or how he had got there, and without the strength

even to push himself off the wall, he closed his eyes and passed out again, lapsing into a sleep of violent visions and unspeakable shadows.

A PUNGENT FIRE roared in the centre of the camp, sending curdling spirals of thick black smoke billowing around the cavern. The walls and floor were cracked and uneven, as though the cave had once been in several other places that had all been crunched together in a gigantic hive-quake. Thick, ichorous fluids rolled and pulsed down through the cracks, collecting into pools on the floor. Crude runnels had been cut into the ground, through which the pools evacuated themselves into a great pit in the centre of the cavern which bubbled and frothed with the congealing liquids. The immense fire danced over the surface of the pit-lake, with flames flickering through the colour spectrum as the chemicals in the liquids flared and burned. Puffs of gas and belches of putrid stink erupted as parts of the pool boiled while some of the liquids vaporised instantly.

Sitting comfortably on the burnt out wreckage of an overturned battle-wagon, Uglar gazed into the dancing pattern of flames, as though staring into the cryptic prefigurings of a dark and dangerous future. The light bounced off the adamantium of his jaw and scalp-plate, rendering him into a starburst of noxious colours. He had ripped the bandages from his chest, and the huge gashes through his pectoral muscles bubbled and hissed as the toxic fumes invaded the wounds. He showed no sign of noticing the agony of infection and kept his expression fixed on the fire.

The other Subversives gangers were dispersed around the camp. A bunch of them had pinned the dead body of a Coven ganger against the wall and were firing volleys from their shotguns into it, laughing and drinking. Others were prodding at their weapons and cussing, obviously displeased with equipment that had failed on their raid. Some simply smashed the butts of their guns against the ground and then cast the rains into the pit-fire, whooping and cheering as the ammunition detonated and sprayed the cavern with shot. But most were slumped into the wreckages of vehicles with bottles in their hands, enjoying the heat of the flames and the toxic liquor.

'He is a puny man. We may have broken him already,' mumbled Uglar, apparently to himself. His gaze was fixed on the fire, and its reflection

danced in the depths of his brown eyes.

'He will not die yet,' hissed a disembodied, low, female voice from the shadows. 'He is tougher than you think - why else would he have been chosen?'

'It doesn't matter. If he dies, nobody will get there. If he lives, I will get there. Either way, I am the strongest,' reasoned Uglar, nodding slightly as the warmth of the fire singed his face.

'Indeed,' agreed the voice.

'Don't patronise me, venator,' growled the Subversives' boss, turning suddenly and staring into the shadows behind him. He couldn't see anything at all, but he knew that she was lurking there, enwrapped in that cursed shroud of hers, oozing with her condescending tone. 'I know the value of artefacts. It is not only the snobs of the Spire or the weaklings of the upper levels of Hive City that know of objects of power. Hive Primus rests on the shoulders of the Goliath gangs in these pits, we in the Subversives know of power, venator. And we do not fear the shadows.'

In fact, Uglar had not been quite sure what 'subversive' had meant when he had named his gang. He had a vague sense that it had something to do with being 'under' everything else, and it had a pleasantly dynamic sound to it. He liked to think that the uphivers shivered when they heard the name, since it should make them aware that the ground under their feet was held aloft through the power of his gang.

'I meant no offence, Uglar, and I do not doubt your strength,' Orphae was smiling sickly. 'But you realise that the other gangs will not give up on this? Triar and Elria both will want revenge for your attacks on them.'

'Let them come!' boomed Uglar, rising to his feet and smashing the butt of his autocannon against the wreck beneath him. 'They could not beat us on their turf. Let's see them try to bring battle to the pits of Uglar.'

'Perhaps we should attempt to retrieve the artefact *before* they come?' prompted Orphae, leading Uglar's anger.

'It must indeed be an object of great power, if the pathetic houses of Hive City are willing to fight about it. They don't know the value of battle - let them come, and the Subversives will teach them!' Uglar was roaring now, and the other gangers raised a drunken cheer in support of their boss's bravado.

'As you wish,' hissed Orphae, realising that she had done all that she could.

KOORL SPRINTED FOR the door, spinning to press flat against the wall next to the door frame as he reached it. In his wake three more gangers took up positions on either side of the door. Further back in the street, Triar crouched in a deep trench that had cracked into the ground, torn out between two of the huge metal slabs that made up the surface of the road. Poised in the trench, another ten gangers were in support. Krelyn had vanished, leaping up onto a nearby roof and disappearing from sight.

As Triar looked up at the ramshackle structure of Elria's enclave, he thought he saw a flash of shadow dancing over its roof. Although the light was dim up there, dimmer even than in the narrow streets below, he also thought that he saw some wisps of smoke.

Despite himself, he hoped that Krelyn was okay. She may be a Red Snake Delaque, but for some reason he trusted her more than Curion. Curion had been trying to convince him to attack the Snake Charmers for years, never wasting an opportunity to slight them or to implicate them. He had never actually come out with it and directly asked Triar to attack them, but it was something that seemed to underlie everything he said. Krelyn was different. She had turned up without ceremony and told Triar that Orthios had taken the curator. There were no games and no cunning convolutions. She had just said it: They have him in their enclave - I can show you the way.

Of course, Triar had been sceptical, and he remained slightly suspicious because Krelyn had not asked for payment. Curion would have held out on such information and waited for a substantial reward, knowing how important the curator was to the Redemptionist cause and to the Salvationists themselves. Then, as the battle in the Snake Charmers' Basket raged and he saw Krelyn fight, he thought that he understood why she had not demanded gems or jewels for her tip-off: killing the Snake Charmers gangers was enough reward in itself. She had thrown herself into the task with the kind of righteous fury that Triar would have admired in a Redemptionist. By the time his blue-cloaks had ploughed into the fray, she had already dispatched most of the red-heads, or at least slashed them

across their throats in a frenzy of cuts. It had taken a while to find a survivor still able to talk.

And it made sense that Elria would have kidnapped the curator from them. After all, this whole affair had begun with Curion's tip-off about Elria's quest into the Underhive to find her sacrilegious archeotech. If anyone had wanted the grey-smocked fop from the Spire more than the Ko'iron's own allies, it would be that heretical Escher witch. Well, now they had him and it fell to Triar to deprive them of his guidance and appropriate his knowledge for the glory of the

Undying Emperor. In any event, he had been waiting a long time to take the battle to Elria's front door.

At the signal from Triar, Koorl planted his melta-bomb onto the plasteel of the door and then turned back into cover, vaulting over a pile of the debris that was strewn throughout the area. From his position, he could see the plasma-gunner in Triar's trench take aim with his heavy, shoulder mounted weapon. There was an almost indiscernible nod from Triar and the gunner squeezed off a shell of bright glowing plasma. It seared across the street and punched directly into the melta-bomb, detonating the thermal charge in its own super-heated explosion.

The door melted and blew in all at once, spraying molten plasteel into the building. The entire wall rocked and rippled under the impact, raining fragments and debris down into the street, dusting the Salvationist gangers as they leapt out of cover and charged towards the door.

HE FLOATED IN and out of consciousness, feverish and increasingly soaked by the pungent liquids that dripped from the walls. After a while, his posture slumped even more, and he ended up laying on the floor, bent at ninety degrees with his back against the wall and his legs sticking out into the middle of the cell. The shift brought his mouth directly under the dribbling effluent, and gradually its sickly sweet taste began to fill his senses.

Spluttering and spitting, Zefer's eyes pried themselves open, as though his unconscious was rebelling against the assault on his senses. For a moment, he actually thought that he was drowning, and he rolled over onto his belly, coughing and gagging in an attempt to evacuate his lungs.

Noming came out, but the sour taste of vomit seeped into his mouth, making him scrape his tongue against his teeth in revulsion.

Sitting back onto his ankles, spitting the residue from his mouth, Zefer looked around the cell once again. He could see more of his surroundings now, as though the glowing liquid on the walls was brighter. But it wasn't brighter in there, reflected Zefer, it was simply that he could see better than he could before. He could see each of the glistening walls in the little cell, and even the low ceiling. The entire space was probably only eight cubic metres. There was still no door visible, and no windows of any kind. The only light, faint and tinged with green, came from the sweet tasting moisture on the walls.

Tentatively, Zefer stood up. If he reached his hand into the air, he could touch the slimy ceiling. He took a step forward and pressed both of his hands against the rough rock of the wall before him. Leaning his weight forward, he sniffed, drawing in the sickly scent of the moist rock in front of his face. Somewhere on the other side of the wall, he could hear the muffled sound of gunshots and shouting.

'Who are you?'

Zefer spun on the spot and backed up against the wall, banging his head abruptly on the uneven surface. The voice had come from somewhere inside the cell. It had not even been a whisper and, for some reason, the shock of conversational volume was almost as great as the shock of hearing a voice at all.

'What?' said Zefer, instinctively. Who said that?'

He strained his eyes in the faint green light, snatching his head from side to side. The cell certainly wasn't big enough for anyone to hide in, and it was small enough that even the dim light was enough for him to be able to see the whole thing. But he couldn't see anything at all.

'Where are you?' he asked, when he got no answer to his first question.

'I am with you,' came the reply, even and measured, as though perfectly crafted in a foreign language. The voice seemed slightly surprised that Zefer needed to ask.

'Show yourself.' Zefer was in no mood for this.

'I am not hiding.'

'Then why can I not see you?'

'Perhaps you are not looking in the right place?'

'So, *where* are you?' cried Zefer, his exasperation overcoming his fear. Anybody willing to have this conversation was probably not going to kill him.

Something tugged at one of the tails of his coat, and Zefer instantly snapped his head down towards the movement. At first he couldn't see anything at all, but gradually a shape began to form in the darkness. The problem was not with his eyes but with his brain -there was enough light in the cell for him to see the creature in the corner, but he had not known how to look for it. Eventually, his brain started to process the negative images that the cell provided, showing him silhouettes against the pale green sludge as three dimensional shapes. But it took a little time.

'W-what are you?' asked Zefer, staring shamelessly at the creature now.

'I am Ruskin,' came the reply, as the creature shuffled silently in the corner, rocking backwards and forwards as though curled into a ball.

The voice in the corner seemed to belong to a normal sized human. But the man was stooped and folded, curled into a ball on the floor, as though chronically self-conscious. His voice was incongruously clear and his speech articulate, despite the fact that there was the suggestion that he wasn't quite sure what he was saying. Whatever he was wearing, it had a pale sheen to its surface that closely matched the dim glow of the glistening walls, making it incredibly hard to see his profile clearly. The oddest thing about him, however, was the shape of his head. As far as Zefer could make out, the man's head was elongated like that on an animal, with a long jawbone and jagged teeth. He seemed to be able to speak without moving his jaw at all.

As he stared down at Ruskin, a realisation hit Zefer like a sudden dose of spur. All of his pain had gone. The muscles on his neck were loose and supple, his head had stopped hurting, and even his broken ribs seemed comfortably set. He shuffled back along the wall away from the man-animal in the corner, trying to remember when he had arrived in the cell, and how long he had been there.

AS HE RAN, Triar lobbed a couple of smoke grenades through the wrecked hole where the door used to be. They blew just moments before his blue-cloaks ducked into the building, keeping low to make the most of

the cover provided by the smoke. The gangers fanned out into formation, interspersing heavy gunners through their line. Triar pulled his sword free and clasped it heroically as he pushed forward of the rest looking for the first kill. But there was no hostile fire. He charged onward, yelling out for Elria.

'Show yourself, witch!' But there was no response.

Unsure about how to proceed in the absence of a battle, the blue-coats waited for word from Triar, fidgeting anxiously with their weapons and snapping them incautiously from side to side.

The smoke thinned as Triar swept on through the hallway, and then it vanished completely when he kicked open the double doors into the great hall.

Behind his mask, his mouth dropped. The hall was in chaos: the balconies were shattered and broken; the banners were torn and burnt and there were bodies lying all over the floor. Half-packed kitbags had been abandoned haphazardly. Elria's throne had been overturned and her family statue decimated.

Standing in the middle of hall, surveying the carnage, was Krelyn. Two bloodied and bruised men were fussing around her, bowing and kneeling, but she was ignoring them. With one hand, she held a thick chain that ran up into a jagged hole in the roof. Triar presumed that this was how she had got in before him.

'What happened here?' he asked, picking his way through the corpses in genuine shock.

'Looks like the Subversives got here first. It seems that we are not the only ones interested in this curator,' replied Krelyn, pushing the bumbling mavants out of her way as she stooped to check the pulse of one of the women.

'Dead,' she said. 'They're all dead.'

'No, mistress. No no,' intoned the mavants, almost in chorus. 'Not all dead, mistress. No no.'

'There were survivors?' asked Krelyn, surprised.

'Y-yes... oh, yes.'

'Where are they?' demanded Triar as he joined them in the middle of the hall, turning his sparkling blue eyes on them.

The mavants recoiled at his gaze, grabbing hold of each other and quivering like frightened animals. T-they've g-gone to f-f-find you, mister,' they managed.

A commotion by the main doors to the hall made Triar turn. His gangers were edging their way into the huge chamber from the corridor outside with their weapons still primed and ready. They were deploying into a wide line to make a sweep through the hall.

Triar held up a hand. 'Hold there.' And the gangers stopped. Each of them scanned the scene in silence.

Regardless of the masks that hid their faces, Triar knew that his men would be shocked by the scene that greeted them. They may hate Elria and her Coven of witches, and they may even have been looking forward to the chance to fight them today, but he was sure that they would be shocked to see what had been done to them in their own enclave. Triar and Elria had been at each others throats for years and, if they were perfectly honest, they had learnt to accept a roughly equal balance of power between their gangs in the sector. They fought every now and again, and even killed a few on each side, just to keep everyone on their toes. But the situation was actually pretty stable. Triar harboured a genuine desire to save their souls and, in the meantime, the conflict gave him an opportunity to exercise his righteousness. The Subversives were brutal people, and they had no place this high up in the hive.

'I suspect that we will find them in the Breath of Fresh Air,' announced Triar, after some thought. 'That's certainly where I always go when I want to irritate them.'

THE SUBVERSIVES WERE hard at work, smashing at the floor of their cavern with huge mallets and pickaxes, gouging out channels around the perimeter of the cave and digging miniature pits into the mouths of each of the access tunnels. They were stumbling and drunk, but this made little difference to their progress, as Uglar patrolled the gangers, punching and kicking at any who slacked off.

In the absence of any electric light, the Subversives worked by the roaring light of the fire, sweating in the darkness as they laboured in the stifling heat. The glittering phosphorescence of the walls sparkled and

twinkled in delicate incongruousness, shining in stark contrast with the crude bulk of the gangers themselves.

One or two grew rapidly bored of digging and shouldered their heavy bolters, shattering the rock with stuttering barrages of explosive shells. Stone shrapnel and errant shells ricocheted around the cavern, sizzling into the burning liquids or burying themselves into the flesh of other gangers, who roared with pain but threw their rage into their work rather than turning on their brothers.

Uglar watched the crude ingenuity of his men and nodded. He knew that the upper hivers looked down on all the Goliath gangs. He knew that they were horrified by their brutal existence in the lower levels of the hive, where electricity was scarce and water was richer in toxins than oxygen. Even the air was thick with sludge and the unwanted gases of the Hive City. There were no great paintings or beautiful statues of women down there in the deepest and harshest areas of the hive. But there were no weak saplings either. That genteel fop, Triar of Cawdor, would not last a day down in the furnace halls or the slag pits. He would not even have the stomach for the water, let alone for the epic barbarism of the great Feast of the Fallen. Let him come, and Uglar would throw him into one of the ancient fighting pits, and then those pathetic Cawdor Salvationists would see the meaning of strength and of despair.

There was not a single member of his gang who had not triumphed in the ceremonial pit fights after the Feast of the Fallen. Goliath gangs would not admit just anybody, contrary to the assertions of the softer hivers. It was not enough to be strong or robust. It was not enough to have survived into adulthood in the harshest environment that the hive had to offer and to have become inured to the toxins and deprivations of life on the cusp of the Underhive. Every Goliath ganger had to make a kill in the pit following the great feast. Every Goliath currently breaking their massively muscled backs against the rock in the floor of this cavern had killed one of their own in the oldest ceremony known to Hive Primus.

Whenever he thought about it, Uglar's huge heart welled with pride. The Goliaths were the very foundations of the hive, holding it up with the immense strength of their arms and their industry. The slack upper hivers may mock at their supposed lack of sophistication, but it was down in the fires of this hell that Hive Primus was built, and the Subversives stood as

testament to that glorious heritage. They were there at the start, and they were still there now, holding the place together from the foundations. Without the various gangs of House Goliath, Hive Primus would be nothing but a gibbering crowd of slack, foppish uphivers, weak and pathetic to the point of suicide.

If this curator that Orphae and the other uphivers thought was so important really knew the whereabouts of an ancient and powerful archeotech, it was probably in the Subversives' domain anyway. And nobody was going to come down here and steal artefacts of power from Uglar of Goliath.

Taking a clutch of melta-bombs, Uglar made his way around the central pit of the cavern, fixing a bomb between it and the end of each channel that his gangers had carved into the stone floor. Making a second pass with a roll of shielded fuse-wire, Uglar rigged the place for the welcoming party. The uphivers always tried to keep their enclaves so pretty, he laughed in his head. Down here, nothing stays pretty for long.

THE SQUARE IN front of the Fresh Air was deserted, filled only by the breeze from the great four-bladed fan. Garbage and dust skidded around in little demons, swirling in the air currents.

Triar and Krelyn stood side by side at the edge of the plaza, watching the scene for signs that the quiet was unnatural. It certainly seemed unnatural, because the Fresh Air was usually the busiest joint in the sector. However, times had changed. Orthios's Snake Charmers gang had been completely wiped out and Elria's Coven had been decimated. Of the three gangs whose territories criss-crossed around the Fresh Air, only the Salvationists were at anything like full strength. It was only natural that the plaza would be deserted today, but it seemed like the most suspicious scene in Necromunda. It wouldn't take long, certainly, for gangs from neighbouring districts to attempt to fill the power vacuum. Triar and Krelyn both knew that this could mean House Delaque and the Red Snakes.

'Looks clean,' said Triar, but Krelyn knew that it was a question.

'Yes,' she replied, striding confidently across the square towards the Fresh Air.

The door was ajar when they arrived. There would usually be a blast of noise and the fumes of toxins wafting out, but there was nothing. Peering in through the crack, Triar could see the women of The Coven seated around their usual table in the corner. Elria herself was perched on the back of her chair with her feet on the seat and her back to the wall. She was talking quietly to her gangers and nodding her head to emphasise certain points, letting her dirty blue dreads cascade freely. Suddenly she stopped talking.

'Who is that with you, Triar of Cawdor?' she asked, without looking over.

Triar shared a glance with Krelyn and turned to beckon a group of his gangers from the other side of the square. Then he pushed open the door and stepped into the Fresh Air.

None of the Escher women turned to face the new patrons, and Elria did not lift her gaze to them. Squatz, on the other hand, was more jovial than usual, sliding down off the bar and running over to greet them.

'It is good to see you again, sir,' blurted the little man with a little too much urgency. And you, madam.' He bowed.

Triar smiled behind his burnished mask and nodded a greeting. 'Ah, Squatz, I see that you're still not very discriminating about your clientele.' He turned his face towards the women in the comer.

'Times are hard, and we cannot all uphold principles as stringently as you, sir,' replied Squatz with uncharacteristic deference.

Triar reflected that the little man was probably telling the truth. The cunning business strategy that he had developed to keep the Breath of Fresh Air running for so long had collapsed overnight. It was no longer the case that his tavern occupied contested, but stable, ground at the intersection of three rival, roughly equal gangs. Now it was merely an unclaimed tavern in front of the most valuable source of fresh air in the sector. Triar was his best and only possible source of security. Even on this day, Triar could see the perfect opportunity for a conversion to the cult of Redemption.

'I understand,' said Triar, his generosity taking Squatz by surprise.

Krelyn brushed past the men and reached over the bar to grab a bottle of the house special. She pushed her visor up onto her forehead, popped the cork and took a long swig from the bottle.

'That stuff will stunt your growth.'

One of the Coven's women had come to the bar and was propping it up on Krelyn's right. The venator turned to her left, looking back towards the door; Triar and Squatz were still talking in the middle of the room. She shrugged and turned back to her bottle.

'I don't think I've seen you in here before,' continued the ganger.

Taking another swig from her bottle, Krelyn didn't reply, but she was smiling inside. It had been a long time since anyone had flirted with her. In the Spire, people tended to scattered like shrapnel whenever she approached a bar. Nobody would try and pick up a venator in the Quake Tavern.

Unperturbed, or even reassured by Krelyn's silence, the ganger reached behind the bar and grabbed a bottle for herself, smashing the neck off against the metal counter and tipping half the liquid straight down her throat.

'I am Elria,' she said. 'I am acquainted with a colleague of yours. Venator Orphae?'

Krelyn thought about the name for a little while and then shook her head. 'I am not familiar with Orphae. But it has been a long time since I was last in Hive City. Much has changed.'

'It has indeed,' replied Elria, casting her eyes back over towards the table in the corner, where eight of The Coven's gangers were drowning their sorrows. 'Will you join us... for a drink?' she asked, leaving her pause deliberately ambiguous.

'We are drinking now, Elria,' said Krelyn, turning to face the blue-haired woman for the first time. She started slightly at the red burning in the ganger's eyes, leaning back involuntarily to get a little distance.

'I should be honest with you, Elria,' continued Krelyn, realising that the flames in her eyes were a mixture of anger and grief. 'I am not a venator of House Delaque, but am an agent for the Noble House of Ko'-iron. Our purposes coincide today.'

'The curator?' asked Elria, piecing things together for herself.

'Exactly. It is in neither of our interests that he should be in the hands of those Subversive creatures.'

Elria's eyes flashed. 'What makes you think that the Subversives have him?'

'We have just come from your enclave, Elria,' said Triar smoothly as he propped up the bar on the other side of Krelyn. Despite his religious beliefs, he too reached behind the bar and snatched a bottle of the house special. 'What?' he said defensively. 'It's been a hard day.'

'You were going to attack us in our own compound?' asked Elria, evidently impressed. 'I didn't think that you had that kind of courage, Cawdor.'

'In the end, there was no need.' It was true.

'Why are you with these deluded freaks?' asked Elria, leaning in toward Krelyn and dropping her voice. 'Don't the Orlocks hold the Ko'iron Contract these days?'

'Othios is dead, and the Snake Charmers are finished,' said Krelyn flatly.

'As you know,' added Triar concentrating on his drink.

A look of shock flashed over Elria's face, but she said nothing as she processed the news. Then, realising the necessary conclusion, she spoke. "We must do something about these Subversives. They may be brutish and stupid - even for men - but they are powerful. We should move together.'

Standing between the two gang leaders, Krelyn picked up her bottle again and drained it into her mouth. In her head, she was smiling.

'The enemy of my enemy...' said Triar, still not looking across at Elria, leaving the end of his sentence hanging in the air.

'We are not and will never be friends, Triar of Cawdor,' said Elria. 'But it is within both our interests that Uglar does not gain anymore power. It was enough that he felt able to come into the upper levels of Hive City today - I have never seen him this high before.'

'It seems that he is already powerful enough to deal with The Coven on its home ground,' said Triar, finally turning to face Elria, his eyes glinting and blue behind his mask. He realised that his words were insulting, but they were also tinged with fear - he knew that Uglar could take on his Salvationists just as easily, if he was confident enough to come so high in the city.

'What do we know about this archeotech? What do we *really* know?' he asked, changing the subject slightly. "Why would Uglar want it?'

'It is an artefact from the ancient history of the hive,' replied Elria. 'My information suggests that it locates a woman at the foundations-'

'A Ko'iron woman,' interrupted Krelyn.

'Even leaving aside the obvious and terrible blasphemy of what you are saying,' said Triar, only half joking, 'would such an item really grant Uglar any more power?'

'It certainly seems that he thinks so,' said Krelyn, and the others nodded. 'After all, our information is incomplete. Only the curator really knows what's down there - he's the only one who could really understand that stupid book. Can we take the risk?'

Triar and Elria stared at each other along the bar, watching each other's eyes burning in vivid colours. They couldn't believe what they were about to do.

'THE ROCK MOVED, and then you appeared,' explained the man-animal called Ruskin.

Zefer gazed blankly, trying to work out whether the creature was deranged, or whether he simply found himself in a deranged place. Instinctively, his hand worked its way up his other sleeve, feeling for the envelope that he had tucked into his undergarments. He needed to know that there was a way home, if he ever made it out of this little cell.

'The rock moved?' asked Zefer, deciding to play along.

'Yes. And from the bright light beyond, you came. You are Kuhnon?' said the crawling figure hopefully, reaching out for Zefer's feet with its hands.

Zefer recoiled, but there was nowhere to go. 'What?' he kicked himself mentally for saying that again. 'Kuhnon? Who is Kuhnon?'

'You. You are Kuhnon. You come from the light and you bring the light with you. You will lead the Ratskins into the lost Garden of the Slump.' The creature had a hold of Zefer's ankles and was just lying there on the floor clutching them.

'Um,' said Zefer. Despite his disorientation, he was reasonably certain that we wasn't called Kuhnon, and that he didn't know where anything called the Garden of the Slump might be. The last few days had been such a blur, however, and it wouldn't surprise him that much to learn that he was wrong about this. Reality was something that seemed to be slipping through his fingers at the moment.

'Where is this garden?' asked Zefer, deciding to fix his attention on a practical problem.

'Ruskin can show Kuhnon,' said the ratskin, rolling himself back onto his heels and looking up at Zefer with huge reflective eyes.

Staring down at the man-animal, an image flashed through Zefer's mind. He could see figures just like it cowering on the ground as one of their brethren was run through by the spiked ram on the front of Prince Jurod's battle-bike. In the caverns of his memory, he could hear the echoing giggles of Princess Gwentria: 'That's my brother! Doesn't he look wonderful! He killed them all you know.

The squalid little cell wasn't quite as glamorous as the shimmering corridor in Gwentria's palace, and Ruskin didn't seem as dangerous or evil as the man-beasts in the epic fresco. Zefer struggled to remember his response to the picture when he had first seen it -he recalled a vague sense of awe, but now it just seemed farcical.

Slouching back against the wall, Zefer realised that something was changing in him. His world had been turned upside down, and his mind was spinning into spirals with it. He clutched his head into his hands, trying to stabilise his thoughts with sheer pressure. But he froze and then pulled his hands away from his face; his left arm was pulsing with a radiant green. He could actually see the blood vessels throbbing through the leather of his coat. Frantically, he scratched and clawed at the sleeve, hoping without hope that the lines of light were simply streams of the bizarre effluent, dripped down from the ceiling. The sleeve was smooth and dry, and the radiance was undimmed.

'Kuhnon,' nodded Ruskin. The bringer of light.'

Zefer craned his miraculously healed neck back, and peered up into the darkness of the ceiling. A steady drizzle of the liquid was seeping through a crack in the corner. There was a shallow pool on the ground where he had been lying, and he could still feel the residue on the side of his face where it had dripped into his mouth.

'Did I come from up there?' asked Zefer.

There was no response. Taking his eyes off the little, glowing crack, Zefer turned to face Ruskin, but the ratskin had gone. 'Ruskin?' he called, taking a couple of steps forward, holding out his arms in front of him like a blind man. The glow from his left arm shed just enough light for him to see that he was quite alone.

A sudden and dull boom sounded, and the cell shook. Debris rained down from the low ceiling and a light spray of the glistening liquid sprinkled across his face. Another series of far-off booms rattled the cell, and the delicate spray from the ceiling became a shower. The crack in the corner had expanded and the liquid was gushing through like a waterfall, cascading down the uneven rock of the wall and rapidly collecting into a expanding pool on the floor. Zefer backed away to the other side of the cell, trying to keep his feet out of the liquid. After a few moments, the entire floor was a glowing pool of pale green, and the water level was rising steadily.

PRESSED UP AGAINST the wall of the narrow tunnel, Kre-lyn could see out of its mouth and into the huge cavern. The Subversives were simply standing their ground around the great pit in the centre, spraying the other tunnels with flame, bullets and bolter shells from their heavy weapons. They stood and absorbed impacts from the hail of slugs that flashed across at them from the tunnels. A few of them were bleeding from bullet wounds on their limbs and abdomens, but none had yet fallen.

On the other side of the cave, Krelyn could just about make out the glint of Triar's silver mask in the shadows. He and his men had followed one of the winding tunnels around to the back of the cavern, twisting and snaking through the rocky substructure of the hive like animals in warrens. With the magnification of her visor thumbed up to maximum, she could see Triar's men preparing a string of grenades, but the cursed blind-spot on her goggles prevented her from seeing exactly what sort of grenades they were.

Elria's Coven had split into two groups and they had worked their way around to opposite sides of the cavern in an attempt to catch the Subversives in the crossfire. They had a clutch of autocannons, braced by two women each, that were sending out constant streams of screaming shells, but most of The Coven's gangers carried lighter weapons, and Krelyn could see Elria itching to close the range.

Krelyn herself was not keen to get involved in the fire-fight. She was here for Curator Tyranus and, frankly, didn't really care about the outcome of the battle as long as she could recover her mark. The cavern was too

vast and too dark for her to see all of it from the tunnel mouth, and she resigned herself to having to infiltrate the camp itself if she was going to find her man. Pulling her cloak around her as camouflage, she slipped out of the tunnel and dropped down into what looked like a narrow, manmade trench that seemed to have been cut into the floor of the cave. It gave her perfect cover as she crouched with her cloak swept around her.

As she crept through the trench towards the heart of the camp, a series of explosions shook the cavern, and Krelyn knew that Triar had deployed his grenades. She risked a peek over the lip of the trench, and saw the Subversives unmoved in their positions around the pit in the centre. Four or five of them had fallen now, with limbs blown clear of their bodies, but at least two of those were still firing their weapons with whatever limbs and whatever strength they had left. Krelyn had to admit that these were seriously tough gangers, and she wondered why Ko'iron had never thought to offer their precious contract to them. As Uglar stooped down and ripped the firing arm off one of his fallen brothers, casting the arm into the immense fire behind him and spitting off a hail of autocannon fire from the pilfered gun, she realised the answer to her own question. The Subversive on the floor at Uglar's feet roared with pain, and Krelyn realised that he was still alive.

Bizarrely, the body-shock seemed to spur the fallen, dismembered ganger into action, and he jumped to his feet, screaming a guttural call out into the cavern like an injured animal. In a second he was lumbering and running towards Triar's tunnel. But his intention was never to reach the Salvationists. Instead, he stopped suddenly and threw himself onto the ground. As he did so, another explosion shook the ground and the superheated, vaporised remains of the ganger were sprayed back into the faces of his brethren. By throwing himself onto the grenade, he had certainly saved a number of the Subversives. Krelyn was impressed that he had not allowed himself to bleed uselessly to death at the feet of his boss.

As the explosion died down, Triar stood forward of the tunnel with a gleaming silver orb and hurled it forward towards the centre of the cave. Krelyn instantly knew what it was, and she threw herself flat into the trench, pulling her cloak up over her head as a thermal shield.

Uglar watched the plasma grenade spin through the air towards him and swore. He yelled an order to his men to scatter and, at the same time,

punched the detonator for the charges that he had planted around the great pit.

The Subversives sprinted from their positions and launched themselves into the relative cover of the ruined vehicles that decorated their lair. Seeing their opportunity as the massive gangers scattered, Triar and Elria jumped forward of their tunnels into the cover of the pits that had been hacked into the stone in front of them.

The plasma grenade and the melta-bombs detonated at the same time. If anyone had been watching they would have been blinded instantly by the starburst of plasma that erupted into an orb above the flaming pit, and then they would have been cooked and flattened by the thermal concussion that rippled out from the blast through the cavern. At the same time, they would have seen the melta-bombs detonate in a staccato sequence around the perimeter of the pit, blowing shards of rock into lethal shrapnel and rapturing the little dams that held the flaming liquid out of the channels in the floor. As the plasma ball radiated death into the air from above the flaming pit, tendrils of burning, toxic liquid gushed into torrents through the trenches towards the little pits in the tunnels' mouths.

CONVERGENCE

IT WAS UTTERLY dark and the air was thick with dust. In his ears, Triar could hear only the ringing echoes of perforated drams. Suddenly associating the darkness with the piercing pain in his ears, he wondered whether he had been blinded by the plasma explosion. Deaf and blind were not the ideal characteristics of a warrior, especially not of a warrior buried deep in the Subversives' sector of Goliath territory on the cusp of the Underhive.

He rolled over onto his back and searched his pockets for anything that might serve as a temporary light source. His clothes felt unpleasantly damp, and Triar lifted his head to look down over his body. There was a dim, greenish tinge to his cloak and, with his head craned towards it, he could just make out the sweet smell of toxins wafting through the air. The cloak was not giving off enough light for him to see by, but he was sure that other people would be able to see it, if there were any other people still alive in the cavern. Awkwardly, he rolled and shuffled on the ground, slipping his cloak off and laying it out on the ground next to him. He didn't relish the idea of that toxic sludge pressed up against him, but he also didn't relish the idea of Uglar popping a slug into the glowing green target.

Finally, he found a bunch of metallic tubes tucked into his belt and he tugged one free. Unscrewing the cap and clicking the primer, he lobbed the photon flare into a high arc, making sure that it would not detonate close enough to him to give away his position. After a couple of seconds, it exploded with a burst of intense, white light, showering the cavern with brightness as it incinerated its own shell and sizzled slowly back down to the ground.

Squinting and shading his eyes, Triar struggled to make out any shapes in the sudden light, but at least it meant that he wasn't blind. Half closing his eyes this time, he threw another flare along the same path as the last

one. When it burst into life in the centre of the cavern, he was looking away from it, around the perimeter of the cave. The tight point of bright light cast heavy, deep shadows throughout the space, stretching the burnt-out wrecks of battle-wagons and bikes into grotesque misshapes. In the few seconds of light, Triar saw the prone forms of Subversives gangers laid out on the cavern floor, and a number of others flopped unceremoniously over the edges of the ruined vehicles. He couldn't tell whether they were dead, but they were certainly not moving. Closer to him, he could see the shapes of a number of cloaked Salvationist gangers, prostrate and broken against the rocks. As the light died, he saw that their cloaks retained some of it as a pale green glow.

'Doesn't look good does it,' came a voice at his shoulder, making him start.

'Krelyn?'

'The same,' she said. She had been sitting behind him and watching his antics with the flares. Clicked to infra-red, she could see pretty well through her visor in the almost complete darkness of the cavern. She could also see that large numbers of the gangers on all sides had been killed by the blasts and the torrents of toxic fluids - their body heat was already ebbing away. Hardly anyone from the upper hive could swim, and about half of Triar's men had drowned as their pit flooded. Of the lucky ones who had managed to vault out of the pit before the waves gushed in, another three or four were fried by the thermal blast from Triar's plasma grenade. Triar himself and a couple of his closest aides had made it into the shadow of an upturned battle-wagon, which was now an amorphous lump of melted plasteel, after it had absorbed most of the heat wave directed towards the Salvationist gang leader.

'How many left?' asked Triar, reclining gently against the warm and still slightly soft metal blob at his back. 'How many were saved by the grace of the Undying Emperor?'

Even in the dark Krelyn could see Triar's eyes flash when he mentioned the hallowed name. 'I am not sure about that,' she answered, rising invisibly to her feet, 'but there are about four of you and perhaps the same of Elria's people - they're on the other side of the cave in a similar condition to you. As for the Subversives -maybe fifteen. They're tough slag-shovellers, those guys.'

'What about Uglar?' asked Triar, his voice quivering very slightly at the thought of all the death that had already surrounded him today. When Uglar had unexpectedly turned up at the Wall and challenged him for the curator from the Spire, Triar had been surprised, but he had actually been pretty pleased at the chance to dance a little with the Subversives. It was not an opportunity that the uphiver gangs got very often, and new opponents were the best way to sharpen one's wits. Had he known that the battle at the Wall would have led to the almost complete eradication of three uphiver gangs and to an apparently suicidal attack in the best-forgotten and hellish depths of the hive, he may have acted differently, for the glory of the Undying Emperor, of course. 'Uglar is fine,' said Uglar.

FLAMING TORCHES FLICKERED around the walls of the cavern and fires burned in the wrecks on the cave floor, filling the space with shadows and an inconstant, warming light. Uglar directed the surviving Subversives to collect up the weapons from the remnants of the Salvationists and The Coven gangs, who had been herded down into the great pit in the centre of the cavern. The liquid that until so recently had filled the huge pit, had all ran out of the cave or been evaporated by the tremendous heat of the plasma explosion. The air remained dense with pungent humidity and sulphurous smoke.

Krelyn stood apart from the uphivers, and Uglar appeared to be ignoring her, as though he had either not noticed her presence or simply didn't consider her worth worrying about. This had not escaped the attention of Triar and Elria, who were muttering to each other and throwing glances over towards the venator.

Despite the heavy losses suffered by Uglar, the uphivers were now outnumbered and outgunned by the Subversives. The explosive pit-defences had taken them by surprise, and the plasma grenade that they had hoped would have dealt with the bulk of the Subversives force had actually fried as many of their own gangers. Fighting down in the substructure of the hive turned out to be a completely different enterprise from the often clandestine gang wars that they had fought with each other in Hive City.

From its edge, Uglar watched the uphivers being corralled into the pit. He had dragged the chassis of an old battle-bike over to the lip, and he sat

on it now as though it were a throne.

'What-' began Elria, shrugging off the hands of a Subversives ganger and firing her defiant eyes up at Uglar. Her words died in her mouth and the flames dancing in her irises winked out as the ganger punched her squarely in the stomach. She doubled over and collapsed, her dirty blue hair brushing into the dust. Instinctively, Triar stepped forward to catch her, but the Subversive brought his foot round is an arc and smashed it into the side of Triar's head.

'No questions,' said the ganger simply. From his throne, Uglar looked down and laughed.

'What will you do with them?' asked Krelyn, approaching Uglar quietly from the side. Although she had no idea why she was receiving special treatment, she realised that she still didn't know where the curator was and that she couldn't leave without him. Besides, it seemed very unlikely that Uglar was unaware that she was there. In which case, he obviously had some sort of reason for treating her differently from the others, and she wanted to know what that was.

'You see, venator,' said Uglar, still laughing at his captives in the pit below, 'I told you that Uglar could pound these weak uphivers without your precious artefact! Didn't I tell you?' He turned to face Krelyn and slapped her heartily across her shoulders, as though emphasising his point.

'Erm, yes. Yes, you told me,' said Krelyn uncertainly, searching her memory for any recollections that might corroborate what the giant man was saying.

Uglar paused and stared at Krelyn for a moment, tilting his head slightly to one side as though deep in thought. 'You look different today, venator,' he said.

'Indeed?' replied Krelyn, pulling her impossibly dark cloak more tightly around her to hide her figure. 'Perhaps it is the thrill of the battle?'

For a couple of seconds, Uglar said nothing. He just stared at her. Then, abruptly, he laughed and slapped her again. 'Perhaps, Venator Orphae, perhaps. Battle invigorates us all - you may even have made a Goliath,' he mused, 'if you had been born as a huge man in the bowels of the world!'

Orphae? Krelyn had heard that name before, and her mind raced trying to locate it in her memory. The images and sounds of the last few hours and days cycled back through her brain at a lightning pace. Triar had

mentioned the name of another venator, but she was sure that it had been a man's name: Curion. That was it. It was after that, she thought, and her memories fast-forwarded like a movie, clicking into normal speed as she remembered leaning up against the bar in the Fresh Air talking with Elria for the first time: *I am acquainted with a colleague of yours. Venator Orphae?*

'You're too kind,' said Krelyn, unsure of what else she could say in response to that.

Clearly, Orphae's most important characteristics in Uglar's mind were the facts that she was a venator and that she was a woman. Both of these things must be pretty unusual to a Goliath; the Delaque are not well known for their rugged enjoyment of the brutalities of the substructure. For them, delight is found in the more subtle and sinister arts of death and deception. If there was a gang-house that could truly bridge the social divide of the Wall, it would be the politicking Delaque.

Besides, realised Krelyn suddenly, it is really dark down in Uglar's territory, and venators must be almost impossible to see, hidden under their light-absorbing cloaks, with half their face obscured by their visors. No wonder the Goliaths were so brash and bold with their hair, tattoos and piercings - otherwise they wouldn't be able to tell each other apart except, perhaps, by smell.

Of course, Elria seemed to have assumed that Krelyn would know Orphae, just because they were both women. And Triar had assumed that she would know Curion, just because they were both venators. They had all been wrong, just like Uglar. At least he had the excuse of not getting out much, and of the dark. It seemed that everyone had their blinkers when it came to House Delaque, which was the finest possible testament to their ability to maintain an aura of sinister mysteriousness.

You too have been kind, venator. I should thank you for your counsel. Without it, things may have turned out differently.' He was still distracted by the events in the pit, since Triar and Elria had now launched themselves at the Subversives ganger who had struck them, and the three of them were rolling about the pit-floor in a brawl. The other Subversives down there had formed a cordon between the rest of the uphivers and the fight, which they were watching enthusiastically.

'Just doing my job,' replied Krelyn, remembering the official line that she used to give whilst she was still part of the Red Snakes of House Delaque. As she said the words, a realisation stuck her like a branding iron. Orphae must have been a double agent - working as an informant for both Elria and Uglar. If this were true, it could only mean that the venator masters in the Red Snakes and in House Delaque itself were manoeuvring somewhere in the shadows. She wondered whether they knew that she was back in town.

'So, what are you going to do with the curator now?' asked Krelyn, realising at last that the whole affair with the Salvationists and The Coven was actually a sideshow.

'Ah, I'm sure that he'll be dead soon. He is a weak, sappy Spireling, venator, and hardly suited to a life in our cells.' In the pit, Elria had set the Subversive's hair on fire and Triar had a choking grip around his massive neck. Uglar was laughing boisterously now.

Why not give him to me, if he is of so little importance to you?' asked Krelyn, trying to make the most of the gang leader's good humour.

A weak cheer rose out of the pit, making Krelyn look down. Triar and Elria lay panting on the ground, exhausted but alive. The Subversive was motionless, face down in the dirt, with charred and melted skin dropping off his head. The cheer, such as it was, had been raised by the remaining uphivers, although they instantly regretted it as the cordon of Subversives turned back to face them.

'These uphivers are too weak to make good sport,' complained Uglar. 'It took both of those to kill Burgla, and he is the weakest of us. And those are their leaders, aren't they? It's pathetic.'

As he spoke, he stood out of his throne and vaulted down into the pit, thudding heavily as he landed. 'I will fight you all at once!' he yelled. 'Blades only. This is an ancient Goliath fighting pit - it is an arena for warriors. To the victor go the spoils!'

Triar and Elria struggled to climb back onto their feet, leaning against each other for support. Meanwhile, their gangers struggled with each other to get to the back of the group, as the huge figure of Uglar strode heavily across the pit towards them.

'I will fight you, Uglar of Goliath!'

The shout made everybody freeze. Uglar stopped walking and turned slowly. All eyes tracked up the far side of the pit to the source of the voice. And there, standing on top of Uglar's makeshift bike-throne, was Krelyn, flickering in and out of visibility as her cloak fluttered around her in the drafty cave.

Venator Orphae?' boomed Uglar. 'Why should I fight you?'

Elria strained her eyes in the darkness, struggling to see whether it was really the treacherous Orphae. It suddenly made sense: she was the one who betrayed the location of the roof-entrance to The Coven enclave. But it didn't really look like her.

'I am Krelyn Delaque of the Noble House of Ko'iron, and I will fight you. To the winner the spoils,' announced Krelyn with calm confidence.

Uglar laughed. 'What? You're who of what? What do you offer if you lose?'

'I can offer your Subversives the Ko'iron Contract -something that both of your prisoners down there would kill each other for.'

'Never heard of it!' countered Uglar. 'Never heard of the Ko'iron. They must be a distant and weak people. But I'll fight you just for the novelty. Then, when I win, I'll get these two to try and kill each other for it, like you say.'

HER CLOAK BALLOONED out behind her as she sprung down into the pit, slowing her fall so that she looked as though she were floating. As her feet touched the ground, she jumped again, letting the grav-shooter in her cape reduce her effective weight. She seemed to bounce, flipping up into the air to a height similar to that of the pit's edge, turning a slow somersault and landing again on the far side of the pit, a short distance from the group of uphivers.

Uglar watched her display with a grin. He didn't really care who this person was - whether it was Orphae, Krelyn or Gerontius Helmawr himself. The way she flipped and leaped around the arena actually made his mouth water in anticipation. 'Are you going to fight or dance?' he bellowed playfully.

In response, Krelyn kicked back up into the air and angled herself towards the giant Goliath in the centre of the pit. As she headed back down

to ground, she saw Uglar hold out his hand to the side. One of his gangers tossed him a long, broad and heavy looking sword and, as he caught it, he stepped back so that he could bring it to bear when Krelyn landed before him.

He timed his swing well, starting his horizontal arc before she landed so that the huge blade would cleave her through the stomach as her feet hit the ground. But she twisted in the air, flicking her cloak like a rudder and redirecting her flight slightly to throw off the giant's timing. As she hit the ground, she ducked into a roll, and Uglar's blade whipped through the air above her head, taking some folds out of her cloak but leaving her otherwise unscathed.

Before he could bring his hack under control, Krelyn was back up on her feet behind him. She spun and flicked out with a short dagger, plunging it into Uglar's lower back where his kidneys should be. He roared and spun, bringing his great blade round in a driven crescent. But Krelyn was already a metre out of range and the sweep served only to turn Uglar himself; Krelyn was standing casually, as though waiting for him to do something.

Hefting his sword into one hand, Uglar reached the other one around behind his back, feeling for the wound. As he drew it back, he lifted his bloody fingers to his face and wiped them against the adamantium of his jaw.

'Not bad, venator,' he barked, realising that he may have a serious contender on his hands.

With a roar, he lunged forward with his blade, trying to close the gap on the woman. Krelyn sprung backwards, maintaining a zone of safety between her and the tip of the blade. As she jumped, she tucked her hand into her fatigues and slipped one of the little, strapped knives between her fingers.

Uglar lunged again, breaking into a roaring charge towards the venator, trying to prevent her from maintaining her safe distance. But again Krelyn skipped backwards, much lighter on her feet than the giant who lumbered towards her. As she stepped back, she whipped her hand forward and released the little knife. It flipped end over end until it slit into Uglar's chest, burying itself completely through the half-healed gash that Triar had left there at the Wall.

The Subversives' boss roared in frustration and batted blindly at his chest, trying to dislodge the blade that had already sunk into one of his lungs. As he roared, he coughed, and a mouthful of blood vomited out onto the pit-floor.

He knew that he needed to close the range - he couldn't let the nimble venator use her speed and these sneaky projectiles. He needed to get in close and overpower her. He lowered his chest and bent forward to hide the gaping wound there, and prowled from side to side, advancing slowly and pushing Krelyn towards the sheer wall of the pit.

After only a few steps, Krelyn had nowhere to go and she knew it. She didn't have enough space for a big jump - the giant would hack her down before she left the ground. As her retreating foot crunched up against the wall, she knew that she had to do something. Without much hope, she whipped out a couple more throwing knives and darted them at Uglar. One stuck into his exposed shoulder, just inside his collarbone, but he swatted the other one away with a grumpy flick of his sword.

Her hands were empty now, and Uglar saw his chance. He pushed his sword out over his right shoulder and stepped forward, bringing the immense blade slicing down and across his body as he closed the gap to nothing.

Uglar had committed himself now, and Krelyn saw her chance. Ducking down to her left, she rolled forward towards the huge ganger, tugging long-bladed daggers from her boots with each hand as she went. She streaked under the descending arc of the broad sword and emerged at Uglar's right shoulder, dragging her two blades through his ribs as she rushed past and out in the middle of the pit once again.

The gang leader bucked like a wounded beast, throwing his head back and screaming into the darkness of the great cavern. The tip of his heavy sword scraped a diagonal grove through the rock-face where Krelyn should have been and then buried itself in the ground.

With blood gushing out between his ribs and dribbling down his chest, Uglar yanked the blade free and turned to face Krelyn again. He was dragging the tip of the heavy sword along the ground now, as though the strength to lift the mighty weapon had deserted him. His posture was broken and slumped, as he tried to hold his body in a position that didn't rely on any of the lacerated muscles. As he staggered forward, he stumbled

slightly and coughed, and blood started to spill over the edge of his metal jaw.

Krelyn stood in the centre of the pit, holding her two curving daggers in an elegant combat pose, with one horizontally before her and the other pointing forwards over her head. She stared at Uglar and met his smouldering brown eyes. He growled, almost halfheartedly, trying to maintain his momentum, but Krelyn simply shook her head.

'It's over, Uglar,' she said simply and without venom. It was just an observation.

'Ss not 'ver,' managed Uglar in response, pulling himself upright despite the agony.

As the Subversives gang leader broke into his final charge, Krelyn seemed to see the whole thing in slow motion. He came lumbering towards her, his head thrown back with blood and a tremendous roar spilling out of his mouth. His huge sword was chambered over his right shoulder, ready for a last great hack, and his eyes were fixed on the impenetrable darkness of Krelyn's visor.

Krelyn flourished her blades and reholstered them, breaking into a charge herself. As she ran towards the lumbering beast, she flicked out a cluster of throwing knives, exhausting the supply strapped to her thighs. Then she dropped into another roll, reclaiming her curved daggers from her boots, and plunged them forward as her spin brought her up onto her knees.

Looking up from her crouch, she could see the bulging eyes of Uglar staring straight down at her, as he leant his weight forward against her hands, with her daggers buried up to their hilts in his stomach. His chest was peppered with throwing knives and there was one sticking out of his forehead.

Slowly and without strength, the great sword fell from his right shoulder, clattering to the ground behind Krelyn. The last of Uglar's strength bled out of him and his massive weight fell forward, forcing Krelyn to duck out from underneath him or be crushed by his bulk. He crashed down onto the pit-floor, his weight driving the knives straight through him, so that their tips protruded out of his back.

A constant stream of blood coursed out of his metal mouth, but his eyes still twitched with the last residue of life. Krelyn touched her knee to the

ground next to the giant's head.

'When you look up, there is nothing but the sky,' she whispered.

'Ss 'ver now,' replied Ulgar. Then he died.

THERE WAS ALMOST complete silence in the cavern, and Krelyn could actually hear the hiss and crackle of the fires that provided the flickering light. Not quite knowing what kind of reaction to expect from the gangers, she decided to take her time. She rolled Uglar over onto his back and dug her knives out of his body, wiping them one at a time on her ragged cloak and repositioning them under the various straps on her legs.

When she stood up from the corpse and turned to face the others, she could see that they were just as uncertain about how to proceed as she was. The Subversives had dropped down onto their knees and were staring fixedly into the dirt, although it wasn't clear whether this was out of respect for their dead boss or out of reverence for her. The Coven and the Salvationist gangers just looked stunned, staring at her wide eyed as though she had just performed a miracle.

Krelyn decided to take the initiative.

'To the victor go the spoils,' she said, trying to sound assertive. 'This is the way of the fighting pit. You!' she called, hoping that one of the Subversives would look up.

A couple of heads lifted to look at her, and she pointed directly at one of them. 'You are now my second,' she said, hoping that she had picked a good one. The gargantuan man looked from side to side and then back at Krelyn. He pointed at his own chest like he was asking a question. 'Yes, you. Now, tell me where the prisoner is.'

The hesitant ganger clambered to his feet and bowed uncertainly. Then he rushed towards the side of the pit, where he paused and turned back to face Krelyn again. She realised that she would have to follow him, but she was not entirely confident that could leave Triar and Elria unsupervised. Both of them must have been a little surprised by recent revelations, and she didn't want them to transform their surprise into violence.

'The rest of you,' she called, calmly but firmly, 'stay here and watch them.'

With that, the other Subversives gangers were on their feet and reforming their cordon around the uphivers as though nothing had changed. Evidently, they were relieved to have something to do, no matter who told them to do it. It seemed that the victor really did get the spoils, in a refreshingly honest and uncomplicated way.

Krelyn walked off with her new second. As they wandered towards the edge of the great cavern, she tried to strike up a conversation with the man, but he would not be drawn on any subjects. He would not even reveal his name, and Krelyn began to wonder whether the man actually had any capacity for speech at all. She supposed that eloquence was not the most highly prized trait amongst the Goliaths, although Uglar had actually been quite charming, in his own distinct way.

The man suddenly stopped moving and pointed down at the ground.

'There?' asked Krelyn, looking down at the rough but featureless rock on the floor at the very edge of the cave. The prisoner is down there?'

The dumb man just stood there and nodded.

'Very well,' continued Krelyn, trying to encourage him, 'Can I see him?'

Again, the man nodded, but this time he also bent down and picked up a long metal bar from the ground. He proceeded to jam this bar into an almost imperceptible crack in the rock. Standing behind the bar, the man gripped hold of it and threw himself backwards towards the ground, dragging the rod down with him. As he did so, a huge slab of rock dislodged from the floor, defining itself as it lifted out of the ground. The man paused, drove the rod even deeper into the crack, and then threw himself down once again. After a few such exertions, the slab had been prised out of the ground, and the man rocked his shoulder against it to move it aside.

'Help! Please, somebody, anybody, help!' The voice sprang out from under the slab with a burst of green light as the slab was gradually moved out of the way.

Down below, in a small pool of stinking green effluent, Krelyn finally caught sight of Zefer, squinting at the relatively bright light that suddenly flooded his cell. He was splashing about in the glowing liquid and spitting mouthfuls of it. From the look of the water level, there couldn't have been much room down there for him to breathe whilst the huge ceiling slab had been in place.

'Curator Tyranus of House Ko'iron librarium?' asked Krelyn politely, reaching down her hand to help him out of the pool.

'What?' said Zefer, absolutely stunned to be greeted so formally. 'Y-yes,' he said, spitting slime and treading water. 'That's me, yes. Have you come to help me? I did wonder when my help might arrive. I rather thought that I would have met you at the Wall-'

'Shut up,' said Krelyn sharply, grabbing hold of his outstretched arm and dragging him out of the cell. She had already forgotten how hideously officious and pathetic people from the Spire could be. 'It is enough that we have met now,' she said as he flopped down onto the dry ground. She didn't have the heart to tell him that she was really an insurance policy rather than an assistant. Frankly, if she had never told Prince Jurod that she had been his baby-sitter whilst he went round pretending to be an Underhive hunter, she felt no compulsion to disillusion this bedraggled bureaucrat.

'Let's get you dried out, and then we should get moving. This is no place for the likes of you, curator,' said Krelyn, helping Zefer back to his feet and leading him over to the fires next to the pit in the centre of the cavern.

'I HAVE TO confess,' said Zefer, huddled up next to the fire, 'that I'm not entirely sure where we are... not, not exactly.'

The green liquid was gradually evaporating from Zefer's clothes, and it gave off an awful stink as it did so. Krelyn was sitting on the other side of the fire, in an attempt to keep the stench at tolerable levels. She was watching him mumble to himself as he dried, and she thought he looked slightly different from the Curator Tyranus that she had been watching for years back in the Spire. It could have been that her perceptions had shifted after being back in the HC for a while, but it was equally possible that being out of the Spire for the first time in his life had done something to the curator himself.

We are in the domain of the Subversives, a Goliath gang, just on the cusp of the Underhive itself,' explained Krelyn through the flames.

'The Goliaths?' asked Zefer, not sure what she was talking about.

'These giant, barbarian warriors,' replied Krelyn, shaking her head. She had been through so much to keep track of this man, and he didn't even know who the main gangs were in the hive. Still, she supposed, that was

not his skill - that was not why he was important. He was significant in this affair because he was a curator and a scholar, not because he was a great explorer or a warrior. Each has their place, she reminded herself.

'And it is better to be well defined at the top than lost in the paradoxes of foundations,' added Zefer, as though in response to her thoughts. 'Unless it isn't.'

"What?' snapped Krelyn, disarmed. "What did you say?'

'It's from *The Paradoxes of the Spire*, a book I have been studying. Have you heard of it?' replied Zefer innocently.

Yes, yes. I've heard of it. But *why* did you say that just then?' persisted Krelyn.

'Because you said that each has their place, and I was reminded of those lines from the book. I remember that they were very confusing for me when I was in the librarium, but their meaning has become much clearer since I set off on this little adventure,' he explained.

'But, curator, I didn't *say* that each has their place,' Krelyn was on her feet now and moving round to Zefer's side of the fire.

What?' Zefer kicked himself again mentally for saying that. 'What do you mean? Of course you said it. Who else could have said it?' he wondered, looking around.

'I didn't say it, and neither did anybody else,' She was genuinely unnerved now, and not entirely sure that this was Zefer at all. She had heard legends about strange creatures in the Underhive who could take on the form of anything or anyone they consumed. Such creatures were said to be telepathic, luring their victims to their doom with reassuring platitudes injected directly into their minds.

'What happened to your arm?' she asked, pointing. Most of the greenish fluid had dried now, but his left arm was still aglow, as though the veins from his shoulder to his finger tips pulsed with light.

Zefer shrugged and reached the arm out towards her. 'I don't know,' he answered honestly, as Krelyn stepped back cautiously. 'It happened when they put me in that cell. I thought that it might have had something to do with the water.'

'Has anything else changed?' asked Krelyn, fingering the hilt of a dagger under her fatigues. This didn't look good at all.

'No, I don't think so. But my neck feels much better now, and I think that my ribs have healed,' Zefer seemed genuinely cheerful about it.

'Curator, do you know what wyrds are?' she asked carefully.

A cry from the fighting-pit made them both turn. Triar was standing forward of the gangers and pointing up towards the fire around which the two servants of Ko'iron sat. His tarnished silver mask danced with firelight and his eyes burnt with a searing intensity.

'Mutant and witch!' he was pointing at Zefer, who looked all around in fear, as though trying to see who the Redemptionist might be talking about.

The other Salvationist gangers were on their feet, and the Subversives were peering up to the edge of the pit with anxiety on their faces. Triar may have been a firebrand of righteousness in the uphives, bringing the judgement of the Undying Emperor to those wyrds who showed even the slightest signs of their powers - people like Elria, who was a genuine pyromaniac. But down here in the depths of the hive, the Subversives had to deal with creatures far more terrifying than telepaths and weakling pyros. All of the wyrds from the upper levels who were too mutated or too powerful to pass as ordinary citizens would eventually find their way down here, where the short arm of the authorities would not bother to look for them. When a Goliath ganger yelled 'mutant,' he really meant it.

'We have to get out of here, now,' said Krelyn, gripping Zefer by his glowing arm and almost dragging him off towards the edge of the cavern. Down in the pit, she could hear the arguments erupting between the remnants of the three gangs but, worse than that, she could hear the bracing of weapons. Even if they didn't all come after them, at the least she could expect a hunting party of Subversives on their tail.

You'd better be worth all this fuss, she thought as she half dragged and half carried Zefer in an attempt to get him to move faster.

'Yes, I hope so too,' said Zefer. He meant it.

Krelyn stopped abruptly. 'I didn't say anything!'

She let go of his arm and dropped her hands onto her hips. She stared at him, watching him shift uneasily from one foot to the other, seeing his obvious discomfort in his surroundings and his complete obliviousness about the danger he was in. The thing that worries you most, she thought,

is probably that you're wrong about your interpretation of that bloody book.

Yes, that does worry me,' he said, nodding anxiously. 'But I'm sure that I'm right,' he rallied, puffing out his chest in pathetically false bravado.

It certainly seemed like him. It would be a weird wyrd creature that would not only take on the form of this curator but also his neuroses.

She shook her head in resignation, and the sound of at least twenty pairs of boots pounding up the edge of the fighting pit made her reach out to grab Zefer once again. 'We have to go,' she said, with calm determination.

'What's that?' asked Zefer, pointing into the shadows where the floor met the wall of the cavern.

'Curator, come. We don't have time for...' She trailed off. 'That,' she said, 'is hope.'

'BUT HE IS a mutant!' cried Triar, addressing all the gangers in the pit. 'We cannot suffer him to live. It is the will of the Undying Emperor that heretics must be exterminated.'

'Boss lady said to keep you here,' said the most vocal of the Subversives' guards. 'We keep you here.'

'But she's not really your boss. Don't you understand about vengeance?' asked Triar rhetorically. Vengeance is what makes us human. It is what places us above the level of animals. It is what makes us the chosen of the Undying Emperor himself.'

Triar was never one to miss the chance to preach, and this sermon might also have the advantage of saving his life.

'The venator killed Uglar! She killed him.'

'That is the way of the fighting pit, as it has been since ancient times,' said the ganger simply, as though he was repeating something that he had heard many times before. To the victor go the spoils. We are the spoils, see.'

'But she was_ deceitful in the pit. She fought with hidden blades and throwing knives, not with the honour of a Goliath warrior.' Triar had no idea whether the Subversives had a sense of honour in this way, but it was worth a shot. He fixed the ganger with his sparkling blue eyes and

explained: 'This wasn't the fighting pit of old, it was a Delaque trick to free the mutant.'

The Subversives didn't cheer or speak, and their expressions hardly seemed to change at all. Then, one of them nodded, and the others started to hand the confiscated weapons back to the uphivers.

'You're right. Uglar was a good boss. We will kill the cheating venator and her mutant lackey' With that, the Subversives turned and ran out of the pit, collecting an array of autocannons, bolt guns and chainswords from the pit-wrack as they went.

As Triar checked his weapon, Elria strode up to him and pulled his mask clear of his face. 'I do not share your feelings about the mutant, Triar, but the venator woman has deceived The Coven. We will hunt with you until she is dead. Then you are on your own. The artefact is now fair game.'

'I do not seek your help in this, witch-' began Triar.

'I can see into your eyes,' interrupted Elria, gazing deeply and closely. 'Do not cross me about wyrds.'

KRELYN HEFTED THE weapons onto her back and stuffed the grenades into a munitions bag that she slung over her shoulder. Zefer stood around, kicking his feet together and looking back towards the growing chorus of shouts and yells that were emerging from the pit.

'Don't worry, I'll carry them,' said Krelyn dryly

Zefer nodded.

With the weapons loaded up, Krelyn ducked down into the nearest exit tunnel and disappeared into the darkness. A couple of seconds later, her face reappeared in the tunnel mouth.

'Come on,' she said to Zefer, who had still not moved.

An abrupt shout from further back in the cavern was followed by the rattle of gunshots and a dusting of rock from the wall around the tunnel mouth. Zefer turned and looked back.

'Are they shooting at us?' he asked.

'Yes, they're shooting at us,' yelled Krelyn as she grabbed hold of Zefer's sleeve and pulled him into the tunnel. Without letting go of his sleeve, Krelyn dragged Zefer around and pushed him out in front of her so that she could drive him along through the tunnel.

'Move!' But Zefer wasn't moving.

'Move!'But Zefer still didn't move. Instead he seemed to be talking to someone further along in the tunnel, but Krelyn couldn't hear what was being said. It was as though only half the noise of their voices was actually vocalised. It was little more than a sequence of rasping breaths.

'What are you doing?' asked Krelyn, pushing Zefer aside to see who he was talking to.

She flicked her visor to infra-red and saw a figure crouched in the darkness. It looked only vaguely human, with a strangely elongated head, as though an animal's jaw-bone had been grafted on. The man-animal was sitting on its ankles and staring up at Zefer with unnaturally big eyes, leaning its weight forward on a staff. It was huffing and mumbling incoherently, and showing no signs of having noticed Krelyn at all.

'What's that?' she asked, shoving Zefer in the arm to get his attention.

'What?' said Zefer, cringing again at his choice of word. 'It's Ruskin. He says that he knows a good place for us to hide, and that we should follow him.'

'When did he say that?' asked Krelyn, confused and suspicious.

'Just now. You must have heard him too. He really is terribly articulate, isn't he, considering he appears to be an animal of some kind?'

'We don't have time for this now,' said Krelyn, checking back over her shoulder and hearing the rush of footsteps approaching. 'We have to get out of here.'

Ruskin nodded and turned. He beckoned to Zefer, took a few steps forward, and then seemed to vanish into the wall of the tunnel. Pushing from behind, simply eager to keep moving, Krelyn bundled Zefer along to the vanishing point. The darkness was severe, so she scanned the walls urgently with her thermal sensors, but she found nothing.

'Where did he go?' she asked, her voice tinged with exasperation. As she spoke an arm seemed to reach out of the wall itself and drag them both through it.

METASTASIS

THE NARROW TUNNEL twisted and snaked through the rocky substructure of the downhive, growing lower and more constricted as it went. To get through, Krelyn had swung her weapons around in front of her and stooped forward, ducking under the jagged rocks that jabbed down from the uneven ceiling. She praised the Emperor for her infra-red visor, without which she would surely have brained herself against the roof. The odd, man-animal guide could clearly see in the pitch-blackness, and he kept disappearing ahead of them, only to be found sitting patiendy in the meandering tunnel, waiting for them. And, somehow, Zefer managed to wander on through the darkness, avoiding all of the dangers without any apparent effort, muttering and grunting in response to noises from Ruskin.

They had lost their hunters almost instandy. A few bursts from a shotgun had smashed into the wall next to them as Ruskin had pulled them through into the concealed side-tunnel, and Krelyn had been able to hear the crashes and punches of frusttation as die hunting party had been unable to work out where they'd gone. Rattles of gunfire had ricocheted down after them once or twice, but she was confident that these shots were just flukes -the angry discharge of hunters who had lost their prey.

After what seemed like an hour of walking, Krelyn turned a sharp corner in the passageway and came to an abrupt halt. As far as she could see, she had hit a dead-end. She pressed her hands up against it, not willing to trust her eyes after the incident in the tunnel off the Subversives' cavern, but it was solid and cold. It looked as though the passageway ran through a fault line, and there had been a vertical slip at some point that had severed the passage in two.

Looking around, there was no sign of Zefer or Ruskin, and she sighed loudly, slouching back against the side of the tunnel, needing the rest in any case. Typical, she thought, shaking her head.

'Are you coming?' It was Zefer's voice.

Krelyn pushed herself off the wall and looked around again. 'Where are you?'

'Down here,' came the reply.

Peering down through the darkness, Krelyn saw a narrow slit at the base of the stone wall that blocked the tunnel. Faintly, perhaps ten metres below, she could see the pale green glow of Zefer's mutant arm -it was waving happily. The crevice was only just wide enough for a human body to slip through, and it was almost invisible, unless you knew exactly where to look. Even then, had Zefer's radiant arm not been showing her the way, Krelyn doubted that she would have found it without falling in and breaking her neck.

Remembering Zefer's clumsy and near fatal attempts to climb down from the Ko'iron librarium's exit tunnel, Krelyn could not help but laugh as she dropped the weapons down to him. How in Necromunda did he ever make it down through there?

'I'm not sure,' replied Zefer, as though responding to her thoughts. 'It just seemed like the best thing to do.'

With all of the weapons safely down, Krelyn took a final look behind her in the tunnel and then jumped, pulling her arms and legs flat so that she would drop like a dart through the narrow fissure.

The tunnel below was just like the one above, as though it had indeed once been part of the same passageway. By the time Krelyn held her hands out for the weapons, still looking around her for some sign of Ruskin, Zefer had already slung a couple of the heavy guns onto his own back, and he was slipping a string of grenades into the custom pouches around his belt. Without a word, he handed the remaining equipment over and then started off into the darkness.

'How can you see where you're going,' asked Krelyn, struggling to keep up with the curator in the perfect black.

'I look,' replied Zefer curtly, as though the question made no sense at all. His manner had changed significantly, and Krelyn noticed that the guns on his back had been strapped combat-fashion, for quick access.

'But it's so dark,' she insisted, ducking under a sudden and vicious drop in the roof level, which Zefer had navigated without comment or visible hardship.

'Is it? It's not too bad,' said Zefer. We must catch up with Ruskin. It would not do to lose him now.' With that, Zefer seemed to click up a gear, and he started to pull away from Krelyn, who was moving as fast as she could in the restrictive environment.

After a few minutes, Krelyn was on her own, straggling forward under the weight of the weapons, banging them against the narrow walls, and concentrating hard on keeping her head on her shoulders whilst not falling down any of the apparently bottomless potholes in the floor. Zefer had vanished into the darkness up ahead. Clearly he was not suffering the same problems as her. Only a few hours ago, the curator had been utterly oblivious about what a gun even looked like, and a few days ago he had been a gibbering wreck of a bureaucrat in the Spire, but now he seemed fitter and more confident than a Delaque vena-tor.

Rounding another bend, Krelyn saw Zefer and Ruskin sitting on opposite sides of the tunnel, Zefer leaning on the barrel of a shotgun with his green arm, and Ruskin propping himself against his staff. Behind them was the faint glow of a fire, which must have been in a cavern further along the passageway. The pale light presented the conversationalists as silhouettes, and seemed to carry their grunting and hissing discussion through the tunnel towards Krelyn.

'Ah, Krelyn!' exclaimed Zefer climbing to his feet at the sight of her. 'Let me help you with those.' He strode confidently towards her and reached out to relieve her of the weapons on her back.

'I'm fine, thanks,' she said, suspicious of his latest mood change, shrugging his hands off and trudging forward towards the light. She was reasonably sure that she had not told him her name.

BURNING LIKE SAPPHIRES in the darkness of the tunnel, Triar's eyes scanned the walls. He could see the impacts left in the ceiling from the shotgun blasts that had chased their prey, but there were no such marks on the side wall.

Behind him, the Subversives were raging, stamping their feet and smashing their fists against the other walls, firing their weapons in frustration. Great clouds of debris crashed down from the low ceiling,

dislodged by their fury, making the already confined space seem even more claustrophobic.

Elria came running back along the main tunnel - she and her Coven had run on ahead in case the escapees had gone that way.

'Nothing,' she said simply, with bright red light spilling out of her eyes into the dust riddled air.

In the strips of red light, Triar saw the dust and debris swirl. The air in the tunnel was being disrupted by a side-draft, not simply being sucked along in a line. He turned back to the wall that had no shotgun marks in it, and he reached out a hand to push it, wondering whether there was perhaps a concealed doorway.

He leant forward and met no resistance at all, stumbling through into a side-tunnel. From behind him he could hear the shocked cries from the gangers, wondering where he'd gone. Mumbling under their noise, Elria's voice muttered something about hypocrites and wyrds.

A second later, and Elria herself stepped through alongside Triar, pushing her arm through tentatively at first.

Very clever,' she said. 'I have seen many concealed doors before, but this is the first time that I have seen a concealed opening.'

'Obviously a trick of the light,' commented Triar, not convinced.

'Or of the shadows.'

THE TUNNEL OPENED out into a hab-dome, of the kind that Krelyn had thought only existed in the uphive. It was rather smaller than those found higher up, but its huge vaulted structure was similar in design. Unlike the epic domes of the Spire or even the upper HC, the roof was clearly visible, perhaps no more than fifty metres from the ground at its apex. Giant cracks ripped through the structure, and rains of dust and liquid effluent sprinkled down into the cavern. The rain and the cracks themselves were lit with an uneven green light of the kind that radiated from Zefer's arm, casting the whole scene into a pale and noxious aura.

Ruskin seemed to spit and gargle as he pointed his staff out over the vista, and Zefer nodded appreciatively, burbling some kind of guttural noise in response.

At least half the dome was made up of a lake. The water was smooth and calm for the most part, although it shimmered with the drizzle of impacts from the effluvial rain. In a couple of places on the far side, where the waters lapped up against the edges of the dome, huge outflow pipes spilt vast quantities of liquid into the mix, like waterfalls. Around the outflows, the lake swirled and eddied as the rusty, red waste splashed into the pale green water, stirring up silt and residue from the lakebed below. A group of boats circled the waterfalls, and their crews cast nets into the tumult, dredging the swirling mess for anything that may have fallen into the waste pipes higher up in the hive or been dislodged from the bottom of the lake.

Piled into huge mountains around the coastline were heaps of garbage. Fleets of tugs and barges, belching smoke from their filthy chimney stacks, constantly called into these ports and dumped their loads before setting off back into the lake for more fishing. As they unloaded, hundreds of figures swarmed over the mounds of refuse, scrambling and fighting to be the first to reach the fresh pickings.

Further away from the coast, there was a fair-sized settlement of, perhaps, fifty or sixty lowrise buildings. None of them were more than two stories high, and they were of an uneven, random architecture that spoke of no design whatsoever. The structures appeared to have been fashioned out of the garbage found in the lake, thrown together with varying degrees of ingenuity. It was clear, even from the mouth of the little tunnel where Krelyn stood, that many of the buildings had collapsed in the past, but they had just been left as they were, perhaps with some of their most useful parts pilfered and incorporated into other structures.

Something that struck Krelyn straight away was the fact that there appeared to be electricity in the settlement. There were a series of dull, bluish lights punctuating the spaces between the buildings and, at the back of the dome, behind the little settlement, there was a huge chimney that vomited thick columns of smoke into the already thick air. A chain of barges queued up at its base, and huge flares of fire leapt out of a colossal grill that overlooked the water. It was probably a furnace of some kind, generating tiny amounts power and vast quantities of pollution using a steam turbine.

While Krelyn soaked in the view, catching her breath at the end of the tortuous journey through the maze of tunnels, Ruskin and Zefer had fallen to their knees on a little plateau that overlooked the ratskin settlement. Ruskin had planted his staff into the ground before them, like a totem, and the two of them were muttering incomprehensible sounds with their heads bowed.

Not knowing quite what to do, Krelyn just watched them, wondering whether the curator had any idea what he was doing and, if so, how he knew. She had been down into the Underhive a number of times before, mostly to oversee the mock heroics of Prince Jurod during his youthful spyrering adventures. She had even seen ratskin settlements before - although mostly through the red-dot laser sight of a needle rifle. And she had no idea what Ruskin was doing.

After a few moments, Ruskin nodded and climbed back to his feet, leaning heavily against his staff for support. As he turned back to face her, Krelyn saw his features for the first time in the relative light of the dome. He was much, much older than she had thought. Indeed, he looked like an old man, with scars and wrinkles etched into his grimy face. The odd shape of his head turned out to be some sort of headwear - a giant rat skull had been sliced in two and fashioned into a kind of helmet, with the elongated jaw sticking out over the man's face and sheltering his huge black eyes from even the tiniest trace of light.

She could see that he was stooped and supporting his weight on the staff, which had been carefully carved into elaborate, snaking patterns, and decorated with a series of miniature animal skulls. The craftsmanship made her gasp as she realised that the staff would probably be worth a small fortune in the curiosities markets of Helmawr Boulevard, in front of the great Spiral Gates. Seeing it clutched in the hands of this decrepit old ratskin, surrounded by the rubbish and waste of the hive, hardly seemed believable. And yet, it seemed perfectly appropriate.

Ruskin was dressed in a series of furs, tied around his body in patches with an intricate system of cords and twine, and a short cloak dropped down out of the base of the rat-skull on his head. If he were to crouch on the ground, that cloak would cover most of his scrawny body and the skull would distort his head; he would look like one of the giant rats that scavenged around in the badzones.

'We must talk with the elders,' said Zefer, back on his feet. They may be able to help.'

With that, Zefer and Ruskin set off down the slope towards the ratskin settlement, leaving Krelyn to collect her thoughts, her breath and her weapons, and to hurry down after them. Things were not developing quite as she had anticipated.

AS THE THREE strode through the outskirts of the ratskin settlement, Krelyn started to notice faces appearing in the cracks in walls, between habitation structures, and in doorways. Highly reflective black eyes shone out of the deep shadows, burning red in her infra-red goggles. Ruskin and Zefer seemed to be oblivious to the attention that they were attracting, but it put Krelyn on edge and her arms were tensed, ready to pull round one of the guns from her back at a moment's notice.

The street was criss-crossed with little runnels, in which flowed fine streams of the glowing green liquid. It seemed smoother and less viscous than the liquids that they had encountered up until now, and Krelyn wondered whether the ratskins had some form of filtration system that made the vile substance less noxious, so that they could use it as a form of street lighting. It was possible, she conceded, that this was simply a completely different type of liquid from the others - less volatile and much less pungent. After all, if even she could tell that it was different from the nauseous stuff in the Subversives' cave, then she was sure that there were any number of variations that she couldn't identify. The ratskins, who lived with this stuff everyday of their lives, would probably ridicule her stupidity if she suggested that all of the noxious green slime looked the same to her. In a similar vein, she recalled being staggered when she learnt that it was only the Delaque who had twenty-seven different words for shadows, depending on their density and utility. Looking around her, it wouldn't surprise her at all if the ratskins had even more.

Eventually, the ambling little street opened out into what passed for a town square. It was a relatively open space, devoid of built structures and paved with what appeared to be door-panels salvaged from vehicles. The strange green liquid flooded out underneath the entire space, lighting it

eerily from below through all the myriad cracks and joins between the panels. In each of the four corners of the square were vertical pillars, atop which shone pale blue electric lights. The light that they gave off was negligible next to the general glow from the floor, but they added a sense of ceremonial importance to the place.

The most striking feature, however, was a huge column in the very centre of the square. It must have been a couple of metres in diameter and at least ten metres high. Roughly cylindrical, it could have once been the barrel of one of the great cannons that bristled around the very summit of Hive Primus, protecting House Hel-mawr from air-raids and attacks from outside the hive. But that would have been long, long ago, and the cylinder oozed such an aura of permanence that it seemed to have been rooted down here in the foundations of Necromunda since ancient times. Perhaps it had never seen the heady heights of the Spire. Perhaps it dated from before there was a Spire to protect, when the battles for land in the wastes of Necromunda raged horizontally across its surface rather than vertically into the skies. Krelyn knew that the ratskins sometimes constructed their settlements around sites of ancient archeotech, and built cults around them.

Whatever its origins, the column was now carved into a gradually rotating spiral, as though it had been wrapped diagonally in thick metal rope. Etched into each strand of the spiral were little icons and friezes, depicting battles and what looked like angels. Right in the middle was a panel in the shape of a family crest, but its details were partly eroded and mostly obscured by grime; a hint of a blue Ę peeked through the dirt. There were images of animals at regular intervals, and the skulls of giant rats had been installed into dedicated alcoves cut into the material of the column itself. In each skull burnt a single, fat candle, which was presumably renewed each day in some sort of ritual.

Sitting before the totemic column in a complicated chair of bone and leather was a hunched and atrophied old woman. Her head was weighed down under the weight of a rat-skull, similar to the one worn by Ruskin, and across her lap she held a sceptre that appeared to be a miniature duplicate of the great pillar behind her. Arrayed around her were perhaps twenty younger men, each standing solidly with what appeared to be shotguns gripped in both hands, as though acting as an honour guard.

Ruskin pushed his arm out in front of Zefer as they entered the square and stopped him from advancing, mumbling something that Krelyn could not understand. He walked forward of the other two, with his staff ringing out metallic notes on the ground. And, as he did so, the old woman prised herself out of her seat and shuffled forward.

'Why have you brought them here, Ruskin?' asked the woman.

Even though Krelyn could not understand a word that she said, her manner was unambiguously displeased.

'He is Kuhnon, bringer of the light, Muridae Roo-jika,' replied Ruskin, bowing his head as he spoke.

The woman looked shocked and incredulous. 'He is an uphiver! You know what happens when uphivers come into our settlements. Were you followed?'

'No, muridae. We were not followed. The giant sub-hivers called Goliaths gave chase, but mey cannot navigate our tunnels,' replied Ruskin, addressing the woman by her ritual title. Roojika the muridae was the settlement's elder, and with her lay responsibility for the community.

'But they are searching for you? They are hunting the ratskin?' challenged Roojika, unconvinced and uncon-soled.

'No, muridae. The hivers did not see Ruskin. Only these two,' he indicated Zefer and Krelyn. 'They will not hunt in the badzones just for two uphivers.'

'I do not like this, Ruskin. You are reckless.'

'But I bring the Kuhnon, muridae. He will lead us into the Garden of the Sump, as it is written,' insisted Ruskin. 'Even had I led the uphiver-predators into the heart of Bandicota, I would have been right.'

'As I said, Ruskin, you are reckless,' Roojika was shuffling forward towards Zefer and inspecting him, leaving Ruskin bowed and isolated in the square. As she circled round to Zefer's left, she gasped and staggered back away from him, almost losing her balance. Instinctively, Zefer lunged forward and caught the old woman before she could fall, lowering her gently to the ground for her to recover from her spell. The last time he'd seen an old woman fall, she had been dead by the time he had reached her, and he was pleased that this was not the case now. That old woman had been the first dead body that he had ever seen, and the memory had stuck

with him. 'Ask him to show me his arm,' said Roojika breathlessly, struggling out of Zefer's grasp and appealing to Ruskin.

'You can ask-' began Ruskin, but then he broke off as he saw Zefer release the muridae and hold his arm out for her to see. The glowing green veins pulsed more brightly than ever.

Roojika looked from his arm to his face and back again, incomprehension, dread, and awe competing for positions on her wrinkled face. 'You... you can understand me, uphiver?'

'Of course.' As he spoke, a chorus of mumbled whispers erupted throughout the square, and the crowds that had gathered around the perimeter started to press in closer.

'Tyranus!' yelled Krelyn, snatching a stubgun from her back and racking it. She leapt towards Zefer and then turned her back to him, scanning her weapon along the line of advancing ratskins. 'Tyranus, what's going on here?' She hadn't understood a single word.

'They just want to look at my arm,' said Zefer calmly, turning and pressing down on the barrel of Krelyn's gun to make her drop her sights.

Reluctantly and hesitantly, Krelyn lowered her gun.

'Why don't you listen to what they're saying, instead of leaping to conclusions?' asked Zefer, with an edge of irritation to his voice. You're supposed to be looking after me, remember, not the other way round.'

'I am listening, Tyranus,' she snapped, turning on him and shoving him in his chest. She didn't know what was happening to him, but she really didn't need this blithering curator getting out of control. 'I just don't speak ratskin. The real question here is how on Necromunda can you understand them?'

Zefer stumbled backwards and tripped over the muridae, crashing into a heap on the ground. Krelyn watched helplessly as he fell and then turned away in disgust, shaking her head and wondering why she had even bothered with all this. She should have just stayed back in the Spire, spying on curators in the librariums. But as she turned, she stopped short, with dozens of pike-blades and shotgun barrels pointing into her face. She froze. 'Tyranus!'

'IT'S A DEAD END,' said Triar as the odiers came stooped and stumbling around the corner behind him. The Subversives were finding it hardest, as the constricting and twisting tunnels crushed in on their huge bulks. But their eyes were good, and the dark was not such a problem for them. It was Triar who had bruises and cuts all over his head.

Elria just stared at him, shaking her head in patronising disbelief. 'I should have known better than to follow you.'

'Watch your mouth, witch!' rebutted Triar, striding forward towards her. 'In the bowels of the hive, there are only the eyes of the Undying Emperor to see you die.'

The Coven's leader didn't look scared, but she sunk onto her back leg and let her hand drop to her weapon. In the dark, Triar couldn't really see what she was doing. He could just see the flames in her eyes burning in the blackness.

A sudden explosion rocked the tunnel, throwing the gangers from their feet and dislodging a shower of stone from the ceiling. Before the resonations had even died down, the sound of Subversives whooping and yelling blasted through the passageway, followed by rattles of gunfire and the strafing explosions of munitions.

'No deadend now!' came the call, repeated and chanted like a war-dance.

As Elria and Triar climbed back to their feet, brushing a thick layer of rubble and dust off themselves, they saw the cavorting Subversives ahead in the tunnel, lit by the molten remains of the rock wall that had seemed to block the way. The passage dropped about ten metres down, but then ran off into the darkness. The floor of the passage they were in had slumped, collapsed, and partly melted under the Subversives' onslaught, and a ramp had been formed down to the next level.

Without a word to each other, Elria and Triar pushed past the others to the front of the group and set off down the ramp.

ALL OF THE ratskins from the Bandicota settlement were crammed into the central square. The children had pushed through to the front of the crowd and were sitting in a haphazard circle around the central pillar. Roojika was back in her ramshackle throne, and Ruskin had been accorded a position of honour at her left shoulder, as befitted a totem warrior of his

age and standing. Krelyn and Zefer sat next to each other on the steps of the dais on which the two elder ratskins held court.

'The people of Bandicota have always had hope,' began Roojika in a low rumbling voice.

Even though Krelyn could not understand what the ratskin chief was saying, she was still amazed that the people at the back of the crowd could hear her from so far away. Her voice was quiet, and the background clatter of the barges, garbage deposits and the power station almost drowned out the little splutters and coughs, even from where Krelyn was sitting. She had heard that the ratskins had a more intricately evolved sense of hearing, able to track the giant rats that they hunted ceremonially from miles away. It seemed plausible, therefore, that the crowd could filter out the background noise as they listened to their leader. It was also possible, pondered Krelyn, that their speech was only half audible, and that much of the communication was done psychically. Looking around, she noticed that many of the ratskins bore marks of mutation, as she would have expected at this depth in the downhive, and with mutation often came wyrd powers. Despite what the Redemptionists would have people believe, lesser powers such as telepathy were not even that uncommon in Hive City. This was not the first time that Krelyn had wished she was at least slightly wyrd.

We have always had hope, because we have maintained our memories and lived here in the manifest memories of the Hive Spirit itself,' continued the muridae, her words greeted by murmurs of agreement from the crowd.

'But now, Totem Warrior Ruskin has brought more than hope to his people. He has been wandering the wastes of the badzones for many years, fasting and trekking through the uncharted labyrinths that crawl with rats and foul subhiver-prospectors. Because of his ceaseless industry and constant meditation in praise of the spirits of the hive, our cleric has been rewarded with a prize greater even than his own personal purification. Not only has he earned his own passage to the bright lights of the after-world, to join his ancestors when his body is finally absorbed back into the foundations of this hive, but he has also been granted a guide to take us all into the Garden of the Sump,' announced Roojika in her understated and slightly breathless way.

As she mentioned the legendary gardens, a chant erupted from the crowd, as though completing a ritual incantation. 'When you look up, there is nothing but the sky.'

'What?' snapped Zefer, reaching up and tugging at the edge of Ruskin's cloak. 'What did they say?'

The old cleric lent down towards Zefer and whispered, so as not to disturb Roojika, who continued to speak. When you look up, there is nothing but the sky,' he repeated. 'It is a line from your own sacred text, Kuhnon.'

For a moment, Ruskin looked concerned. 'Are you testing me, master?'

'The prophesy is passing, and the bringer of the light is amongst us. As it is said in his own book: *"Though he may have been lost, salvation is always found buried in the depths of space and time, where Kuhnon first planted his roots."* At last he has returned to his roots in the very foundations of the hive - speaking the tongue of his people and bringing evidence of the light in his very being,' continued the muridae, preaching a sermon to the excited ratskins.

As Roojika paused for breath, the crowd once again struck up a ritual chant.

'In the beginning he lay the end into the ground, and his finale was buried beneath the foundations, as though expecting the sky to fall into the abyss in the days when Kuhnon's salvation will come.'

Zefer was on his feet now, the shock of the words being chanted around him leaving him dazed. As he got up, a great cheer rose out from the crowd, expecting him to speak, but he was rummaging inside his clothes, searching for the notebook into which he had so meticulously scribbled his thoughts over the last few years. He really had no need to check those lines - even the youngest school children in the Ko'iron academies would be familiar with those famous opening words -but something in his brain rebelled against the incredible coincidence and he was suddenly unwilling to rely on his memory in case it was deceiving him. So many things had changed over the last few hours and days, including some things in his head; it was not inconceivable that his memories had shifted and mutated into new shapes.

In one of his sleeves, his hand fumbled across a square of paper, which he realised was the envelope that he had eventually been given at the Wall.

But that wasn't what he needed now. He stripped off the long coat that he had been given by the women of The Coven and started to pat around his upper body, suddenly panicking that he had lost his book even after coming all this way.

The crowd had fallen into silence, and dozens of black in black eyes were staring up at him with confusion written into the blankness of their gazes as they watched his glowing arm dart around his body. But Zefer had completely forgotten that he was the spectacle, and he struggled against Krelyn's hand when she reached up to try and calm him. In the end, she gripped hold of his arm and yanked him back down onto the steps.

'What are you doing?' she demanded, hissing in a barely controlled whisper, apparently believing that the situation could still be salvaged. 'What's going on?'

Zefer flashed a look at Krelyn, making her recoil slightly under the unexpected venom. For that fraction of a second, it was as though Zefer had been replaced by somebody else entirely.

'It's the words... the words from the book. They said them. All of them... but they're different-' He was back.

'Slow down.' said Krelyn, and she slapped him. The crowd gasped.

'Ah!' exclaimed Zefer, oblivious to the strike but suddenly pulling a soggy and battered notebook out from underneath his vest. 'Here it is.'

Sitting on the edge of the dais, he carefully opened the book onto his knees and pushed his face down into the pages. He sniffed, inhaling deeply and holding the book against his nose as he sat back up again. The musty scent of the seventy-third floor of the Ko'iron librarium still lingered in the paper, but it was swamped now with a blaze of other things, pungent and noxious like the effluent in which it had been soaked.

Sniffing one more time, Zefer opened his eyes and suddenly realised where he was, as though the dank and stinking pages had finally brought it home to him. Looking out over the edge of his notebook, which was still pressed over his nose, he saw the crowd of ratskins staring back at him in incomprehension. Turning, he saw the same shocked look on the faces of the muridae and cleric. Finally, there were the curious eyebrows of Krelyn, whose eyes remained hidden behind her visor.

'Well?' she said.

Placing the book back into his lap, Zefer smoothed out the soaked and buckled pages. 'Yes - see, here,' he said. 'The ratskins just chanted these lines.' He pointed to some smudged text that he had carefully penned into the paper years before and then handed the book to Krelyn. 'This is where we are supposed to be.'

'This is were I am supposed to be,' he repeated, standing and addressing his remark to Ruskin. As he spoke and thought the words to the ratskin, the crowd erupted into cheers, and Ruskin's face relaxed into a smile.

SUDDENLY THE CROWD stopped cheering and scattered. In only a few seconds the town square was virtually empty, with Ruskin and Roojika the only ratskins still there.

'What did you say to them?' asked Krelyn, climbing to her feet next to Zefer to take a better look.

'I just told them what I told you,' he replied, taking his notebook back.

They are coming. We must go,' said Ruskin, picking up Zefer's coat and handing it to him. 'We must get to the garden gates now, before it is too late.'

'What?' said Zefer, deciding that this was not the time to worry about his diction. 'Who's coming?'

'The hunters are coming. They have found us at last,' said Roojika, showing no signs of getting out of her throne.

'They must have followed our trail after all,' added Ruskin, turning and bowing to the muridae. 'My humblest apologies, muridae.'

'It is too late for apologies, Ruskin, but not too late for Kuhnon to fulfil the prophecy. Take him to the garden gates, and we will hold them off for as long as we can,' hissed the old woman, as though on the verge on unconsciousness. By the time Ruskin had nodded and turned back to Zefer, Roojika was already mumbling the wordless sounds of an incantation and the soft light under the square was beginning to burn a little brighter.

'We must go,' said Ruskin again, grasping Zefer by the sleeve and half-dragging him down the steps.

'What's going on?' asked Krelyn, slipping her finger into the trigger cavity of her stubgun as she skipped lightly down the steps after them.

'Triar and Elria are here,' explained Zefer. 'The ratskins heard them coming out of the tunnels on the perimeter of the settlement. Ruskin is going to take me to the archeotech-'

He was cut off by the clink of a grenade hitting the metal floor and skidding towards the centre of the square. As it detonated, Krelyn and Ruskin dove at Zefer and squashed him to the ground beneath their combined weights. Sheets of fire sizzled through the air above them and Krelyn realised that Triar must have deployed another plasma bomb. However, as she lay waiting for the superheated sphere of plasma to expand into a miniature star above their heads and incinerate them all, a sudden blast of cool energy coursed through her and the coruscating flames in the air simply blinked out.

Rolling off Ruskin and Zefer and springing to her feet, Krelyn saw Roojika floating on a column of green, liquid light in the middle of the square. Threads and streams of the strange liquid had seeped up from under the scrap-metal floor and extinguished the fiery discharge from the plasma grenade, and a web-like lattice of tendrils had caught the fledgling star before it could form, choking the life out of it and suffocating its flames. Roojika was held entranced, muttering and mumbling wordlessly, orchestrating the hive's very own defence mechanisms.

'She's talking to the hive,' said Krelyn, the realisation striking her like a concussion. But, as she watched, she heard the crisp report of a bolt gun from the edge of the square and saw the muridae's head explode into a fountain of red. As her body flew back off the pillar of light, the energies in the square seemed to lose all focus, and the tendrils of icy green started to lash and whip in every direction at once.

Tracing the line of the shot, Krelyn shouldered her stubber and rattled off a hail of heavy bullets towards the shooter. An ear-piercing scream told her that she'd found her mark, but the dull clanging from her gun also told her that the ammunition had run dry. She cursed the Subversives for leaving near-empty weapons laying around in their cavern and cast the hunk of metal aside, grabbing a grenade launcher in its place.

Ruskin and Zefer were up and running, with the green lightning slashing over their heads and all around them. The ratskin cleric had his staff brandished into the air above him, and the tendrils of hive energy seemed to be sucked into it as he ran, drawing the lashes away from their bodies.

By now the sputter of gunfire and explosions could be heard from all around, and Krelyn realised that the ratskins had engaged the uphive gangers with their shotguns and pikes. It was hardly an even contest considering the kind of firepower that the uphivers would have brought with them. As if to confirm her fears, screams of pain cut through the shadows.

'Good luck!' she yelled at the disappearing figure of Zefer, reaching her decision and dropping a chain of frag-grenades into her weapon's reservoir, leaving only one still clipped to her belt.

'What?' he said, skidding to a halt and spinning around, pulling Ruskin to a standstill alongside him. 'What are you doing?'

She had started walking in the other direction, towards the sounds of battle. 'You're the one who knows about the artefact, you have to recover it - not me. Jurod just told me to make sure that you didn't screw it up. Baby-sitting is really what I do best.' She paused, removed the Ko'iron medallion from round her neck, and threw in over to Zefer. 'Return this to the prince for me.'

'We must go,' urged Ruskin, not really understanding what the woman in the square was saying. 'Leave her.'

Zefer paused. If the truth were known, he thought, he didn't really know anything about the artefact at all. He had just thought that he had made an interesting discovery about some new lines in a book in the Ko'iron librarium. They said something vague and suggestive about the foundations of the hive, and how House Ko'iron was there, but nothing specific. That said, after a slow start, everyone did seem to be making a bit of a fuss about it, and even he was beginning to believe the hype.

Grabbing a shotgun from his back, he racked its stock and turned back to Ruskin. 'Right,' he said, 'let's go-'

BEFORE KRELYN MADE it to the edge of the square, a group of ratskins came flooding in, wailing and shouting with flashes of tracer rounds zipping between them and over their heads. They were being routed. Bracing the launcher against her shoulder and angling it up into the air, Krelyn fired off a clutch of frag grenades. They arced over the top of the

charging ratskins in a tight parabola and then rained down into the street behind them, exploding into showers of lethal shrapnel.

The tracer rounds suddenly stopped chasing the ratskin braves, and the braves skidded to an abrupt halt when they saw Krelyn. There was a moment of indecision as they tried to work out whether she was on their side, but then they remembered her from the dais and watched her lob another volley of grenades over their heads into the crowd of gangers at their heels.

Fanning out to take up positions on either side of her, the ratskins threw themselves onto the deck and rolled into firing positions with their shotguns, prising up slabs of metal from the floor to act as cover.

It was no great shock to see Triar leading the charge of gangers into the square. His silver mask sparkled and his eyes flashed as he levelled a plasma pistol and squeezed off a burst of energy shells. Close behind him came Elria, her straggled hair flaring out around her like blue flames, and her red eyes surging with fire. And then came a storming line of intermixed Salvationists, Subversives and gangers from The Coven, bristling with discharging weapons.

Krelyn loosed another barrage from her grenade launcher and then threw it aside as it clicked to empty. Triar and Elria charged through the explosions, almost bathing in the flames, and Krelyn watched Triar fire another round from his plasma gun. This was her chance - plasma weapons may wreak havoc on the battlefield but they took too long to recharge to be practical at this range.

Breaking into a run, Krelyn pulled her curved daggers out of her boots and charged towards Triar, turning flips and springing with her cloak whipping around her to disrupt the sights of the ganger's weapon. When she landed, Triar had already drawn his sword and was poised waiting for her. She hit the ground and charged, spinning her curved blades into twin frenzies on either side of her, making Triar retreat under the onslaught, hopelessly prodding forward with his sword as he staggered backwards.

Without breaking her rhythm, Krelyn suddenly changed direction, stabbing out to the side with one of her blades and feeling it slide home before she turned to see Elria's shocked face falling towards her. Whipping the dagger out of the Escher's stomach, Krelyn wheeled and swiped back

towards Triar, spinning around behind him as he tried to charge her in the split second that she was distracted by Elria.

Bringing the inside of her elbow around his neck, she pulled Triar back into her chest, with one blade held at his solar-plexus and the other at his ear. She dragged him round so that he could see the figure of Elria bent double and coughing up blood in front of him, as hails of gunfire ripped through the air all around.

Triar felt a trickle of blood run down his neck and he closed his eyes, waiting for the deathblow, muttering a silent prayer to the Undying Emperor that his soul be saved.

But the slice across his throat never came. Instead, he felt the weight of Krelyn fall against his back. He stepped aside, and she collapsed forward onto her face with two seeping entrance wounds on her back.

With a broad grin hidden behind his mask and a muttered thanks to the Emperor, he picked up his plasma gun and turned back to face the broken figure of Elria.

'Suffer not the witch to live,' he said, and fired a volley of superheated energy into her constantly burning eyes. Then he turned and charged back towards the battle raging against the ratskins. This was turning into a proper Redemptionist crusade, he thought.

'IS SHE DEAD?' hissed Curion, as Orphae stooped down and prodded Krelyn with the barrel of her still-smoking needle rifle.

'No, not yet,' replied Orphae, with her voice tinged with amusement. She rolled Krelyn over onto her back and lifted off her own visor.

'I have always wanted to meet you,' she confessed playfully, pushing up Krelyn's sleeve and admiring her snaking tattoo. 'The last of the genuine Delaque in our part of the hive, an authentic Red Snake. Very impressive.'

'And you have certainly been very helpful to us,' nodded Curion, not bothering to crouch down beside her.

'Yes, the masters will be very pleased to hear how much havoc you have caused. Our power is now virtually unchallenged, thanks to your efforts,' explained Orphae with mock gratitude.

'Of course, if the Ko'iron Contract is returned to us, then you would return with it. Needless to say,' spat Curion, the little red snake under his

eye twitching with disgust, 'there are many in the Red Snakes and in House Delaque more generally who would rather not share their kingdom with you, Krelyn Delaque.'

'Yes, it certainly would not do for you to attempt to reclaim your birthright. It would cause... problems for the masters.'

Drowning slowly, with her mouth full of blood, Krelyn could offer no answer to the venators, but she realised that this was the second time that they had knocked her to the ground in the last few days. She also realised that actions speak louder than words, and she thumbed the detonator on the last frag-grenade on her belt.

SALVATION

AN EXPLOSION CUT through the persistent rattle of gunfire. It wasn't deafeningly loud, and it was way back in the central square, but it brought Zefer skidding to a halt as he ran after Ruskin. He turned just in time to see the smoke and flecks of shrapnel billow up into the air, breaking over the low roofline of the ratskin settlement.

'That was Krelyn,' he said softly, watching the smoke dissipate and mingle with the rest of the sludge in the air.

'Yes,' said Ruskin simply but with an edge of impatience.

Despite the energy of battle and the frantic strangeness of the surroundings in which he found himself, Zefer felt a calm sadness settling into his mind. He had hardly known Krelyn at all. He had met her for the first time only hours before. But, somehow, he felt that there had been a bond between them, the kind of bond that was built only after years of shared experiences. Her death took him by surprise, because he could suddenly not imagine the world without her. His world had been turned upside down over the last few hours and days; inexplicably, he had know that the explosion was her and, in that moment, his life had changed once again.

'How... How did I know?' asked Zefer, turning back to Ruskin and appealing to his wizened face as he might to a cleric or teacher.

'You are Kuhnon,' replied Ruskin, as though it was a simple matter. 'You feel the pulse of the hive.'

'And you, Ruskin?' asked Zefer, willing to believe anything at this point. 'You also feel this pulse?'

'You test me again, Kuhnon?' said Ruskin, slightly offended. Then he collected himself. 'Like all the ratskins, and more so,' He thrust this spirit staff forwards, as though that were proof.

A cloud of dust whipped through the street behind them, carrying the scent of burning fur and the metallic taste of shot. Zefer sniffed as he closed his eyes to prevent the particles from stinging them. As he did so, a burst of images besieged the darkness behind his eyes. He saw ratskin braves in flames, throwing themselves at the ground and rolling over and over, struggling in vain to extinguish them. He saw warriors charging with their pikes lowered being cut down by volleys of fire from the Subversives' autocannons. He saw Triar turning on Elria, and he saw Krelyn bleeding to death on the ground, thumbing a grenade.

His eyes snapped open and he saw that Ruskin was impatient to leave. His staff was glowing more brightly than ever, and he was twitching his head from side to side, checking the little alleys between the structures all around them.

'I can taste the wind,' marvelled Zefer, holding his glowing arm out in front of him and staring at it. Krelyn had been right - he was changing. It wasn't just the journey. It wasn't just that his body was toughening in a new and harsher environment. It wasn't even just that his eyes had been opened to new ways of viewing the hive - that process had begun with the incongruous picture in Princess Gwentria's palace weeks before. He was actually changing into something else - the spirit of the hive, or whatever the effluvial sludge was in that Subversives' cell, was changing him from within. No matter what had brought him here, it was somebody new who was finally arriving.

'For it is better to be well defined at the top than lost in the paradoxes of foundations - unless it isn't,' he quoted, looking deeply into Ruskin's black eyes.

'And it isn't,' answered Ruskin, as though Zefer had spoken the first half of an ancient code.

'Perhaps it isn't,' said Zefer, striding after Ruskin as he turned and hurried on through the outskirts of the settlement.

'Not far now,' said the totem warrior. 'We are nearly at the gates.'

THEY WERE HARDLY the Spiral Gates, reflected Zefer as he looked up at the huge, smooth surface of the nearly featureless doors. Although he had very limited knowledge of building materials, even Zefer could see

that the dull, grey-blue material from which they had been constructed was unusual. There were little trickles of green fluid running down them, but otherwise the doors seemed perfectly smooth and unmarked.

They were set into the side of a small dome, which seemed to be made of the same material. It was almost completely hemispherical and, again, totally unmarked on its smooth surface. Round the perimeter, however, Zefer could see mounds of rock that had been hacked away from the ground where the walls of the dome dove into it. It was as though somebody - or, more likely, some teams of people - had tried to dig a trench around the edge of the structure. The surrounding area was littered with broken tools, snapped pickaxes and abandoned rams. Here and there, half buried in the rubble, Zefer was sure that he could see skeletal limbs protruding.

Set into the open ground on either side of the doors were two banks of columns that resembled the one Zefer had seen in the central square of Bandicota. Sure enough, as Zefer scanned his eyes over them, there was one more on the right than the left and a shallow pit had been dug into the ground where the missing pillar should have been. Presumably the ratskins had removed it and taken it as the totem for their town.

Like the one in the central plaza, these columns had simple, flat panels cut into them at about their midway points, but on these this was the only decoration. The panels were as grubby and grimy as the rest of the structure, but Zefer could just about make out the hint of a family crest under the layers of dirt. Straining his eyes in the dim light, he was sure that he could discern that crucial word, Kuhnon, etched into the bottom of the crest-panels.

Even leaving aside the lack of decoration and ornamentation on these columns, they still looked slightly different from the ceremonial monument in the heart of the ratskin settlement. For one thing, Zefer noted that they were not held vertically out of the ground, but rather stuck out diagonally in various directions. It was certainly possible that they had slipped over the centuries and millennia, but there was something ineffably deliberate about their formation that made Zefer think that they had been carefully positioned in that manner.

At their bases, where the dais had been around the totem in the town, heavy mounds of rock had been piled, as though to help support the weight

of the wayward pillars. However, through the rabble and dirt,

Zefer could clearly see that the mounds were actually part of the columns themselves, like huge ball and socket joints in the ground, simply covered by ages of rockfalls and, perhaps, ceremonies.

As he watched, Ruskin picked a loose rock off the ground and wandered over to one of the pillars. He stuck his staff into ground next to him and muttered a quiet mantra, before carefully placing the rock onto the pile at the base of one of the columns. 'For the ratskin braves who have already fallen today,' he said solemnly as he saw Zefer's questioning look.

Zefer nodded in response, respecting the totem warrior's traditions but his mind racing with more rational, scholarly explanations for this site. Despite all the changes that he had undergone, he was still a curator of House Ko'iron, first class.

PUTRID GREEN FLAMES jetted out of holes in the rained remains of the square, and the great column in the centre finally keeled over under the onslaught from the gangers of the Subversives. They cheered as the structure crashed down into the scrap-metal of the ground, smashing through the plates of plasteel and splashing sprays of fiery green out into the air. As the pillar fell, the dais around its base crumbled and wrenched out of the deck, exposing a complicated, bulbous metal structure grafted onto the end. Although the shape was melted by the flames and corroded by the toxins in the effluvial flow, there was the clear suggestion of a chair pointing out along the barrel, and a series of levers.

Standing in amidst the flames in the square, bathing in the light with his arms outstretched, his mask shimmering and his eyes flashing with delighted passion, Triar soaked in the atmosphere of righteous destruction. All around him lay the corpses of dead mutants, ratskins and witch-Coven-heretics. His blue cloak was soaked with grime, green effervescent slime, and deep red blood. It was torn and tattered as it fluttered around him wim the flames. If he had realised how much fun it would be, he would have been on a crusade into the Underhive years ago.

From one of the burning sidestreets, Koorl, Triar's favoured deputy, came running. There was a clutch of Salvationist gangers behind him, limping and struggling to keep up, but Koorl himself seemed unharmed.

'The curator is heading for an old bunker at the edge of the dome,' called Koorl, skidding to a halt in front of Triar and watching his boss's eyes flare with unearthly blue fire. He had seen the glow of righteousness in those eyes before, but he had never seen them burn so violently. A thread of horror stitched itself into his soul as he realised what it could mean for the Redemption-ist firebrand.

'Then we will bring the wrath of the Undying Emperor to the mutant and his disgusting ratskin lackey!' Triar's voice bellowed unnaturally, sending waves of imperatives and commands rippling through the devastated plaza. As he spoke, all of the gangers stopped hacking, slicing and blasting their way through the haphazard structures of the settlement. He had always been a charismatic and persuasive boss, but there was more to his tone than charm now.

Pushing Koorl aside, Triar swept through the square, letting the toxic flames lick at his boots and reach hungrily for the fabric of his fluttering cloak. He held his plasma pistol in his left hand and his long, elegant sword vertically in his right. Like a blazing angel of death he strode forth towards the edge of the blistering remains of Bandicota. The Salvationist gangers fell in behind him, grabbing the heaviest weapons that they could find from the dead grips of the fallen. Then, after a few seconds, the Subversives around the toppled totem in the centre of the square broke into a run, pumping their autocannons and heavy flamers from side to side as they went, finally falling into step with Triar's minions.

'HOW DO WE get in?' asked Zefer, running his hands over the smooth surface.

Pressing so intimately against the heavy doors, Zefer could see that the layer of grime and sluice that coated the material had been scraped and struck in various different places. The crack that ran down between the double doors was so clean that it looked as though it had been scrubbed everyday. Just below his head height, a shattered fragment of metal stabbed out from the crack, as though some kind of rod had been jammed in and then snapped off under pressure.

'Has anyone ever been in before?' he asked, realising that these were the residual marks of attempts at forced entry.

'Never,' said Ruskin simply. He wasn't watching what Zefer was doing. Instead, his back was to the doors and he was facing along the ramshackle path that had brought them there. Beyond was the settlement of Bandicota that had been his home for his entire life. As far as he knew, it had sat undisturbed for millennia, buried deep in the badzones of the Underhive and undiscovered by the predations of the uphivers. And now it was a blaze of ruination and flame, and the energies that pulsed through the air were replete with the death-agonies of his ratskin kin.

His spirit staff was aglow with energy, and he gripped it firmly in both hands. He was murmuring under his breath, and tendrils of acid-green liquid were trickling and creeping over the rocky ground in little streams, converging at the point where his staff cracked the stone at his feet.

'People have tried, from time to time,' he continued, talking as though it were merely an automatic impulse as he continued to murmur and concentrate on his staff. 'False messiahs have come with explosives and guns, but the gates to the Garden of the Sump remain undamaged, awaiting your return, Kuhnon.'

It was clear to Zefer that Ruskin was right. People had tried to force their way into the little dome, but they had failed. Whatever they had used had simply had no effect on the unusual material of the doors or of the dome itself. Underneath the thick, syrupy layers of grime, the structure must have been just as it had been when it was first built. Whatever that material was, Zefer was reasonably sure that it wasn't used anymore.

'So, how do we get in?' asked Zefer again, stepping back away from the impregnable doors.

'They are coming - you must hurry,' said Ruskin, apparently ignoring his question. 'They are coming, now.'

Zefer turned as the first shell screamed overhead. He saw Ruskin standing in an expanding sphere of green light, against which the ranged shots of the distant gangers bounced and burst. Looking back into the township, he could not yet see the advancing figures of the gangers themselves, but he trusted Ruskin's nose and he could not deny the periodic explosions of ordnance.

He turned back to the doors and stared at them. There must be a way in. There must be. He hadn't come all this way just to be thwarted by a simple puzzle. He solved puzzles everyday - that's what he did. He was a curator

in the Historical Research Section - it was his job to solve puzzles and logic problems like this. Surely he hadn't changed so much that he had forgotten how to think.

How do you open doors that cannot be breached?

The most obvious thing about the question was that half of it was redundant, he reasoned. The fact that the material from which the doors were fashioned is unbreakable is irrelevant if the task is to *open* the doors. He was not trying to blow them up or knock them down, he just wanted to open them. The great adaman-tium Spiral Gates were virtually indestructible, but they creaked open from time to time when the right person gave the right papers to another person with the right key. It was simply a question of procedure.

What is the correct procedure for opening these doors?

A better question, thought Zefer, congratulating himself on his progress as another shell screeched overhead and slammed into the side of the dome. It's detonation was odd, since all of its force was thrown back in the direction from which it had come, spraying heat and light in every direction except into the dome itself. It was as though it were a las shot bouncing off a mirror.

A series of smaller explosions rattled above his head, but the bolter shells ricocheted energetically, bouncing back towards the shooters as though the impacts had had no appreciable effect on their velocities. However, the impacts did have an effect on Zefer, who spun round to see what was going on behind him.

The gangers were plainly visible now, clearing the fringes of the settlement and charging forward towards the archeotech site. Ruskin stood defiantly in their paths, sucking the tendrils of green sluice off the ground through his staff and then radiating an incredible green energy field into a dome that encompassed both him, Zefer, and the lower half of the impregnable doors. The hail of bullets that flashed out of the charging mob just seemed to glance off the field, but each impact made it stutter and flicker, and Zefer was sure that it would not hold forever.

Turning back to the doors, he struggled to discipline his mind once again: what is the correct procedure? He needed some clues. There was not enough information here to him to be able to answer the question. He needed resources, texts, people to interview... anything.

'You must hurry, Kuhnon,' called Ruskin, his voice trembling and weak, as though his strength was slowly deserting him.

Zefer looked from the ratskin totem warrior to the doors and back again, his mind racing but devoid of thoughts. He just didn't know what to do. And why should he, he realised suddenly. He wasn't Kuhnon. He didn't even know who this Kuhnon was supposed to be. He was a curator - a first class curator, but a curator nonetheless - not a ratskin messiah sent to bring light to the Underhive. He had just come on a research trip to see whether there was any evidence that the Ko'iron had been here at the foundations of the hive.

As if to show that it was all the fault of something else, Zefer snatched his notebook from its pouch and slapped it down onto the ground, fie could blame the book, at least. But as the book smacked onto the step in front of the doors, it puffed up a cloud of dirt and dust and, from underneath, Zefer saw a familiar glint of blue.

He dropped down onto his knees and started scrambling at the dirt, shovelling aside slime and sludge with the cover of his notebook. In an indentation in the stone, filled with guck and ancient grime, Zefer frantically uncovered a little crest. Even in the uneven, pale green light of the Bandicota dome, Zefer could see the tell-tale blue lines of the Ko'iron seal.

Tearing a page out of his book, Zefer used it like a cloth to clean out the rest of the sludge, but it was already clear that this was the mark of Ko'iron. He sat back in amazement as he realised what this meant. He had been right about the *Paradoxes of the Spire*; House Ko'iron had been down at the foundations of the hive. He could hardly wait to see the expression on the face of that senioris, whichever one it was, when he told the Historical Research Section the news.

Peering down into the hole a bit more closely, Zefer screwed up his eyes in a moment of confusion. The little seal looked just like the Ko'iron seal in every respect, except that it seemed to have the word 'Kuhnon' etched into the base, where 'Ko'iron' should be. For a moment he was concerned, but then a flash of insight struck him and he reached his finger down into the hole to scrape away the remnants of the sludge that still partly covered the emblem. He dug his nails into the dirt, but it was firmly fused to the surface of the seal and he couldn't budge it; eventually he gave up trying.

Slouching back against the doors, his hands covered in iridescent grime, Zefer looked out at Ruskin, still standing heroically with his hands clasped around his spirit staff. The sphere of green energy was beginning to fade and the gangers were now besieging him from three sides, laying withering fire into the pulsing field from their heavy weapons.

The cacophony of the battle seemed to fade into the background as Zefer realised that he just had no idea what to do. He still had the weapons that he had taken from Krelyn, but he had never fired a gun in his life, and was relatively sure that he wouldn't be able to confront the evangelic rage of Triar and the brute power of the Subversives all by himself. Even Ruskin's heroism just seemed poignant and depressing, as Zefer played idly with the page he had ripped out of his notebook. He smoothed the paper out on his lap and sniffed at it automatically. Buried in amongst the smells of toxins and death, he could still just about make out the soot from his candle in the librarium, and he smiled weakly. Tilting the page into the light, he read the famous words for the last time: *In the beginning they lay the end into the ground, And the finale was buried beneath the foundations, As though expecting the sky to fall into the abyss In the days ofKo'iron's salvation to come.*

With a start, Zefer jumped to his feet and yelled over to Ruskin.

'I've got it! In the beginning they lay the end into the ground-'

He was cut off by a huge explosion of energy. Ruskin collapsed to his knees in exhaustion, dropping his staff to the ground. As he fell, the protective sphere of green light blinked out of existence and the tirade of fire that had been pounding into it from three sides suddenly burst through. A flurry of superheated plasma smashed into the doors above Zefer's head, but the abrupt and unavoidable crossfire shredded Ruskin instantly, leaving him lacerated, bleeding and dead on the floor where he fell.

'HOW DELIGHTFUL TO see you again, and in such enchanting surroundings,' said Snakryn, waving one hand around the private lounge in the back of the

Quake Tavern while swirling a glass of rich, red wine in the other.

'Master Snakryn,' nodded Prince Jurod. His guards fanned out around the perimeter of the room before he walked through the door with Gwentria in tow. 'It has certainly been a long time.'

Jurod sat opposite the venator master and picked up the glass of wine that had been poured for him. He handed it to one of his guards, who took a tiny sip - enough to test it for poison, but not enough for him to enjoy. Nodding confidently, the guard returned the glass and stood back against the wall. Jurod wiped the rim before taking a mouthful, wondering whether the Red Snakes of House Delaque were cunning enough to lace his taster's lips with poison.

'Can I have some?' asked Gwentria, reaching for the carafe without waiting for an answer. She propped herself up on her tiptoes and leant across the table with her fingers wriggling to reach the wine, but it was infuriatingly just too far away.

'You may not,' said Jurod bluntly, pushing the carafe even further out of his little sister's reach.

'But you said!' stamped the girl, clearly displeased as she folded her arms into a sulk.

'I said that you could attend this meeting with our old allies, not that you could drink their wine,' explained Jurod patiently.

'We are new allies too, are we not, my prince?' injected Snakryn smoothly, amusement playing over his face. 'Let us say that we are timeless allies.'

'Indeed, venator lord,' confirmed Jurod absently as he motioned for Gwentria to sit. 'Tell me, what news do you have of the crisis in Hive City?' asked Jurod, a look of serious concern returning to his countenance.

'As my messenger must already have informed you, my prince, the virtual collapse of the Snake Charmers - the Orlock gang led by Orthios - created a significant power vacuum in the sectors closest to the Wall, not to mention the inconvenience that this must have caused to your own house's supplies, my prince.' Snakryn smiled sweetly and appeared to be waiting for an appropriate response.

'Yes, indeed, we are all too painfully aware of the shortcomings of Orthios and his Orlock Snake Charmers,' responded Jurod encouragingly. 'It was most generous of you to step into the breach, so to speak.'

'Think nothing of it - the Delaque have long memories, and we remember a great many things about House Ko'iron,' replied Snakyrn, still smiling; it wasn't quite what Jurod had expected him to say.

'As you are aware, my prince,' continued the venator smoothly, 'there have also been other developments in these regions of the Hive City that may have implications for House Delaque. In particular, I am pleased to be able to report that we have succeeded in neutralising the threats posed by The Coven - the Escher gang of that witch Elria - and by those fanatical Cawdor idiots of Triar's Salvationists. In short, my prince, we in the Red Snakes of House Delaque are now unchallenged in our control of that vital sector of Hive City.'

'That is certainly excellent news for you.'

'And, I hope, for you, my prince,' added Snakryn. 'With such solidly consolidated control, House Delaque is in a uniquely strong position to guarantee supplies to the Noble House of Ko'iron through our Red Snakes.'

'Indeed.' mused Jurod, not altogether impressed by the subtlety of Snakryn's speech, but aware that he was speaking the truth.

'It is not that we were willing merely to "step into the breach," as you said. Rather, I am here to represent the collective wills of the masters of House Delaque and all our various gangs throughout Hive Primus: we would be willing to shoulder the full burden of the Ko'iron Contract once again,' concluded Snakryn, finally getting to the point.

Jurod nodded slowly, swirling the remains of his drink. Making a decision, he beckoned to one of his guards, who rushed over with a document pouch and slid it onto the table in front of the prince.

"Very well,' said Jurod, throwing back the rest of his drink and opening the pouch. This is the contract. You will find it the same as before. The same as it was for the unfortunate Orlocks. Should you fail to fulfil its terms, it will be unilaterally revoked - not exactly "timeless". Is that understood?' He pushed a sheet of paper across the table towards the venator master.

'Perfectly,' smiled Snakryn, pushing his chair back from the table as though about to leave.

'There is one further thing,' said Jurod, leaning forward.

Anything, my prince.' His smile was fixed.

'I am sure that you are aware that Krelyn Delaque is currently on a mission for me in the downhive. I understand that you will be anxious to have her back, but I would be grateful if you could permit her to complete her mission for me before recalling her to your house.'

'I'm afraid that Krelyn is dead, my prince,' confessed Snakryn, furrowing his brow into an ostentatious frown. 'My agents in the badzones found her body. I am sorry. However, I am more than happy to provide you with a replacement venator from my own entourage.'

Snakryn beckoned over his shoulder with his hand. 'Curion, come out and show yourself.'

The prince's body-guards levelled their weapons as a cloaked figure emerged from the shadows behind Snakryn. He had been completely invisible until he stepped up to the table, but now Jurod could see the visor set into a deformed, scarred and burnt face. Under the rim of his visor, the remnants of what was once a snake tattoo twitched.

'Does that mean the funny man's not bringing me back my toy?' complained Gwentria, already grumpy about not being allowed any wine.

THE BULLETS RIPPED past his head as he ducked down, fumbling with the medallion that Krelyn had given him. They ricocheted off the door, bouncing back over his head instantaneously. He could barely hear the thudding of charging feet over the pounding of his heart as he stuffed the medallion into the hole in the ground and twisted it around until it clicked into place. In the beginning, he thought, closing his eyes as if in prayer, they lay the end into the ground, and the finale was buried beneath the foundations. Well, this was certainly the finale, and he was laying the pristine seal of his house into the ground.

A creak and a hiss of wind made him open his eyes. The great doors in front of him were opening slowly inwards, and volleys of fire were rattling in the widening angle. He jumped to his feet and pushed at the doors with all his strength, willing them to open faster. After a few seconds, the crack was side enough for him to get through, and he turned sideways to slip into the darkness beyond, with burning bright plasma shells hissing around him.

As he cleared the doors, he tripped, falling flat onto his face on the ground, splitting his lip and smashing his nose. Scrambling wildly to get back to his feet, his eyes fell upon another little hole in the ground, the mirror of the one out front. Without thinking, he plunged his medallion down into the slot and the doors ground instantly to a halt. Another second and they were moving back the other way.

Zefer sat on the ground with blood coursing down his chin, and he watched the huge, impregnable doors drawing back together. The vertical shaft of light that pushed in between them seemed incredibly bright when compared with the utter darkness in the bunker, but it grew rapidly dimmer as the doors started to meet in the middle. A fraction of a second before they finally sealed shut, Zefer saw a flurry of plasma zip through the crack and then a burst of blue fire as Triar crashed into the doors and pressed his face against them, reaching only fingertips into the interior.

Then it was black. Completely and utterly black. The dull thuds of the gangers' futile attempts to get in were barely audible, and Zefer simply sat motionless, listening.

After a while, his eyes became more accustomed to the light, the only source of which was his gently glowing arm, and he looked around. The space was roughly circular, like a small cave. The walls were smooth and curved, matching those he had seen outside. The only feature appeared to be a pedestal in the very centre of the chamber.

Clambering tentatively to his feet, Zefer shuffled over to the little podium, holding out his glowing arm to help light the way. The pedestal was also made of rock, carved and decorated in designs that looked vaguely familiar to him. Lying on top of the plinth was a large envelope. It seemed to glow green in the reflected light of his mutated arm, but it was probably white. Printed neatly on the front of it were five crisp characters: *CCA04*.

Zefer stared in incomprehension. He stared for a long time, although he had no sense of the passage of time in the darkness. Finally, he reached out and picked up the envelope, drawing it close to his face to sniff the paper. The scent was clean and lovely, reminding him of the Spire.

He carefully flicked off the Ko'iron seal on the back of the envelope and laid out the papers within on the pedestal in front of him. He stared again, shaking his head faintly and listening to the blood coursing through his

ears. There was a pass to get him back up through the Spiral Gates and a collection of requisition vouchers for him to collect supplies and a guide from a depot on the Hive City side of the Wall. There was also a little certificate, promoting him to the position of first class curator.

A memory struck him and his hands flew all around his abdomen, searching and patting down his clothes. He found the little envelope in the curator's pouch in the sleeve of his undergarments, exactly where he'd left it.

Dropping it onto the pedestal with the other papers, he inspected it closely. The text across the front read: *Zefer Tyranus, Ko'iron Curator - First Class*. Whoever had written that must have known about his promotion already. He turned the envelope over and looked again at the little red icon stamped into the seal on the back. It resembled a tiny snake, but this still meant nothing to him so he flicked it off and opened the envelope.

Inside was a single sheet of paper. Zefer turned it over and over, checking both sides, but there were only three words printed onto one side in a cursive, elegant script: *Thanks, Zefer. Snakryn*.

After staring at the words for an immeasurable time, Zefer slumped down to the ground with his back against the pedestal, shaking his head in bewilderment. He had no idea who this Snakryn was, or what he had done to deserve his thanks. He had no idea what his documentation was doing waiting for him in this bunker and, most of all, he had no idea how he was going to get out of there.

Then he laughed, despite himself. For it is better to be well defined at the top than lost in the paradoxes of foundations - unless it isn't, he thought, understanding the sarcasm for the first time.

JUNKTION

MATT FARRER

PROLOGUE

FOR ME IT ALL BEGINS with one single, knife-sharp memory that hasn't ever begun to fade.

It was in the middle of what Junktion people these days call the Dry Season, and I remember it all. I remember the slogans in that lurid green paint, that seemed to be everywhere you turned. And the tattered bodies of Garm Heliko's rebels over the Greimplatz, while Yellow Jancy sat underneath and laughed up at them. I remember looking into the dead eyes of the Escher girl lying in the muck of the puffball forest by the Shining Falls trail, with scavvies yelping and howling all around us. I remember the Steelheads and the Firebrands, the burning at Mirror-Bitten, Brother Hetch. Sometimes when I can't sleep I remember the sound of rats' feet on hollow metal ducts, or carrion-bat wings in among the gantries under Walking Man.

And I remember sweat and sharp, acid air. The noise of the winch. Brass armour shining in the stablight beam and Sebyo saying 'hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?'

We were in the number-four Winchnest, right on the end of a snapped-off girder sticking out into the Well. The winchboys had thought that there was a problem with the juice tap that fed the winches and the big pintle stablight. There wasn't, but it had taken me more than an hour of sweaty, nail-biting work to find that out, crawling up and down the girder trying to ignore that space all around and above me and the great big drop down to the Junktion rooftops. I'm an Underhiver, I like my tunnels and crawlways and boltholes, and when I'm out in open space like that I keep thinking I can feel the empty air plucking at me with little invisible fingers.

And of course the real problem was just that the cowling over the cable-join was loose and the juicewire had grown a coat of green rust-rot. If I'd known that at the start I could have spliced it in ten minutes and be back

on the winch-carriage (and if you think standing on a catwalk is bad, try riding in one of those rat-spat things), on my way to a firm Underhive floor and knock-off for the day. Sebyo and Backni were fussing over the signal lamps and pretending not to notice how angry I was.

'Hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?'

I didn't and I didn't care. Keeping the panniers moving was their business, not mine. It took a minute for me to realise that Backni was standing motionless a double armlength away from me, staring upward, mouth open.

What kind of spider? Junktion paid its trappers well to make sure that the spiders and carrion-bats and ripperjacks never got near the Well, but someone had slipped up. That was my first thought.

There were cables dropping down the Well all around us. Sebyo panned the pintle-light around and we saw two, three, four, half a dozen, a dozen more. The other winchnests had seen them too and all the crews were shining lights around. The lines flashed pale in the crisscrossing beams. They hung almost vertical, only swaying a little. There wasn't much movement in the air that day. What kind of spider lowered a trapline straight down like that?

Not spiders. Now I saw what Sebyo had seen. A flash of movement. High up. One of the stablight beams hitting metal. Never saw a spider that colour. Human shapes, clipped to the hanging lines, coming down all the lines at a smooth even speed.

There were calls from each nest they passed, and of course we were too surprised and stupid to work out why until they passed us too.

They wore scrolled and polished carapace armour and full helmets that covered their heads and shoulders. Beautiful bronze-coloured armour, the colour of aged sipping-liquor. Their faces bulged with darkvisors and machine-sights. There were grenades and limpet-meltas pouched at their hips and fat-barrelled fast-fire hellguns slung at their backs.

One of them was coming down the line nearest us now, near enough for me to see the Hive City Militia emblems etched into his armour and hear the soft buzz of the climb-harness that was lowering him. Buying kit like that would send an Underhiver broke for a year. The visor was turned toward me, watching me without expression. The hand dipped toward the belt.

That broke the spell. I yelled something half-coherent and ran. I left the other two standing in the winchnest and raced down the spar, running for the little burrow in the rockcrete wall where the winchboys slept and ate. My feet thumped on the catwalk's rubber grip-mats.

I remember looking over my shoulder. Backni right behind me, the same fear in his face, yelling my name: 'Kass! Kass!'. Sebyo, slower, still at the pintle-light railing, and the man in the bronze armour, his hand coming around in a languid, easy throw. I remember the soft sound of the grenade landing on the matting as I threw myself forward and a wordless cry from Sebyo, running just fast enough that he couldn't stop running towards it.

I remember lying on my face in the burrow with my ears full of static from the blast. I remember hearing Sebyo's scream - he wasn't so badly hurt that he couldn't cry out as it threw him over the railing and down the Well. I remember Backni taking four more rattling breaths and falling silent.

And I remember my hearing coming back as I lay there willing my limbs to move, in time to hear the sounds coming up the Well. They were faint and echoing but unmistakable - the snap of lasfire, the rattle of stubber-fire, the boom of grenades.

That's the starter, the kick-off; the memory of Hive City coming down to Junktion to take us apart.

WATER FOR ALL

WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH.

The words were written in letters of glow-green paint, three feet high against the wall of the Upper Six road-pipe out from Junktion towards Twodog and Dying Gorge. The light was bright enough to catch the paint and make it almost leap off the rough metal behind it and the writing was rough and angry. You could imagine the knuckles of whoever had held the jet-brush, white and shaking as they had painted the slogan on. It grabbed the eye just the way the painter must have wanted it to.

It had grabbed someone else's eyes already. Filling most of the roadpipe, shuffling on the packed dust and slag-gravel that made up the walkable floor, a knot of sombre grey shapes regarded the words. I stopped about a dozen paces away, letting them realise I was there and get used to me. Junktion is safer than most parts, but there isn't anywhere in the Underhive where it pays to startle a crowd of strangers, and lately people round here had more reason than usual to think with their trigger fingers.

There's a body language and a way of walking that most Underhivers know and I used it now. Small steps so I wasn't rushing at them, face neutral, one hand on the holster at my hip so they knew it was there. I think I looked more confident than I felt. All of the shapes were pretty much the same, silent lumps about human height. No faces, just thick vulcanised dust-hoods that dropped down into knee-length ponchos, belled out like a sting-jelly's skirts where packs and satchels were slung underneath them.

For a minute they just stood in the dimness and I had one quick moment of alarm, then the shape furthest front yanked back his hood and turned into a tired-looking man, maybe ten years older than my thirty-two, with sweat on his forehead and grey stubble on his chin. He pointed the chin at the far wall and then looked back at me.

'We hadn't heard about this.'

Hadn't heard things were drying up? I didn't say it outright but the question must have shown on my face.

'The attack we heard about. Not this. Things this bad up here already?'

He was watching me carefully. You can pick up a lot from how someone reacts to strangers asking about their town. This guy had the trick of it, but not of hiding his interest. I didn't give anything away. I'm good at that. Ask anyone I've played Ko'Iron Six-Card with.

'Few people are unhappy about the rationing, I guess,' I said after a moment. 'Lot of these slogans around now.'

We looked at the letters together.

'Bizer Enning', he said eventually. He had the accent of someone from the Twodog gantry-tunnels, overemphasising his words from having to talk through the heavy cloth mask that kept the lichen-mites out of the mouth and nostrils. Enning wasn't the name of any of the bigger Twodog families I knew of, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

'Sinden Kass,' I told him back, and we nodded to each other.

'How would a newcomer get a water ration, then?' he asked. His voice had made the question casual but his eyes said otherwise. I spread my hands.

'Can't tell you. Lot of people have come in from the badlands since the raid, wanting rations. You can't buy an allowance any more.' Not without some strategic choices in friends, anyway, but I didn't say it. 'The rules change on the hour, it seems like. You'd find out the latest at the gates.'

He nodded and glanced back at the other shapes behind him. They didn't seem so threatening now.

'How far down the way, then?'

'About an hour of walking. Maybe another quarter more, depending. It's downhill, but if you've come a way...' He nodded, looking a little more tired, and started to fumble with the edges of his hood.

'Safe, do you think, or should we...' He made a downward-patting gesture by his hip, the gesture for 'be fight-ready'. I grinned at him.

'Relax, sir. You're on your way to Junktion. Haven't you heard the stories?' He managed a smile back at that, and pulled the hood all the way on to turn into a shape again. I watched them as they set off down the

roadpipe, with soft steps that soon blended with the little creaks and echoes that you hear in the Underhive all the time.

I went over the conversation as I went about my work by the scrawled-on wall. For a while I felt a little bad about acting so cool about Junktion's safety, but I soon put it out of mind. Things weren't that bad around Junktion, after all. At least they weren't back then.

THE LIGHT-TILE I was there to work on was the furthest point of the rounds for that lightson, and the one I wanted most to get out of the way. I hadn't admitted it to Enning, but the letters on the wall here were new, and so were the last two I'd seen on the way there, and there were more around all the time in the weeks since the raiders had hit Junktion. I had had to get back into the habit of keeping my coat tucked back behind my holster and the fast-draw flap down.

The tile itself was still glowing, which was just as well. There are fixtures around Junktion that we lamplighters know how to repair, but those upper-circuit roadpipe tiles with their bright white glow are definitely not an example. But the framing was hanging loose and the reflector slats were badly gunked and that I could do something about. I got the housing back into position with only a little cursing, and the grime and crap came off the slats easily enough. By the time I was done the tile was bright enough to read my map by, which I hadn't been able to do before, and that's my test for a job properly done. The brighter light made the graffiti even more brash than before. WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH. Flashes of the colour kept jumping into the corner of my vision as I walked away.

THE NEXT STOP was the only really nasty one, seeing to one of the arclights on the elevated bridgeway that climbs up to the Shining Falls trail and crosses the cavity between old hive domes. The cavity floor is carpeted by fungi with these big, glistening, dish-like pads that people say like to drink the light. I've heard if you shine a lamp down onto them you can actually see all these cups of white fungus-flesh shivering and trying to turn to the lantern-beam. Balancing out on the stanchions in all that open space is bad enough, but the thought of those nodding white saucers

all stirring underneath, waiting for the light to come back on, made it worse. Even with my clip-line a job out on the girderwork out there can never be over soon enough.

Luckily it was a quick job. The rubber coating had been stripped off the juice feeds by decay or some gnaw-happy local wildlife specimen, and I had enough replacement stuff in my pack. Some peddler Thamm knows brings it up from deeper downhive. I have no idea where they harvest it from, but if you melt the salvaged stuff a little you can knead it into place easily enough.

I finished up in good time and was walking back down the bridgeway within half an hour, swearing to myself as I always do that before we had to fix those damn feeds again I'd call in a favour with one of Junktion's jackleg foundrymen, and get little cages made to keep the vermin off the arclight arrays. With my own cash if I had to, I had enough to spare and I hated the bridge jobs enough for it to be worth the expense. There had been more stories from further down that way, too. Attacks by feral ratpacks and swoopspiders, even scavvies if you believed the rumours, things that had been drawn out of the badlands since the attack, looking for water and finding prey. I didn't think anything would come this close to Junktion, but you never knew. I was thinking about bringing back the old arrangement from when Nardo and I first lit the bridgeway, one working on the lights and the other one standing guard with a piece at the ready.

I could see Nardo ahead of me now as I came slogging down off the bridgeway and through the wreckage and giant branching fungi that ring the Fog Flats. The chem-fog was only just starting to really thicken as the air chilled on its twenty-hour cycle, and the lights from Junktion's walls beyond us were still individual points of light instead of the orange glow that they would become when the vapour was at its thickest. We'd be gone by then: at their thickest the fogs had some kind of stinging taint to them that drove the toughest winch-crews indoors.

Nardo was leaning against the biggest of the line of corroded girders that ringed the winchport, holding up an ungainly curtain of razorwire and trap-chains. He was easy to pick out: like me he had his pack and tool belt, his little collapsible ladder sticking up over his shoulder and the pool of light from his lantern-pole bobbing around him. There's no official markings for Junktion's lamplighters, no Guilder-style medallions or

colours like the gangs wear, but you can tell us by our kit. Good gear and good clothes. We get looked after.

'More slogans around,' I told him as we walked. The Junktion lights were growing brighter, and to our left the fungus forest was thinning out into the spore-orchards and metal humpies of the Peelgut plantations.

'Yeh. Saw 'em myself. Same as the others.' Nardo had never said where he was from, but he had the thickest muttering downhive accent I'd ever come across.

'Same?' I asked him. 'More of the "water for all" ones?'

'Yeh, some o' those. Few others. "Junktion water's our water". Like that.'

'Haven't seen any of those,' I said as Nardo darted a look around and slid a water-flask out of his coat. 'Only different one I saw was near the old feral pits at the bottom of the roadpipe, up on one of those big hanging vent covers. Same green paint. Said "We shall fight and we shall drink.'"

I was grinning. Nardo had taken a mouthful of water before he thought about it, started laughing and had to gulp and double over before he could get it swallowed. I saw some figures around drum-fires inside the liftport looking around curiously, but lamplighters tend to get left to their business.

Think that's quite what they're after?' I asked Nardo. '"We shall fight and we shall drink." Might even get a few more recruits that way. Let 'em think they're on their way to a piss-up.' Nardo thought about it again and laughed again, and this time he did choke. Water spurted out of his mouth and soaked the stubble on his chin and the front of his heavy grey tunic. I clapped him on the shoulder.

'Look at you, then, stuck-up spoilt lamplighter on your water stipend. Get ten Guilder chips for that in the Square.'

'Screw you, rich man. How much y'got stashed in that hole of yours? Hoarding y'water, y'bastard.'

We traded elbow jabs and kept walking. Nardo and I were the two oldest lamplighters, with five years or more on Venz, Mudeye or Thamm, but we were good enough friends that we caught ourselves acting like juves when we were on rounds together. Thamm even made jokes about us being twins although we looked nothing alike - me long and lean and pale under my broad hat, Nardo with his stocky shoulders and squashy, jowly face and rolling way of walking. But we worked well together. We got on.

Nardo gave me a swig from his flask. The water tasted brackish and metallic, the way it always seemed to now the town was using the emergency cisterns. Then he realised he was walking along with his flask on show and stowed it again in a hurry, and after that we went on in uneasy silence. This was not the sort of conversation people were supposed to have in Junktion.

Junktion. Fortress-town, meeting of roads, trading post. Boom-town, sitting at the bottom of the Junktion Well, sprawled on top of the Piles. Come and visit us sometime.

It happens anywhere in the Underhive where any two trails or through-halls or roadpipes meet. Any joining of roads has its drinking hole, or flophouse, or at the least a half-arsed communal dust-tent and a scruffy knot of pedlars hawking food and lucky charms. At places like Junktion, where one of the big uphive collapses has torn a hole down through the guts of the hive, you get something bigger. Not the biggest of the Underhive's collapse pits, definitely nowhere near that great chasm at Dust Falls where you can't see one side from the other even with a stablight and anything you toss in will fall all the way to the Sump. But it's big enough to be valuable.

Nardo and I were close enough now to see where the Junktion lights sloped up the sides of the Piles. That was where the rubble had settled, all the smashed rockcrete and ripped metal that had cascaded down to make the Well. Some time long after the collapse a band of now-nameless wanderers found that it had settled enough to be stable and set up a camp that turned into a permanent enclave, that turned into Junktion. The giant Black Pile with the brightly-lit cisterns and sentry tower at its top, across the sludge canal the Red Pile where most of the collapsed metal seemed to have landed and rusted. The little nub of Guilders' Hill was too small for us to make it out over the wall and through the thickening fog. We both walked a little faster.

If I took my eyes off the sides of the Black Pile and looked quarter-turn to my right, I could see a point of light moving unsteadily upwards. A second to listen and I could hear the faint grind of the winch. Someone's cargo, off up to number-one nest in among the rooms chopped into the rockcrete at the bottom of the Well, where the smashed shaft from the collapse bellied out into the burrow that Junktion town lived in. From

there it would go into another pannier to be hauled up to number-two nest in its half-collapsed dome; from there the cable from number-three nest would hoist it up through the broken roof and up to the bluff of packed rubble where the cable from-

('Hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?' The sound of the grenade.)

But I didn't feel like dwelling on number-four nest now.

Anyway, that's Junktion's real jackpot, right there. You've come up from the deep Underhive, up from Glory Hole or Blackenred, up from where most people have never seen light that came from a power lantern rather than a burning wick, or a gun that fired las-shots instead of slugs or scattershot. You've lugged your load of spider shells or eyes, or mutant pelts, pearl-spores, even archeotech, stuff that'll have the whiteneck uphive traders fighting to push creds into your hand. You reach Junktion, rest your feet, buy some refined booze and a night (or at least an hour) with someone you fancy who might even have all her fingers and toes, both eyes and no visible scars.

There would be enough of that even with just the roads. Junktion is where a lot of trails meet. Head twelveward and you can get on the roadpipes for Mirror-Bitten, Ghoul Bend, Scrubtangle, even Baiters' Dock down on the sludge lakes. In the other direction there's Shining Falls, and the big arterial pipe that opens up Dying Gorge, Tarvo, Wilhelm's Crossing, Coma Gulch and Twodog. But then there's the Well on top of everything else.

Because when you're ready to move again, what's going to look better? Plod on up the trail through another hundred, hundred and twenty, hundred and fifty levels? (No, I don't know how many, I've never cared to stare up into all that empty air long enough to count them.) Spend weeks more in the roadpipes, risking wildlife, scavvies, bandits, quakes, gunk-floods? Or are you going to stay in Junktion, eat a nice late breakfast, and then roll yourself out to the liftport? Buy your winch chit from the town fathers and hand it off to the hauler crews, then you watch as your goods get hoisted up to be at the stockade up there by the next lightson?

Don't listen to the grumbling you hear about Junktion prices, about how the only difference between the Junktion town fathers and a bandit gang is how the bandits don't bill you for wear and tear on the gun they hold to

your head. For every pannier that gets hauled up the Well you can bet there are five caravan bosses cursing the lucky bastard whose cargo it is and jockeying for the next chit, and ten more setting off through the roadpipes and wishing like hell they could afford a winch passage at all.

So, Junktion the trade-town, the boom-town. Once there's money flowing through a town in the Underhive, well, people with money need guns and ammo and people to use them on their behalf, and they want booze and smokes, and the people who provide them with those need food and juice and parts and entertainment of their own. And there are plenty of things that nobody would ever think they needed at all except that places like Junktion fill up with folks who'll provide them anyway. Soothsayers, kootchie-girls, or amiable gentlemen who get mysteriously luckier with the cards once their opponent has a few shots of Second Best inside them (and turn out to have some burly, bad-tempered friends in the event someone gets pushy about it).

So the place has a reputation in this corner of the Underhive. It's in Junktion, people have said around here for more than seventy years, and in the Underhive that can be nearly three lifetimes. Whatever you need, it's in Junktion. Whatever you need, go to Junktion.

Which was why Nardo and I were suddenly walking in silence. Why the slogans about fighting made me uneasy, why watching Nardo hide his water flask was worse. Junktion was a town that made money. It was the town where people came to live large. It wasn't the town where you were supposed to have to look over your shoulder before you took a drink. It wasn't the town where you found your conversations circling around and around the idea of revolt.

I'D BEEN COUNTING on my train of thought about the town to distract me from what we were walking past, but it didn't work. Our feet were crunching through scorched debris, and as we came up the little slope away from the Fog Flats to Junktion's sixward gate the smell of ash started to mingle with the chemical scent of the fog.

This had been the shanty belt, the usual dribble of lean-tos and tottery dust-awnings that crust around any big settlement. A couple of lightsons after the raid, the smell of gunsmoke was still in the town's nostrils.

People were twitch-eyed and fever-hot for someone, anyone to take it all out on, and the shanties had been right there to see. There wasn't even the hassle of leaving the town - most of the shacks were in shooting distance of the walls. When the mob of Junktioners whose anger trumped their laziness poured out of the gate to start torching the shacks, the town wall became a regular little shooting gallery as a second mob lined the parapet and picked off the poor bastards who came running out of their burning camp. For hours afterwards in the Greimplatz drinking holes I had to listen to man after man swaggering in, bragging about their tallies, patting smoking guns and assuring one another that this was the stuff, this was what it was all about, those uphive bastards were lucky they'd caught us by surprise, next time it'd be different, you mark me...

'Ain't pretty,' said Nardo from beside me. My thoughts must have shown in my face, and he'd mistaken it for a reaction to what was in front of us.

Junktion had swapped one camp of cast-offs for another. Under the row of acrid orange gate-lamps they spread out in a sea of packs, dirty blankets and dispirited faces. Travellers, refugees from the deadlands and holesteads who'd come streaming in here when the water-lines ran dry. Whatever you need, go to Junktion, remember? So here they were.

I was carrying my water flask rolled well into my tool pack where it wasn't visible, and Nardo had his under the hang of his dust-shawl. Not that it mattered. The voices started up before we were a quarter of the way through the sprawl of grey figures.

'Got a drink?'

You got water? C'mon, how about some water!' 'Water? Do they have it? Ask 'em, tell 'em how far we've come!'

Nardo was meeting eyes and shaking his head. I kept my eyes ahead of me and down, watching the patch of ground in front of me and the toes of my boots going forward and back, forward and back. I was dreading someone actually stepping out in front of me - not a kid, please the ghosts not a kid - or a hand on the sleeve or tail of my frock-coat. But holesteaders are a tough bunch, proud as hell the way you have to be to keep a place running in a tract of Underhive, and none of them tried it.

Closer to the gate the crowds were standing not sitting, and the ones who weren't looking up and shouting at the gate-guards were walking along with us, staring or hailing us. They were feistier than the wasted

specimens further away, either more recently arrived and not as used up or maybe just more desperate. The pleas were changing their tack too.

'Can you get us in?'

You know the people on the gate, do you? What's a name? C'mon, just tell me a name I can ask for, you can do that.'

Head forward, eyes down. Nardo next to me saying 'No, no, sorry' over and over again.

'I can work, everyone in my family can. My wife can read and write and so can I, a little, look, take this, take this to show to someone...'

'You're the lamplighters! You're the lamplighters, aren't you! I know juice stuff, I can do that work! I can help you, just get me and my son in there and we can...'

'I got information! I can tell you 'bout the gangs, the gangs are coming up from the Crossing, they'll be here, you need to know, lemme in and I'll...'

And then we were at the edge of the mob in front of the little door that had been opened in the gate itself, and some of the gate guards were stepping forward with short clubs and mesh-wrapped fists. Their voices easily overrode the others: these were men used to shouting down a crowd.

'Aside! Go on, move it, you scrawny bastards, get out of the way. There are honest Junktion folk here!' Malley put both barrels of his shotgun into the air and emptied them over the crowd's heads to make his point, and the mob around the gate flinched and split apart. No Underhiver is a stranger to gunfire, but we also tend to have a well-developed take-cover reflex when we're surprised, and Malley overpacks his cartridges to make the shots shockingly loud.

Nardo stayed behind me for a moment to make his spread-hand gesture at the crowd falling back behind us, but I was already stepping through the gate-door, head down. Some of the cries I could hear under Malley's shouts were desperation, but some were pain now. The barrels of that shotgun were so short that some of the pellets must have grazed people in the crowd even with the high angle of the shot. I thought of the conversation I'd had with Enning and wondered if he'd made it down the roadpipe. I'd have liked to think I'd have felt his eyes on me if he had, but even then I suppose I wouldn't have looked up to meet them.

I pushed the thought aside and walked away. In the Underhive you can't get too attached to people. To anything at all. You have to learn to let it go and walk away. So I kept my head down and walked away, and then the gate clanged shut behind us and I didn't have to think about it any more.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE LAMPLIGHTERS

I WAS GLAD TO get away from the gates. Pushing through the crowd had brought up some bad memories. I thought I had heard my sister's voice in among the shouting, but that happens sometimes when I let things get to me. Tanny isn't anywhere where her voice is going to reach me now. I kept my head down and picked up my pace along the Quicklime Road until I realised Nardo wasn't next to me any more.

He was standing back by the rubble-and-mortar pillar that the town watch had put up to remember those of them who'd died on the job. The dead ones' names were painted up high in angular red letters. Many of them fresh, many of the fresh names painted less tidily as the letterer had been borne down by having to record so many dead at once. The raid had taken a toll of the town guards. Lower down, at eye level under hanging stringlights, were plastered decrees and notices from the town fathers. Nardo tilted his head toward the creased yellow proclamation-sheets.

'Notice anything different?'

It was hard not to. Last lightson there had been maybe a dozen bounty placards around the column: a couple of thieves, a medicine-counterfeiter, someone who'd beaten up a town father's favourite kootchie-girl.

And a whole handful of double-size posters of Master Volk and Brother Hetch, two hardcore Red Redemption crazies who'd muscled into the leadership of a straggling Cawdor gang called the Firebrands and turned them into a trigger-happy, fire-starting nightmare. Back before the Firebrands finally got driven away from Wilhelm's Crossing, talk had it that they had the charred bodies of nearly a dozen bounty hunters hanging from the girderwork where they made their camp, and they were adding to the collection every time the bounty was raised.

But this lightson the sinister black Redemption masks were gone, and copies of a new bounty-poster had been pasted up almost edge to edge

right round the column. Payment in water and five hundred creds in Guilder chips for Garm Heliko, dead or alive. Nardo and I looked at the price, looked at each other, and started walking again.

A price on Heliko's head was no real surprise. It was a matter of record that he had tried to take out town father Gartch's convoy to Baiters' Dock, and most of us took it for granted he was behind the water-rebel slogans, or in with the people who were. It was the same thinking as behind the trashing of the shanty town. Climb all the way up past the Well to Hive City proper and take on the men who'd sent the raiders down on us? A joke. Most Underhivers will live and die without ever getting within spitting distance of the City. So the anger and the pain got taken out on whoever was convenient. On someone like Garm Heliko.

That was about where my thoughts were when I got to the end of the list of charges under Heliko's scowling portrait and almost choked. Nardo, who'd reached it before me, was grinning.

"What y'think of that?'

'That is not serious. They're saying Heliko was in league with the raiders! A scout for them? What spit-blind idiot thought that up? It's an insult, them expecting us to believe that!'

I thought about the raiders.

('Hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?' The sound of the grenade.)

Their weapons, their kit, their numbers. Hive City soldiers, bought and trained and armed with Spire money. This hadn't been a turf skirmish or smash-and-grab like the badzone gangs or tinpot little holestead confederacies like to stage. It had been a punishment raid. Trade tariffs too high or a town father had impounded the wrong crate of booze for his personal stash or someone had been rude to a Guilder with connections or some spitting thing. They had been sent down to kick us apart like a boy kicking a scrapebeetle nest after he's been stung. You hear of it happening sometimes, when an Underhive place within hitting distance of Hive City gets too big for itself. There's not usually much anyone can do.

But now we were supposed to believe that the cream of the Hive City's army was in league with Garm Heliko? I was almost outraged. Nardo was chuckling. We swapped disbelieving remarks back and forth as we walked down Quicklime Road.

Heliko had made a living around Junktion for, well, I didn't know, long enough to get half-known the way some do if they stay in town for a while. Born of no particular House, from no particular place, fought for no particular side. Underhive scummers, they're called. Sump-gunnies. They drift from settlement to settlement, wherever their feet and the gun-and-muscle work takes them. Hire on with a trail boss here, take a couple of chips to fight with a gang there, then on to another town to drink the earnings and look for more of the same.

I thought I remembered Heliko having some part in the gang-wars between the Berserkers and the Exers around the Highshack Causeway. Nardo said Heliko had been in the thick of it when the Berserkers and the Curse banded together to take on Volk's Firebrands and drove those crazies down toward Wilhelm's Crossing. We couldn't remember which side he'd been on, and it didn't really matter. Gangs only ever carried grudges against one another's full-blooded members: paid hangers-on like scummers and ratskins were generally agreed to be just business. Nothing personal. One of those Underhive things.

I definitely remembered him weighing-in in the boozy riots in Cyclops Square the previous year, and talk was that after that he'd signed on as a caravan guard and lain low on the trail to Ghoul Bend. Things must have blown over eventually because he'd shown up back in Junktion, helping someone who was supposed to be his brother run cheap liquor and crappy bargain-rate ammo from people he knew in Column Forest and Twodog.

'Fought like a bastard when they came for him,' I told Nardo. I'd been in the slums around Highdome that day, looking for a man who owed me for a half-dozen spreadlight filaments, and I'd heard the shots and the yelling. Heliko had been the first to start hoarding water after word came back from Penman's Deep about what the raiders had done to the pumping plant. Not many people had imitated him. Water wasn't going to run out altogether in Junktion, we were a boom-town, that kind of stuff happened to miserable little holes at Hive bottom where, you know, other people lived.

'Got greedy, though,' Nardo commented as we walked past a gaggle of dispirited whores at the top of Anselm's Alley and started walking carefully down into the gloom. We both put our hands on our guns and slowed our pace down so we could make sure to see what was ahead of us.

The Alley was a good short cut to the town fathers' bunkerhouse, but it went right through the warren of crowded, stinking rookeries crammed in between Greimplatz and the Quicklime Road. It had been a while since anyone had actually died in the Alley, but you never knew.

Nardo had been right. Garm Heliko had gotten greedy, too pleased with himself undercutting the town fathers' prices and too enchanted by the idea, in that weird time right after the raid trashed us, that somehow all bets were off, that anything went. The town watchmen went straight for Heliko.

'Put up a fight, eh?' said Nardo.

'That's right. Faced them down, I heard. Stood in his door with a pistol in each hand.' Classic scummer bravado, but futile. He'd disappeared from his rathole as a watch flamer filled it with burning goop. Must have had an escape hole somewhere, and one way or another he disappeared. He was seen once in Tarvo trading ammo for food, and then he was gone.

Nobody much bothered about where. He was still just a sump-gunny with pretensions. If it had been a reputable citizen you might have heard more about it, but a lowlife like Heliko? Someone like that deserved to have his water taken off him. Everyone had said so.

'So why that much, and not until now?' I asked Nardo as we picked our way down the alley. 'If they're dumb enough to believe that a scummer like Heliko was caught up in the raid somehow then why are they only saying so now?'

'It's a gimmick,' Nardo decided as we came out into the light again. As we crossed the rough open ground where the Brotherhood Road petered out and made for the bunkerhouse I asked him what he meant.

Trick. They want us t'get fired up at Heliko. They don't believe he's a raider themselves, I reckon. Fathers're spooked about the slogans, so if they make him out as a raider they get us angry an' they get him faster.'

I thought it over as we walked to the bunkerhouse doors. It had some surface logic, but... Hive City raiders and Garm Heliko? Was anyone in Junktion dumb enough to actually believe the connection?

There was something else that was nagging me. Not about the new poster, but about the column. I blinked and tried to work out what it was as the bunkerhouse wall loomed over us.

WHEN THE RAIDERS touched down in Junktion the Greimplatz was the first place they took apart. Shoot what moves and burn what doesn't. The gunfire from that opening act of the massacre had been what had come echoing up the well and into my blast-stunned head at number-four nest. There are still times when those echoes make it into my dreams.

When they got to the bunkerhouse they got serious. Almost everyone they'd run into so far was dead or fled, the town watch either mowed down before they really understood what they were dealing with or still on their way from elsewhere in town. So the only real fight at the bunkerhouse was from the fathers' personal muscle. There had been some sporadic shooting out of the sniper-holes in the upper floors, but from here I could see the tight patterns of shot-marks around each hole where return fire had taken out anyone who dared stick out a gunbarrel.

Then they had gone to work on the big shutter-doors and that was when things got really scary, Thamm told me later, because the stuff they had to do that was good. Not the gas-drills and sputtering red-glowing melta grenades you get with gangs who go in for hardware damage, but stuff most Underhivers won't see but once or twice in a lifetime. Long-necked cutting torches the same gleaming bronze as their carapace armour and white-hot meltas that brought the gates down in the time that their gang-made cousins would have taken to warm up. Even now the doors still hung in a creepy derelict lean.

I'd been friends with half a dozen of the bunkerhouse gunboys, and I'd been to wakes for five of them. If I tilted my head forward a little the brim of my hat hid most of the wall and I didn't have to look at the shot-marks any more.

'WATER FOR ALL, not just the rich.'

'Four,' said Nardo. He had forced his voice out of its usual mutter and up to a civilised level for the occasion.

You?'

'Me? Um.' I looked around and thought. 'About two.'

'About. Two.' Town father Roben Harmos was giving me his death look with those weird eyes. They were regular and blue-grey, almost the same colour as mine, but somehow all you noticed were the pupils. They were

tiny, needle-hole tiny, but when he was glaring at you the pupils were all you could look at. I looked at Yonni instead, which wasn't much better. He was standing behind Harmos's shoulder, shifting from foot to foot. Dealing with the town fathers or their flunkies always made him do that, shift and squirm as though his skin was trying to crawl around backward. He was giving me his usual look, too, like whatever was going on between him and his nerve endings was my fault.

'What else?' Harmos wanted to know.

'"Junktion water is our water",' said Nardo. 'Couple o' those.'

'It spitting well is, is it?' said Harmos. His hands were laced behind his back. He never needed to write down anything he was told. Ever. That was high on the list of things that unsettled me about him. 'Alright, what else? Kass?'

'Um. "We shall fight and we shall drink." First one of those I've seen.' The tiny black points stayed fixed on me. Apparendy he wanted something more. 'But it was the same paint and the same, um, hand. Um.' Talking to Harmos was never a very dignified business for me.

Our reports didn't seem to please him much. He rocked on his heels for a moment, pointing his needle-hole eyes at me then Nardo, and then the interview was over. He gave Yonni a sharp nod and spun on his heel, marching away with quick stiff steps. It was the kind of thing that Town Father Roben Harmos liked to do. Waiting for him by the stairs up to the bunkerhouse's next level was a man I didn't recognise, younger than me, with smooth narrow features and a heavy, shrouded disc around his neck that could only be a Guilder medallion. He watched me watching him, then as Harmos passed him he gave me an odd, too-amiable smile and went after the town father. I blinked and shook my head.

'New orders, gents,' Yonni was telling us, instantly more relaxed now the father and the Guilder were gone. He was one of Junktion's first lamplighters and now the most senior, a sort of foreman. I thought whenever I saw him in the bunkerhouse that his real place was sdii out at the town limits with tool pack and gun, but he kept insisting to us, sometimes before we could ask, that he liked the bunkerhouse fine. He still looked out of place, though, a craggy man with a jaw like a building-joist and a weird diagonal bald patch where he'd gashed his scalp on a girder and spore-rash had got into it. He had powerful hands that looked

like they would be wasted on anything less epic than wringing a Spyrer's neck. He'd been known as the Big Man since before I could remember.

'New orders?' I wasn't sure I liked the sound of it. Nardo was inspecting his fingertips the way he did when he was hoping the conversation would stop happening.

'Harmos gave them to me while we were waiting for you,' Yonni went on. Thamm and Mudeye and Venz already know, we had a talk with when they got back from the Grindholes.' Yonni looked around, sighed and jerked his head for us to follow him downstairs.

We had had our little debriefing in what Mudeye had started calling the Bootlickers' Gallery, the rooms one flight up from the bunkerhouse atrium. They'd seen some bad fighting late in the raid, when remnants of the watch had tried a counterattack and bunkerhouse gunboys had thought they were still going to make a last stand. None of the surviving town fathers felt inclined to move back into those rooms with the scars of bullet and bomb so fresh on the walls. Packs of cronies and second-order henchmen had set up in them instead, hoping they could step into the post-raid power vacuum just as easily.

When Mudeye had given the gallery its name he had joked about how the raid couldn't have broken the old Junktion spirit too badly if there were still that many ghoulish ratbastards prepared to set up shop in these rooms before the old owners' brains had finished congealing on the floor downstairs. The rest of us hadn't found it particularly funny. The scared, glaring faces of the self-appointed flunkies in what was left of our town government were just another sign of what had gone wrong with the place, was all.

We stopped on the steps just short of the atrium. It was cut in below the level of the streets around it, so if anyone had been about their business outside we would have been able to look out of the window-slits at their boots. Nobody was.

"You know it's about the water,' said Yonni.

'No, really? Farthest thing from my mind.'

That's enough, Kass. I can't, I mean I've been told...' he shot a look up the steps and dropped his voice to a rumbling whisper. 'Screw it. Look, I can trust you two with this, but not even to the other 'lighters, alright? It's not getting better any time soon. The towns up the Well are too scared of a

second raid to let us have the help we need with the pumps, so anything we do on them we'll have to do ourselves. The rationing is only just starting to work and Gartch is coming back empty.'

That was a shock. Gartch was supposed to be leading his train back up from Baiters' Dock with a month's worth of water. There had been cheers in the streets when the news came through that he'd fended off the ambush from Heliko and his mob.

The Dock is a dead end,' Yonni said. 'Remember this is between the three of us? You sure? Right. Yes, the Dock's on a sludge-lake. The stories about them purifying their water from it are all true. But their machines are crap, barely enough for their little town. The runners coming back ahead of the train say Gartch was barely able to get enough for his own people for the trip back.'

'And this all means what for our orders?' I asked him.

'Nothing big, Kass. Nothing much over and above, you know.' He was fidgeting again. 'What they want you to do is start keeping an eye out. The way you're doing. Harmos thought this "water for all" stuff would die off, but with Gartch coming back empty it's probably going to get worse. More of these slogans, more fighting.'

'More fightin'?' Nardo's voice was suspicious.

There's been trouble with the cistern near the Guilders' tor, some scuffles around the fathers' private supplies, someone trying to...' Yonni looked over his shoulder, 'someone trying to break into Wilferra's plantation to tap the pipes. All stopped, nothing you have to concern yourselves with. Your rations are both safe.' We looked at each other. 'But a debrief like this, that'll happen every time you come in from now on. They want you to report any new slogans you see around, how fresh they seem to be, whether the - Look, you're smart, you'll be able to tell what's important. About the slogans, or, you know.'

'Or what?' Nardo was looking at his fingers again but the question was still sharp.

'Or anything that's, you know, suspicious. Anything you see that you think the town watch needs to take action on. You're smart people,' he said again, his eyes flicking, 'you know these are just not normal times.'

I signed on as a lamplighter, not a spy. The thought didn't fully form in my head until later but the feeling was there right from that moment. I

wondered if I'd have to start reporting on who I saw at the drinking holes, what they were talking about and who to. Or if I was supposed to eavesdrop on the gate guards, or the traders on the Highborn road, or...

I was starting to get angry. I got careful and put on my card-player face, and Nardo looked at his fingers again, and before too much longer that interview was over too.

NOBODY LIKED LINGERING in the atrium any more. The floor matting was shot-scorched and bloodstained from the random dozen fathers and flunkies that the raiders had dragged screaming down the steps and shot one by one. The last thing they did was make the rest of their captives watch while their leader slicked his gauntlet with blood and smeared it across the map of Junktion daubed on the atrium's long wall. None of the raiders had said a word to us, but the message was clear.

By the time the raiders shot and burned their way out of the bunkerhouse and across the Cash Bridge, nobody was really interested in trying to take them on. Most of the town were keeping their heads low, looking after what was theirs and silently willing the raiders to take another route. Organised resistance had finished with the gutting of the bunkerhouse, and it didn't take long for the people in the raiders' path to work out that the fifty-fifty chance they stood if they tried to run or hide dropped to nothing if they stood and fought.

The poor bastards guarding Penman's Deep didn't have choice or chance. The shock of the raid lasted until well after the last trace of bronzed armour disappeared down the eightward trail. By the time anyone thought of the town crew out at the Deep, right in the raiders' path, and the surviving town watch quit talking about a posse and actually called one, it was way too late. The water-plant, the lamplighters all agreed later, had probably been on the raiders' maps from the beginning.

I'd come more or less out of my blast-daze by then, up in number-four nest, and I'd made it unsteadily back into my battered-up town by the time the posse came back. I remember sagging against a stablight gantry near the eightward gate, bent at the waist and woozily watching a drop of blood from my nose land in the trail dust in front of me. I was still dazed enough for my senses to feel sludgy and slow, and I had thought it was funny that

the drop had fallen quick and true when everything else was drifting. I remember watching the pattern of shadows I cast in the gate lights, and thinking 'number seven's out, and if the mantle is smashed we've only got one spare in the bunkerhouse stores'.

I remember that because a moment later we heard the posse, and someone caught me as I tried to lurching towards the gate to hear them properly. They were calling out to us that they'd taken out the Deep, they'd killed Kinch and her whole crew, the pumps and the cleansers gone, they'd used kraks and meltas and there was no water left in the cistern, no water left at all.

NARDO AND I DIDN'T spend long in the Greimplatz. We were really just killing time until lightsout, the last of the lamplighter rounds. The arclamp gantries over Junktion's nerve centres were all fed from a little rockcrete burrow near the bunkerhouse where Yonni spent his time, looking after a snakes' nest of heavy juice cables that led out to powertaps all around the town. Those we could kill all at once, but the alleys and roads in the other districts had to be snuffed out by hand. Most big settlements do this, or something like it. People just seem to do better when you snuff the lights right down every ten hours or so, just another one of those Underhive things.

So we wandered around the 'platz, killing time. It wasn't the same since the raid. Most of the shot-marks and debris were still around, and the people were quieter, wary. Greimplatz and Cyclops Square are usually impossibly loud, packed with the desperate energy you get when a critical mass of Underhivers all try to forget their troubles in a small space full of drinking holes, gambling houses and kootchie-joints. Now there was little talk, little shouting, no laughter.

We had a drink in one of the substreet holes, but neither of us had much appetite for it after hearing Yonni's news, or the secrets he wanted us to keep. I didn't want to be drunk around strangers, card-player's control or no. We watched Yellow Jancy sit in her corner of the 'platz, telling fortunes for those who'd toss her a Guild chip and haranguing anyone who didn't. She didn't do either for me as I tipped my hat to her, but tapped the

side of her nose and gave me a wink. I was still wondering what that meant as Nardo and I parted ways at the Quackstown ramp.

Where it flanked the sludge canal the Black Pile was too steep to build and too shaky to tunnel, so there was only a dark, dead bulk rising up to my right. Every ten paces on my left, a metal post on the canal edge held up a bundle of lanterns, a mixture of filament jobs and wick-burners. Yonni had set those up, after a pack of scavvies braved the poisons in the gunk flow and tried to sneak up the canal. Junktion was smaller then, with more to fear from scavvy bands, but with Yonni's work the canal had been well enough lit that the next raid that tried it was spotted and wiped out. Yonni wasn't the first lamplighter, but he was the one everybody respected the best.

That got me thinking about Yonni passing on Harmos's orders that we spy for him, and what it meant, and if I had anything to fear from it. (Or anything to gain. But fear was what had been in the air ever since the raid.) The questions were a net of sharp black wires in my mind, and I worked to pull coherent thoughts out of the tangle as my hands did the work on their own.

I was up against the centre pole, at the far curve of the trail, in the quiet strip where Guilders' Hill was a dim hint of wall over the canal and the lights from the platz were blocked out by the Pile. I was up on the ladder with my hands and face right in the light, lost in my thoughts. I had just snuffed the last lantern on the pole when the hand gripped my arm, spun me off the ladder and crashed me flat on the trail.

I hit the ground already running on animal fear and adrenaline. My ladder and lantern-pole fell away and were kicked over the edge of the canal. My other arm was tangled in the strap of my tool pack and my laspistol was trapped between my body and the ground.

A shape stood where I had a moment ago. Dark cloth hood for a head, dark cloth mask for a mouth.

'Yeah,' it said. 'It's Kass. You going to do it or will I?' A boot hit my back and I yelled and scrabbled my feet. My tool pack was half under me, big and unwieldy and trapping my arm. My right hand flailed. My hat was off.

'Whoever, just hurry. We don't have much time.' The sound of a pistol leaving a holster. Another squirt of that animal fear.

I kicked myself over onto my front, got a leg under me. On one knee, I pivoted and swung my shoulder so the toolpack's weight carried me through a full turn before it crashed into the masked man. It took him by surprise and he staggered, off-balance, and didn't fire. The same movement brought the pack off my shoulder and I desperately flapped my arm free of the harness.

There was a curse behind me and I turned without getting up. The second man's knife, coming at a height that would have dropped my bowels out of my body had I jumped to my feet, instead scored across my forehead and scalp with the point. I grabbed at the knife-hand, desperate to choke the return swing, and then the anger kicked in and I roared as I pushed myself half upright.

I wasn't strong enough to overpower the man's knife-arm straight away and he was about to grab the blade with his free hand anyway, but by then my own knife was out of my boot. My first slash went too high and tore his jacket, but when he grabbed for my blade in turn he gave away some of his balance and I used that, dropped my stance and made the second cut too low to grab, taking advantage of my crouch to open up the inside of his leg where big artery is.

He lost interest in me straight away, falling back and grabbing at the wound. I spun and now my pistol was out, the long-barrelled las that had never fizzled or flamed out on me yet. I sidestepped as I drew and as the silenced autopistol fired. The man I'd hit with my pack missed me by a hand's breath with a tight burst of shots, and before he could get his bearings I had time to pump the trigger four times. I was better in the dark than he was, even with my vision still adjusting from staring into the lanterns, and anyway he'd let himself get into silhouette in front of the lantern post.

He fell without a sound. I could smell the crisping of his clothes and flesh over the rotten smell of the canal as I dropped to one knee and took a bead on the third man, who'd thought that because he was standing back from the action he didn't need a weapon up. By the time he realised the mistake I'd shot him twice. Three staggering steps and he was over the edge of the canal.

The stubber in his hand gave one futile boom as he fell but there was no way to tell where the round had gone.

The traces from the las-shots stabbed after-images into the haze the lanterns had left on my dark-vision. I rubbed my eyes with my fingers and tried to will them into recovering. There had been no more shots - were they all dead? I fanned the path ahead and behind me with the pistol. My grip on it felt jittery and weak. I rummaged in my tool pack for the hooded filament-lamp I used for close work. Where was the bastard thing, I knew I- no, here it was, and between it and the lanterns the gloom turned into an ordinary length of trail, gritty grey rockcrete, patches of lichen, spittle-stains. Two men, one shot, one bleeding out. He lifted his head and looked into the lamplight for a moment before it got too much and he went limp. He didn't have the strength to keep pressure on the wound and as I watched his hands fell away from it.

It wasn't the first time I'd killed, but I'm not the type to get better at it. Or to enjoy it. I stood there trying to make my mouth work, not sure what I was going to say. The fight-rush had soured and gone, and all I did was stand there with my light on the man while he died, until a pair of guards from the Black Pile cistern who'd heard that last stub-shot made their careful way down to where I was still standing, shaking, pointing my pistol and lamp.

They weren't anyone I'd known. The faces under the masks weren't familiar. Later on, from the town watch militiamen, I would find out who they were, for what it was worth. A journeyman metal-grinder from a salvage shop along the Twodog trail, a semi-pro gambler from the gaming holes around Cyclops Square, an armourer from the fighting stables at Brass Pit. That was the one I'd cut and bled.

But right from the start I couldn't see why they'd come for me, used my name. They had thought about it, made sure they recognised me, followed me on the lightsout round to make sure they had dim light to take me in. The guards couldn't work it out and neither could I.

That was before we found out that Nardo had been grabbed by two men as he stepped out for a piss in the alleyway behind one of the hostels on the Dead Walk, and not found until half an hour later, fifty paces further down the alleyway and beaten within an inch of his life.

Around the time he and I had parted ways at the Greimplatz ramp someone had pitched a rough-made smoke grenade into the little sleeping-

nook Thamm rented on the Twelve-Road and stabbed her four times as she came coughing out of the haze.

Mudeye had been dawdling at the tunnel that led from the Red Pile to Cyclops Square, flirting with a couple of the girls who worked the doss-houses there, when a man had stepped out of a doorway and shot him twice in the face. The man had been gone down an alleyway before the nearest of the girls had had time to scream.

And Venz, Venz who was better with a weapon than any of us, Venz was lying dead by the sixward end of the Helmawr Bridge over the canal. Two men with cloth masks and sawn-offs had caught him in a crossfire as he walked through the pedlars' markets there. He had got off one shot before he'd gone down.

Nobody knew the plan and nobody knew the reason. Nobody knew if Thamm would live or die, or whether Venz had any next of kin, or how long it would take Nardo to regain consciousness. We didn't get any clues about any of it until someone spotted a new slogan, in the same green paint, halfway out to the ruined water station at Penman's Deep.

LAMPLIGHTER SPIES GET WHAT THEY DESERVE.

And that was when we all knew that whatever was going on in Junktion was now on in earnest.

STEELHEADS AT THE GATE

'SINCE WHEN WAS this a lamplighter weapon?'

It was the first time the skinny little flophair that hung around the Gunnery had ever spoken to me, and the first time I'd ever heard him properly talk at all. Normally he was just a background presence in a grey Orlock slag-miner's jacket far too big for him, carrying boxes or hanging dust-shutters somewhere in my peripheral vision. Now he was looking at me with beady eyes that caught the shop lights in a way I didn't like.

'Since I decided to start carrying it.' That had taken me a couple of seconds. The answer that had come to my mouth had been softer than that. Bark a question at me and my reflex is to back off, answer in a pleasing way, no matter who asked or whether it's their business. I don't like that much, and I was pleased I'd managed to catch myself.

Thought you were supposed to be real popular.' That little cockroach gleam was still in the kid's eyes. Thought everybody liked the lamplighters. Thought you never got into trouble and you never got into...' The trash-talk rang a bit hollow from someone too vacant to string together more than three sentences in a row. That didn't make me feel as good as it should have.

Tovick broke the moment when he appeared behind the kid and cuffed him hard enough to nod the unkempt head forward.

'Out of it! You can shoot your mouth when you've earned it, you sandbagging little grub. That crap around the hoist base I told you to shift is still there. You want to bet you'll lose hide over that if it's still there when I've finished attending on the gentleman.'

Flophair gave me one more cockroach glance and shuffled away. There was a sore on the back of his neck, and his greasy brown hair had matted into the discharge from it. Every Underhiver should know about looking after cysts and rashes and sores, there are enough damn things that'll give

them to you. Was it petty to let a kid get to me like that who didn't even know to clean out a sore?

I suddenly realised Tovick had been talking.

'Sorry, distracted. Give it to me again?' He waved the question away.

'Don't worry about the little runt. He's getting ideas above himself. When he can carry a crate of shells across a room without half of them going on the floor, then you can bother noticing him. All I was saying was I hadn't seen the two-tone in an age. I was wondering if you still had it.'

He peered under the counter into the armoured drawers where he kept the autogun ammo. My heart sank for a minute - I suddenly realised I had no idea if there would even be the right ammo there to buy. Carrying lasweapons for too long makes you careless about things like that. Then he grunted and straightened up with two boxes in his hands.

'Good idea to make sure you're stocked up,' he told me as he counted out shells. *Word is that not all of the trader caravans are so keen to come around here now.'

'The raid.'

'The raid indeed.' He inspected one of the rounds and closed the second box. 'Word of the troubles. People are wondering if we're worth the risk.' We stood in glum silence for a moment. Tovick broke it. 'Anyway, don't burn off any more of it than you have to. There's a smith down Shining Falls way who swears he can make an Escher knock-off that your piece won't tell from the real thing, but load yourself with real uphive ammo for as long as you can.'

'On that note,' I said, and the silence came back for a moment.

'I can give you some of this for the range, Kass, to keep your hand in,' Tovick said carefully. 'But it can't be the usual. Not the tab. Sorry, but with the way things are...'

He let the sentence hang until I made a that's-okay face and thumbed out a Guild chip. Tovick had got into the habit of throwing in a few extra rounds to the lamplighters on the tab he ran for the town fathers. It looked like that arrangement had gone the way of a lot of other things around the place since the raid came down.

'Leave the pistol with me, Kass. I can at least juice that for you on the house.' It was his way of apologising, and I slid the long-barrel far enough up my leg to pop the cell. I handed it over to Tovick and he muttered an

artisan's lucky charm as he clicked it into a juicing sheath. I wondered whether to say anything more, then shrugged and took the two-tone past the racks and piles of weapons ("Outtlaw salvage, mak a offer, use at own risk" said a card propped on the last one) and into the little dead-end corridor that Tovick had sealed and sandbagged and dignified with the name of The Range'.

'THE TWO-TONE' WAS Tovick's nickname for the only long-arm I owned, and I'd adopted the name myself for want of anything else to call it. It was a hybrid piece I'd saved up and paid well for back when I rode with the caravans on the big trader trails. The stock and frame were House Delaque build. Delaques are keener sneaks and spies than warriors, and their kit is perfect for someone like me. It's compact, smooth to handle, made to be quick and easy to stow and keep out of the way when you have to move fast and quiet, or to get up a girder or down a chute.

On the other hand, Junktion doesn't sit under Delaque territory. I think I've only been near their part of the Hive City once in my life, when my mother and sister were alive. I was young and Tanny was younger, and I don't know which of us was more scared of the Delaques, with their big pale puffball heads sunk down into the collars of those long coat-cloaks they wear, and their little shiny eyes the same colour as their skin. That whispering sound you hear is easy to mistake for their clothes rustling until you realise it's their voices.

No, when you get a taste of Hive City around Junktion it's the bright splash of House Escher gunwomen with their braids and swaggers and loud garments, or House Goliath musclemen bellowing to each other and rattling the metal bands around their thick arms. Or the blue eyes and red bandanas of House Orlock, with their clipped accents that sound like they're disgusted with whatever they're talking about. You don't hear those sighing Delaque accents much and you get Delaque ammo even less. The Houses keep their people separate - it's why their looks are as distinctive as their dress and talk - and they keep their kit separate too. A Delaque gun without ammo of Delaque make is just ballast.

So it didn't take me long after I got to Junktion to work out that my piece needed a little reworking. Venz called in a favour from a smith at a

Guilder bunker halfway up the trail to Scrubtangle, and the work was worth the tedious roundtrip up the alley-road. He fitted a new action and barrel from a gawky long-stocked piece he said had come from a House Escher caravan guard, then cut the barrel and tinkered with the action to fit them into the Delaque frame so that when I first hefted it I could barely tell the difference. It had kept its easy Delaque handling but fired the way Escher pieces do, quick and clean, with recoil but none of the jagged muzzle-climb that you can always pick the Goliath or Cawdor guns by, eating up Escher-make ammo smooth as you please.

The only sign of its mixed parentage was the colouring Tovick had nicknamed it for: flat gleamless Delaque black from the old weapon, a bright powdery silver from the Escher breech and barrel. I kept meaning to dull it with grease the way the gangers do, but as Junktion got big enough to tame the wildlands around it there was less and less need for the two-tone and I'd simply got too complacent to unpack it.

Until now. It had been too long since I had held the thing in my hands, let alone fired it in anger. I wanted to remind my hand and my eye how it felt and shot. It was something I thought I needed to remember.

IT FELT FINE AND shot better. People who say you're either a las or a slug shooter, that you can get the hang of one or the other, are squeaking with it. Ignore them. I had remembered the kick as stronger, so overcompensation sent the first burst way off, but the right reflexes bobbed up after that and the two-tone burred off quick, tight bursts that walked up the strips of plas-sheet as the weapon rode my shoulder. By the time I was halfway through the magazine I was hitting comfortably inside the targets and by the time it clicked dry I had punched through the painted bullseye. I work with tools, I have mechanist's hands. I don't think I could ever use one of the damn great cannons that the Goliath gangs carry, but give me a precision instrument like the two-tone and I'll use it like one. I came out of the range hefting the empty gun, smelling of cordite and feeling much happier.

Thought you didn't need to tote a piece.' Oh, good, he was back again, lounging against a crate full of reconditioned las-barrels. Thought you people didn't need to worry about the gangs or anything. Thought you

people... y'know... hah. Uh.' That third consecutive sentence was still defeating him, but you wouldn't know it from the grin he was wearing.

Twenty minutes for that las-cell to get properly juiced, Kass,' Tovick called from across the shop. Tell you what, don't waste it hanging around here listening to that runt. Just come back here before you head for the gate and I'll have it ready.'

The flophaired kid gave me a smug look, as though he'd won some kind of point. I ignored him. I had an attack of nerves at the top of the stairs, and went through two checks of the two-tone and three that the knife was in my boot before I went down them. I stopped in the awkward little elbow where the stairs had to fit around a mis-built corner, checked both of them again, and then I stepped out.

I'D BEEN PUTTING off going back to the bunkerhouse, and up until now there had been plenty of excuses. A grim conference with the town watch about the attacks, a visit to the incinerators at the head of the Chamberpit track to watch the three men I'd killed being rendered down to ash to fertilise the Peelgut farms. Back at my rooms I'd barely been able to sleep and had sat through lightsout putting an extra edge on my knife, fixing a hook to the new lantern-pole and cleaning the two-tone. Good mind-occupying business, but it was done now, and on my way to the bunkerhouse once again there was no way to avoid having to think about what had happened to the others.

Lamplighter spies get what they deserve. Lamplighter spies.

Someone out there had declared war on us. Someone knew about what we'd been asked, sump-ghosts knew how. And someone had hit out at us.

At us, or at the town fathers? Water was for all, not just the rich. Was that what this was about? I thought of Nardo hiding his water flask as we walked back from our rounds. But everyone knew about the lamplighters' water rations, didn't they? I couldn't remember hearing about any resentment. We were the lamplighters, everyone in Junktion knew about what we did. How had it come to this?

I went cold at a memory: Yellow Jancy winking at me the previous night in the Greimplatz. I had thought she didn't care to tell me my fortune, but

was I wrong? I looked for her as I clanked across the 'platz's grill-metal floor, but her little nook was empty.

Suddenly nobody was around - Junktion was a city of strangers. No Nardo to drink with or Yonni to talk with. A sour-faced little flunky in a fringed vest of rat-leather shoved an order sheet into my hand and barked at me that there hadn't stopped being work to do when I tried to ask him some questions.

This was wrong, this was all wrong. I slouched back through Greimplatz with the rough yellow paper crumpled and unread in my fist. My knuckles were white on the dark metal of my new lantern-pole.

Two fellow lamplighters, my friends, were lying in the sawbones' rooms behind the Red Pile leaking into their bandages. Two more were dead and waiting in line for the firepit.

Nothing about the Greimplatz was what it should have been. I wondered why I hadn't noticed before. It wasn't just the quiet or the wary sullenness any more, either. By the time I was halfway back across the 'platz I was noticing it was about me.

Jancy was still nowhere to be seen. The fire-jugglers who performed for travellers coming off the Highborn Road had nobody now to laugh and toss trinkets at their tumbles, so they sat around a little vapour-burner and watched me instead. I heard someone spit after me as I passed. The bruisers outside the highbrow dens at the top end of the 'platz folded their arms and eyed me, and as I hooked onto the Brotherhoods' Alley a travelling card-player I vaguely knew murmured 'Who're you watching for them, Kass?' before he ghosted by and disappeared in the crowd. I could feel people's eyes on me. I was used to recognition or greetings, but this was a different feeling, hostile and clammy on my skin. I forced the hunch out of my shoulders, straightened my hat, tugged my coat square and went up the crooked steps to the Gunnery as fast as dignity would let me.

The flophair was nowhere in sight. Tovick was hunkered down by the far wall with a dirty sheet of canvas spread in front of him. Half a dozen weapons, bashed and dirty enough to be scavvy cast-offs, were laid out on it and Drengoff the poacher had dumped himself down cross-legged opposite. He grinned as I walked up, his greasy beard folding up on itself and a half-dozen glints of yellow tooth showing through.

'Had a good haul, Kass! Took some work. Bloody dangerous game, ours, innit?' Drengoff liked to pretend he was some kind of free-roaming man of action, wandering around among the gangs and the bounty hunters, battling the scum of the Underhive for his plunder. It wasn't much of a secret that he spent most of his time holed up along the Tarvo trail with a flask of rotgut, tailing gangs at discreet distances, waiting for a fight where something valuable might get dropped. There weren't too many times when I'd take his company over the more respectable folks in Junktion. I must have been more rattled than I thought, because I sat down on a crate next to him.

'Dropped in on another fight, Drengoff?' It was the closest I cared to come to humouring him.

'Lot of it around now, Kass,' he told me happily. 'Lot of people coming further in. Getting closer to Junktion than I ever seen 'em. Wan't just us who lost our water, was it now?' I managed a nod.

Three and a half for the lot of those, Dreng,' Tovick put in. 'And don't try haggling me up, they're going straight in my salvage bin. And I'm not taking those cleavers, either. Try them on Cappitt at the foundry yard, he might give you a fifth of a chip or so for melting. Kass?' He tossed me the cell for my pistol, a point of green light winking to show it was juiced.

Tovick?' I said and tilted my head. We moved down the counter a way, leaving Drengoff scowling at his salvage and probably trying to calculate how much booze it would buy him.

'What have you heard?' I kept my voice down. What's been going around about the lamplighters that hasn't reached me?' He looked at me for a long moment.

'Word came around before last lightsout that you were doing more than just keeping the lamps. The runt was full of the news. He said everyone knew you lot were going to start being the fathers' eyes and ears if you weren't already' He shrugged under my stare. 'Don't suppose it was so hard to believe. You're all over the place, all the time, and there's not a lot of love for the fathers since the water rations got tightened. They're charging more for what they do give out, too. I know you don't-' he caught himself, 'I know it doesn't affect you quite so much, but it's happening. There's less to go around all the time and nobody knows where the replacements are

coming from.' I thought back on what Yonni had told me and clamped my teeth down on the inside of my cheek.

'Someone in the bunkerhouse said that the water-tithes they're collecting to let people in the gates are going straight to the fathers' private stashes, not to anywhere the rest of us are going to be able to buy it for any amount of money, and I hear tell some of the fathers have been bringing gangers through the gates these last couple of lightsons. You know anything about that?'

'I just do my job. Is all.' It was the best I could manage, and it left a rotten taste in my mouth. But what else could I tell him?

From the way Tovick grunted and walked back to Drengoff I knew I'd blown something, missed some kind of chance. I was trying to think of more to say as Tovick flipped a pair of Guilder chips down onto the cloth. They disappeared into a chubby, grubby hand as the old poacher started talking to me again.

'What've you got, Kass? Got your rounds, hey? Yeah, dangerous out there, y'know.' I fought off a chill.

'So how about you, Drengoff? What is it you've heard about us?' His look turned suspicious.

'About you?' He was scanning my face and Tovick's for a clue, wanting to say whatever we wanted to hear. Tovick snorted and gathered up the ironmongery he'd paid for, and I put on my card-playing face.

'Trouble about, is all I'm saying,' he said after a moment. 'Gotta watch your back in places you used to be safe. Man can't afford to keep his hand off his holster. Outlying towns are running out o' water faster than we all are. Not just the people, either.' He caught on. You going outside the walls today, Kass?'

'Um.' I blinked, and uncrumpled the yellow sheet I still had in my hand. 'Yes. A set of stabbers by the gate and a half-dozen stringlights out along the Tarvo trail.' My mouth was a half-step ahead of my brain again. Broadcasting your route. Smart, Kass. But if Drengoff was itching to run outside and sell me out he didn't show it. He looked down at the chips in his fist and nodded.

'Mind how you go, Kass,' was all he said.

JUNKTION WAS GOING to spend that lightson in gloom. The big arclights had come on from their central switch but there was only me to work the smaller streets and alleys and there was no way to cover the whole town. The thought gave me a stab of unusual, spiteful satisfaction. If the ungrateful bastards were going to attack their lamplighters they could see how well they got on with only one in a dozen lamps started up for lightson. I was nursing that sour thought when I left the town in shadow and arrived at the sixward gate. I was looking forward to getting some honest work under my hands, but if the Peelgut gate had been bad last lightson then this was worse.

Even fifty paces out I could hear desperate shouts from the crowd outside and the answering roars of the guards, pitched lower to intimidate and command the way the bosses taught them. As I got closer, individual sounds emerged from the soup of noise, shouts of pain mixed in with the anger and the bitter pleading. The clank of the gate as a handful of skinny figures were allowed through. The cries of children. The chill was back in me.

Over the gate hot yellow-white stablights rode a thick metal rail along the parapet, ready to throw good hard light right out across the rubble-littered dome floor and the Tarvo trail. Bright enough to blind rushing attackers and turn the approach into a shooting gallery for the wall guards. The sixward gate stablights were the last thing many a scawy or bandit had ever seen.

The three central stabbers were out. The end ones still worked, and in the backwash of light I could see the gate guards swinging them back and forth, directing the attention of the bruisers below. Even of those, a couple were starting to flicker and stutter in a way that would blow them if it weren't evened out, and if that happened they'd take hours to cool enough for me to work on them. The gate lights were Venz's particular babies, but I knew enough about them to be able to fix this.

I was halfway up the gatehouse ladder before I took a proper look at the guards and stopped dead.

'Hello down there, little man in a hat,' came the voice at the top of the ladder. A threefold shine in the glow of the gate-lights: metal-plated boots, bright chains wrapping the body and arms, aimless glossy blotches across the shorn scalp.

'What a hat that is,' said the Goliath gangman. Well done for you, carrying that hat. Must be a heavy hat for a little man.' He stood a little back and let me come up the ladder, then grabbed my wrist without warning me and dragged me half-upright onto the catwalk. If anything he was half a head shorter than little-man me, but House Goliath measures a man by brawn, and although my hands have long fingers I doubt I could have made them meet around his upper arms. Or his neck. He grinned at me. About a third of his teeth were missing, the gums scarred. I guessed that at some point he'd had a half-arsed try at putting metal teeth in and botched it. Very few of the Underhive docs know the trick of that, but plenty of people still try.

I looked up from his teeth, avoided his eyes, and realised the shiny patches on his head weren't sickness-marks but tattoos, blotches of gunmetal ink across the skin.

'Steelheads!' he rumbled happily at me when he saw me looking, and smacked his palm against his head. 'Meet your new watch gang, little man, House Goliath's finest laying down the law for little Junktion.'

I'm told that 'little' is about the worst insult that one Goliath can use to another. When they come to the Underhive to form gangs and seek their fortunes they use it on the rest of us a lot.

Tovick had mentioned gangers being brought in and I'd thought little of it. The Berserkers or the Curse, maybe the Razors or the Snaptooths. One of the gangs you could do business with. But the Steelheads! With their reputation! Who'd done this?

It took a gunshot, a burst of screaming from below and three more seconds of the Steelhead's grin for me to decide that this was not the time to try and get briefed.

'Lamplighter!' I shouted over the racket. 'Here for those stablights! They need to work now!' I was straining to be heard, although the Steelhead hadn't seemed to raise his voice. There must have been quite a pair of lungs in that barrel chest. He made a show of bowing and motioning me along the parapet, grinning all the while. There were half a dozen Steelheads on there with me, all smirking, posing, looking down their noses at the crowd outside the gate and hefting their weapons.

The work was easy, but they made it hard. The joiner box that spread the juice out among the lamps had been kicked in against the wall by someone

who'd wanted a clearer footing, and now one side had popped its seals and was letting the juice spark and choke. I scowled at the Steelheads' metal-banded boots clanking up and down the catwalk and decided it was a blind miracle that the juice hadn't hit the metal already and cooked the whole lot of them. A lamplighter sees that kind of thing happen every so often.

Re-dipping the box was no great task and I had a cleaner, undamaged joiner collar in my pack. By the time I'd got it out I'd had one Steelhead non-accidentally bounce a knee off my ribs as I crouched down, and barely got my fingers out from under the non-accidental boot of another. They watched me and guffawed to each other, and didn't even seem to care when I pulled the power to rejoin the leads.

The crowd did, though. Without the stablights' glare they could see me - the parapet wasn't that high, and the shouts were the same as at the liftport gate.

'Lamplighter! Let us in! Talk to them!'

'You! I've seen you, always around! You give me safe conduct in there! You won't regret it! Won't regret it unless I catch you out on the trails alone, you ratfaced little sack! Let me in!'

'Please, you have to tell these people, tell them I have enough water for them, it's just it's in my holestead, if I can just come in and eat before I go for it...'

Except one.

'Kass! I know you! Sinden Kass! We met up on the trails! It's Enning! You remember me, don't act like you don't! My brothers are through, they're in Junktion, they're in there with their families, can you at least get word to them? Talk to them, Kass, their names-'

But by then too many others had heard my name and taken up the chorus. I finished fixing the box in a frantic scrabble, cursing, hair in my face. All I want is to do my job, I kept telling them in a voice so low I could barely hear it myself. That's all. I had no clout with the gate guards and the water-tithe wasn't my idea. Even in Junktion it was running out, why didn't they try their luck up or down-Hive where there might be more? It wasn't my problem.

Even after the stablights came on and the bruisers and gunners drove the mob back, even after three Steelheads escorted me out of the gate and

marched me toward the Tarvo trail, those still seemed to be the only words I could say.

I can't do anything. I can't give you what you want. It's not my problem. It's not my job.

I walked away.

THE RATHOLE

THE STEELHEADS WAITED through the first job, a trivial little wiring correction for a crossroads stalk-lamp, and then they leered, gave me a clap on the shoulder that turned into a non-accidental shove, and swaggered back toward Junktion without a word. I stood in the stalk-lamp's glow and looked around.

The crossroads sat in a tall chamber of stained grey rockcrete. Above me the ceiling buttress was festooned with the bodies of scavvies and outlaws strung up by the Junktion watch. (The real Junktion watch, I corrected myself. The Steelheads! I didn't want to think about it.) Ahead a tunnel turned left to meet the Shining Falls rampway before it picked its way through three or four ragged old supporting walls and met the jagged little alley under the liftport and joined the roadpipe for Ghoul Bend. Three more trails zigzagged off through the equally decaying old habplexes to the right. One dropped a level, doubled back on itself and led into the gauntlet of deadfalls and lookouts that protected the fungus and slime farms at Peelgut. The second curved away in the other direction and climbed three levels, opening into a flat table of empty badlands, old manufactories full of foul-smelling metal-dust and leaking tox pipes.

The third was the trail out to Tarvo, lit and patrolled courtesy of Junktion and of the Berserkers, the Orlock gang who'd made Tarvo their own. I took a deep breath and a glance at the half-ruined walkway buttress above me, littered with corpses, and I started walking.

Work, that was what I needed, good back-bending mind-clearing work to get it all out of my mind. All this trouble had proved my point. In the Underhive it doesn't pay to get attached to people. You need to be able to just turn and walk away. Walk away from the water-rioters. Or the bodies of the other lamplighters. Or the town where you'll never see your mother and sister again, or the holestead where your father is...

I shook my head to clear it. This was what happened when you let things get to you. I stared ahead instead.

I knew a shortcut that would keep me off the main trail, and going by the scene at the gate staying off the trail was a good idea. I didn't want to meet another mob intent on getting into Junktion, not with my escorts gone. I remembered Drengoff's words about trouble brewing out here, and then I ignored them. Who was I going to believe? Him or the bodies hanging over the crossroad? Junktion had cleaned its badlands out. It was famous for it. Hell, I was part of that fame myself. Nobody knew any other town that had ever hired people like me to get the old Hive lighting grids running again, although plenty of places were trying to copy us now. Bright light so the vermin couldn't hide and the bandits couldn't lurk. Junktion and its lamplighters.

Junktion and its lamplighter. Singular. Me. I steered my thoughts away again.

Work. Something for my hands to do. I was a third of the way along the trail now, a stretch that used to be some kind of high-roofed access tunnel for hab-levels abandoned who knew how long ago. The lighting was good, a working lamp about every dozen paces, and I was making good time. I wasn't quite used to walking with the pole and the two-tone and experimented with some different ways. Pole this hand, gun that shoulder, pack and ladder... no. Pole and gun here, pack lower and around toward the hip more? I got about three steps before I realised it was all about to drop on the ground. This was good, this was distracting. This was my job.

I had found a setup I liked, pole and pack on the same side and the two-tone slung low, and I was adjusting some straps and the tilt of my hat to accommodate it better when I saw the arm and stopped like a statue.

It was an adult's arm. Maybe. The skin was grey like a scratchgrub shell and flaccid with rot, and the flesh was missing off two of the fingers. Two of the six fingers. The thumb was longer than any of those fingers, and all of them had odd, angular joints. I took a slow step closer. The fleshless fingers looked gnawed and the bone had been cracked to get at the marrow. The nails were crusted with something dark. Everyone knew scavvies would eat their own kind if they couldn't chase down cleanskin folks.

I breathed hard and dropped my pack to get the two-tone into my hands. The arm-stump had been dragged back and forth across the rough floor,

leaving a congealed mark. Had it been an attempt to write something, paint something? I couldn't tell. I listened hard but couldn't hear any sounds.

New arrangement. Pack on back with my lantern-pole jammed down through the straps, uncomfortable as a bastard but it left both hands free for the two-tone.

Safe than sorry and all the rest of it. I scowled at the arm, as if I could intimidate it in revenge for unnerving me, and set off again, playing a nasty game of question-response in my head.

If there were scavvy troubles then surely the fathers would have tried to root them out?

Sure they would, it wasn't as though things were so stretched in Junktion that they'd had to rope a gang of House Goliath thugs into the Watch, or anything.

But there was that much activity on the trails into Junktion that somebody would have come across them and raised the alarm?

That's right, an alarm that would have cut right through all the shouting and crying at the gate, and we knew for sure that any trail-slogging holesteaders who blundered into a scavvy ambush would survive to raise the alarm.

Ha! I told myself as the tunnel right-angled and pitched upwards over a long-settled rockfall into which some conscientious soul had cut steps years ago. Ha! Anyone they ran into almost certainly got away, though. Scavvies don't turn on one another unless they're really hungry.

Everyone knows that, I told myself back as I picked my way down the far side of the slope, which is what pretty much guarantees that any scavvies still lurking around here will be really hungry.

While I stood and thought about that, there was a noise from behind me. Light and distant, maybe nothing more than a little rockfall or some little underhive vermin, but it was enough for my instinct to make my decision for me: I moved on again.

The steps down on this side of the fall led down a long way past the tunnel's original level, down to stepping stones over an eye-smarting chemical bog. About a hundred paces later it started climbing again, toward the Tarvo trail. I was out of the chem-stink in short order and moving more easily up the gentler passageway, through level on level of

crumbling, interwoven passages. I was trying to move and breathe as softly as possible, listening for any more of those stealthy little sounds behind me. I knew for a fact that nerves were fuelling my imagination, but did that mean that my imagination was all it was? There were no more scavvy traces littering the floor now: the only marks I saw were the carefully cut and painted signs marking the way to the Tarvo trail, which was fine by me.

It was putting me in a more optimistic mood, too, and I asked myself again: was it not true that I had spent a large chunk of my life pre-Junktion on the move through country just like this, and come off none the worse (and rather the richer and craftier) for it?

Of course, I replied, and that was because I had the good sense to always travel with a big caravan and never piss off down an empty trail on my own.

There was another rattling of loose rock from behind me. Not a scavy, but not my imagination either.

I was gripping the two-tone tight enough to make my fingers ache. I had found my distraction, well and good, but now I needed a distraction from my distraction. I almost scuttled into the chimney at the top of the trail and hauled myself one-handed up the ladder, into the distinctive green tinge of the Tarvo trail's stringlights. I backed away from the top of the ladder with the two-tone trained on it, until my heart had slowed and I was sure there was nothing coming up it. It had been a long while since I had been that glad that a leg of my rounds was over.

THE GREENISH STRINGLIGHTS made the Tarvo trail one of the brightest, and so safest, but they gobbled juice like an absolute bastard. The trail depended on a fat juice cable that the Berserkers had taken off their neighbours the Exers, a gang of House Van Saar renegades. After three lightsons of the vicious little turf-war the sole surviving Exer had legged it along the Chamberpit trail minus an eye and most of his gear and hadn't been seen since. Now the Berserkers rented it to Tarvo, and Tarvo cut a deal with Junktion, and here I was working for any or all of them, as far as I could tell or be bothered to think about it.

I'm good at powertaps, picked up a knack for them setting up camps in my travelling days. Finding the arm had still left me nervous, but after I saw lights moving around on the bridge (the Berserkers would never relinquish their toll station there, water shortage or no) I got more confident. This was a good spot, kept in good hands. The Berserkers were one of the toughest gangs this side of Coma Gulch. I'd been jumping at shadows.

The thought cheered me up as I panned my lamp around. Someone, probably Thamm, had got too extravagant with the lights near the bridge over the Dredge Canal, and there just wasn't enough juice off the existing powertap to run them all. The existing tap was more or less sound despite some bodged connections (definitely Thamm, I couldn't touch her on fine component work but her cabling was atrocious), but it needed a backup. No problem.

I managed to follow Thamm's tap-cable away from the trail and through a broad crack in the rockcrete wall that enclosed one side of the trail. That led to a bit of swearing - Thamm hates it when I set stuff too high for her to reach and I hate it when she puts it places too small for me to fit. I was just working out a way to get my body and pack through the crack when I heard the voices behind me, at the head of the ladder I'd climbed up. It took me a moment to realise what they were saying, and then I froze in place.

'What do you mean you can't see him? How would he have got back past us, then?'

'Maybe he legged it down to the bridge. I swear he heard us. 'S'why he was so quiet when he came up, was covering behind him.'

Then why don't we just keep talking like idiots and give ourselves away?' hissed the first voice. 'Let's move it and find him before he gets to the bridge, if that's where he's going. I don't want to get into Berserker gun sights. You heard Heliko at lightson, no trouble with the gangs 'til we've done with Junktion.'

I'd been right. They'd been following me. More lamplighter-hunters.

If they were afraid I was still lying in wait for them, fine. That was a dandy head start. There was no way I could make it past them and down to the Dredge Canal bridge, but thanks to Thamm's cable I knew this burrow would come out somewhere. Fear helped me wrench myself through the

gap, hook my pack with my lantern-pole and drag it after me, and now I was inside the double thickness of wall.

No good, not yet. If they'd heard me and I stayed in here I was trapped and dead meat. I took a breath and then followed Thamm's cable through the cavity and out through another great crack.

Passing through a wall or hatch is often the cue for a shocking change in Underhive scenery. Suddenly I was between two giant hab-stacks, balancing on a swaying duct barely wider than I was over a dark gap that went a long way down. But that was where the cable went, and that meant it was where escape was, so with clipline and pole-hook I worked my way across and into a second cavity between another pair of double walls. From wall to wall there was barely enough room for me to extend one arm and even that narrow space was full. My lamp shone off vents and ducts and shafts, silver splotched with old rust, and my boots were sinking into the usual floor coating that the out-of-the-way nooks of the Underhive pick up. Dust, silt, metal scraps, trash, little bones bound together with old spider webs or small papery scraps of skin.

I unhooked my clip line and clicked off my lantern, stayed still and quiet. For a moment I fancied I heard voices back on the other side of the chasm I'd just crossed, and I wondered what the hell I'd been thinking coming out here without a guard.

I hadn't been thinking anything. I'd been too relieved to be out of the gate and away from the Steelheads and I'd wandered off without thinking the way I was so used to doing. And what was I supposed to have done, ask the Steelheads to stay with me? Well, maybe I should have swallowed my pride. I ground my teeth and decided not to think about that. If it had been voices on the other side of that giant gap, they weren't there now. I made myself stay quiet and listen for a count of a hundred and fifty before I decided I could risk flicking my lamp on.

I took my bearings. Thamm's tap would be connecting with the master cable below where I stood, and I was pretty sure I could fit in another one. I was also forming a good idea of where I was relative to a parts stash we kept behind a-

Venomous black eyes in the light of the filament lamp, yellow dagger-teeth in a snarl. I yelled. My hands went for the two-tone and sure they got

it, but then the rim of the lamp cracked against the rockcrete and it began to flicker and my lantern-pole went over with a crash behind me.

Not the dark, not now.

No.

For a heartbeat a quick white muzzle-flash from the two-tone scorched away the dark. It could only have been a couple of seconds since I had seen that face and my hands on the gun still remembered where it had been.

I hit where it had been but not where it was. The rat, long as my forearm, thicker than my thigh, was already coming at me and my burst killed the one behind it.

My boot was powering forward by the remembered light of the gun-flare and crunched high into the thing's snarling face. By reflex I shifted my weight forward and pinned it on its back. Its hissing squeal sounded almost like words. I kept my weight down until I heard its back break and back-pedalled, shuffling my foot around until it hit the lantern pole.

I'd seen more rats in the flare, eyes and teeth and bone-spines and claws. The Underhive twists rats the same as humans, only worse. Feet skittered in front of me and I risked a breath-quick burst down where the noises were loudest, then bent and snatched for the lantern.

Never crouch when you're fighting Underhive rats. It brings your vitals down to where they don't need to climb or leap to tear at them. I got the pole into the crook of an elbow and the glow-rod in the lantern came up again as I dragged it out of the dust, strong and bright, thank Helmawr.

The sudden change in light gave the rats pause and I used it, put a foot back behind me and burned off half the two-tone's ammo, sending the leading rats back to land in the spray from their own exit wounds. That stalled them again and I backed up another step, darting lizard-quick glances at sides and back. Underhive rats are smart enough for pincers and ambushes, oh yes.

I needed to get out of this coffin of a double-wall, that or get out my pistol. The two-tone would need a reload in a moment, if I didn't wing myself with a ricochet in this death-box. I realised that more and more of what my feet were crunching in was bone. Gnawed bones.

I ducked my head through the sling of the two-tone and let it hang as the rats seethed and shifted on their feet. Most were big as a human baby,

naked tails longer than my arm. The one nearest had nests of sharp quills framing its head. The next had hooked bone thorns growing out of a row of sores down its spine. At least two had extra pairs of legs and ran low to the ground like spiders. They stared at me and chattered. Had I scared them with the kills I'd made, or were they... around the bodies... were they drinking?

My head banged against a shaft and I yelped, ducked, danced forward and away from anything that was standing on the metal and level with my face. The rats came on again as soon as my concentration was split. The boil of mangy backs crawled with parasites.

I didn't dare try and duck under the shaft, not without knowing what was beyond it. Trapped hunched over in a dead end I'd not live a minute. Zakzakzak and my pistol scorched the air in front of me, took the life out of two rats. The rest didn't slow. I crouched for a terrifying moment, shed my tool pack then jumped, kicked out and hung there, wedged by feet and shoulders between the filthy walls.

A rat leapt out of the mass and managed to punch its teeth through the hem of my coat. It swung there for a moment and nearly dragged me down before I managed a convulsive jerk that let me twist and shoot into its belly. Its dead jaws sagged open and it fell back into the mass. Another rat leapt for my outstretched pistol arm and I pulled it back with an effort. I was sweating: body heat and the las-shots had upped the temperature in this little cavity of hell. My nose was full of the stink of vermin breath and las-scorched rat-hair. Sin-den Kass, Junktion's last lamplighter, rat-bait in a cavity he didn't have the sense not to scurry into.

I shut my eyes and tried to breathe, but the crook in my body and the stink made my lungs hitch. Do not cough. Then I looked over at the shaft I'd hit my head on moments before. Ventilator, it looked like, for air or smoke or whatever the hell. But built how strong?

How long could I stay wedged here like this? A minute more? Two? If that. No choice.

I shuffled a foot sideways, another, wedged my elbows and worked my arms and my shoulders. Rockcrete grated me through my coat. This was stupid, this whole thing was stupid. How could it take my weight if-

No. No panic. I gritted my teeth, reached over and shot the head off a two-foot-long rat that had reared up on top of my pack with one of the

straps snagged in its forelegs. It had had a tongue longer than my finger and tipped with a sucker.

There. Who's still on top? I shifted further. One of my elbows slid and I nearly lost the lantern-pole. My chest was cramped and I wheezed for air. My hair was plastered to my face. There were screams below me as the rats fought to climb the walls.

Don't think about them. If they could get this high they would have. I fired a random shot downward. Another scream. That was me. Sinden Kass, Ratkiller, their god, perched high above their little Underhive dealing death on my whim. Fear me.

I muttered this self-anaesthetising rubbish while I ignored the burning in my muscles and moved, moved. Nearly there, don't blow it, lunge too soon and you're down there in amongst-

Clank. I got the lantern-pole onto the flat top of the shaft and was able to let go. Free hand! I twisted to get both feet planted, right shoulder and the right side of my face ground into the wall, then put my left hand flat on the wall in front of my face and pushed myself into an arch, facing down. All I could see under me was heaving hair shot through with pink tail and white bone. I shot another one to boost my spirits then walked feet, shoulder and hand along the walls until I was over the duct.

Moment of truth. I let one leg down to test the duct, but then my own strength ran out and I crashed down full length onto the top of the shaft.

It held. The top bowed in and boomed and creaked but it bloody held.

Underneath me the rats went wild, boiling and spasming with hunger and rage, leaping from the top of my pack and snapping the air, thumping against each other and the walls.

The metal of the duct began to give way.

There was a thin screech from by my head as the mounting gave, then the whole duct deformed and started to crumple. The rats stayed under me, rearing and scrabbling and pawing the air, and then a new sound, a new realisation. I could hear the sound of rat-feet in the duct, feel the vibrations of claw and rasping tail in the metal under my cheek. They were coming up here.

Think. There was another duct above me, but it was too high to reach for and most of it hung in a rusted slump. I could dimly see one beyond and

below me, but I'd have to stand and leap to it and there wasn't (another shearing grate from the metal underneath me) time.

I pressed the hot muzzle of my pistol into the back of my hand and cleared my thoughts. No panic. I gripped my lantern-pole in the same instant the duct gave way.

I planted the end of the pole on the floor below, and doubled over the top end of it as though I were one of Bull Gorg's freedom-fighters, impaled on a spike outside Dead End like you hear in the stories. For a moment I knew I was dead, knew it so completely as to even resent the formality of having to live through being eaten after I fell to the floor. Then the pole turned my fall into a clumsy curve that crashed me into the lower duct. I hugged it as tight as I've ever hugged a woman, coating my front in rust and white grime, worked my way on top of it and lay there, panting in the dimness as the duct I'd been lying on finally collapsed to the floor with a clamour that drowned out the screams of the rats.

While rat-voices rustled and snickered under me, I felt the comforting angles of the two-tone against my chest, then craned over and looked down. The lantern was still glowing up from the layer of floor-trash it had landed in, half-hidden by the shattered curve of something's skull, every so often eclipsed as a heavy body scampered across it.

I sat up on the new duct. This one did not give, but the top was cambered and the curve made me slow and cautious as I lifted the lantern-pole and took stock. I spared a wince for my poor tool pack, down there getting gnawed on and tunnelled into, filled with infected fleas and reeking crap. But better it than me.

There was a way out. There had to be, because Thamm had run a cable tap in here and it needed to get out the far side. I clamped the pole between my knees and dug a new magazine for the two-tone off my belt. I stowed the old one - forgetting about it and letting it fall was the sort of thing I'd do if I weren't careful - and I was about to load the replacement clip when the rat, a lean grey bastard with teeth as straight and narrow as needles - dropped out of the darkness above me, missed my knee by a fingers breadth, caromed off the side of the duct and squalled angrily as it fell.

Stupid, stupid. If they knew a way into the old duct, why wouldn't they know a way into this one? I whacked my hat off my head and onto my back to hang by its thong. You don't see too many broad brimmed hats in

the Underhive. A hood or a bowl helmet will keep off the dust and tox rains without stopping you seeing a high-set attacker. Underhive turf is three-dimensional. Wide brims are a hazard, a luxury, an advertisement, a vanity statement. You'd think I'd know better, wouldn't you?

Two more rats landed. I straightened up as much as I dared and whipped the first one over the side of the duct with my lantern-pole, but then the lantern end scraped the wall behind me and toppled me forward. I got my footing, but not before the rat had got my foot. Smart or no, it took seconds to work out that its teeth weren't biting through to my toes - when did I say the Goliaths were the only ones around with metal-shod boots? - and that was enough for me to load the two-tone and take away everything between its ears and its shoulders with one careful round.

I flapped for balance for a moment before I caught myself, crouched and drew my las. The two-tone's recoil was light, but enough to cause problems on the curving metal that I didn't need. The next rat landed, scrabbled, snarled and lost its face to a las-round. So did the next, and the one after that took a kick. When an Underhive rat is coming in low for your knee or your hamstrings, kick higher than lower: better to be ready to stamp or pin the thing if you don't kill it first off than have it grip your foot and be placed to bite your instep.

I booted the twitching body off the duct and shot the next, a mangy brown with vestigial eyes in its shoulders that stared blindly up at me. But the next one must have run to jump, and it came arcing out further and hit me in the chest. For a terrible instant it was clinging to me, its claws scratching and its snout under my chin, and then I'd torn it loose. When I tried to throw it away it twisted and got a mouthful of coat sleeve, and I could feel wetness on my front and palm where claws and quill-spines had pricked the skin.

The writhing thing on the end of my arm took my balance, and I staggered into the air for a moment. The next rat came down at the same angle and hit my stomach, and the terror of it biting at my innards saw me pump half a dozen las-shots into it. It spasmed and fell smoking as I toppled off the duct, landing on my back, my arms dragging down the walls when I tried to throw them out.

The sickly-grey thing on the end of my arm growled and worried at my coat-cuff, trying to unsnag its teeth from the cloth, and then the rest were

abandoning the tool pack and rushing me, the last few dropping down out of the wall and bouncing to their feet with their eyes already fixed on my throat. I was yelling, trying to regain my feet, firing the pistol wildly, holding them back with sheer volume as the floor-litter in front of their noses began to smoulder and catch from the shots. The rat on my cuff yowled and scratched until I got enough wits back to jam the pistol against the side of its jaw and blow its head off.

Flames were licking up from the trash in front of me. Not much, but the smoke and little glow was enough to buy me a moment. I kept low and scrabbled further back. I wondered what filth and parasites I was putting my cut and opened hands in. Question for another time. If I died a sick man tomorrow I wouldn't die an eaten man today. I risked a look behind me and-

And there was smoke coming from behind me too. Smoke and light. There was flickering light coming from a cavity low in the rockcrete. I heard a voice. I knew I heard a voice.

'Out! I'm coming out! Lamplighter, I'm a lamplighter!' I didn't care how my voice sounded. I was bleeding and hunted and low on ammo - the amber telltale was winking on the back of my laspistol. I wrenched my body around and through the cavity, nearly strangling myself in the sling for the two-tone before I writhed it free and kept going. I was ready to take it apart with my teeth if that was what it took.

I lay on my back on bare metal, eyes squeezed shut, gulping air. In between gulps I got as far as 'Believe me, people, am I glad-'

Then hands hoisted me up. They were not gentle. They were big, powerful, bony, and they grabbed my hair and tilted my head back.

The first face I opened my eyes to was drooped and sagging. The eyes were two wet red holes rimmed in scabs. The top lip was curled up and atrophied and the gum underneath it was green and toothless.

'Got gear!' it said. The deformed mouth made it snuffle the words. Rolling my eyes desperately from side to side I could see more faces start to echo the words. Sacred red pissing redeemer, but what faces. Grey flesh, yellow flesh, waxy-white flesh. Eyes deep set, eyes in repellent glistening clusters, eyes missing or pulsing under veiny skin. Atrophied features, sores like craters, mouths like wounds, mouths like suckers, mouths like

muzzles, missing teeth, tusk teeth, horns, trunks, throat sacs. The giant hand that held the front of my coat was ridged with dark green scales.

'Got gear,' said the saggy face thoughtfully, and then split in a grin. 'Got gear, got meati' It started shouting, the whole rubbery face jolting, the scabs around its eyes cracking and weeping.

'Got gear got meat! Got gear got meat!'

The scavvies had found me.

GOT GEAR, GOT MEAT

GOT GEAR, GOT meat. No guesses about which of those terrified me more.

They had lashed my wrists together and wrapped something moist around my head. Hide or gut, from the way it filled my lungs with reek every time I took in breath. I was trying to work my face to wriggle the wrappings so I could see. Well, I could if it actually spitting worked. I didn't know which of the filthy scavvies had bound my head, but he had tightened them too much around my eyes and the only way to make a gap over my mouth would have been to poke the wrappings with my tongue. Licking that half-cured mess was a bad enough thought, but worse was the incredible urge to vomit that the thought brought on. I actually began to dry-heave, flopping my body and gasping against the wrappings, before I gritted my teeth and controlled myself.

I had no idea where we were. They had punched me into a daze when they bound me and I didn't know how long it had taken to hang onto one of my little passing patches of consciousness and stay awake. I'd been draped over the back of the big spitter who'd grabbed me as I crawled out of the rathole, draped like a cloak with my wrists crossed and bound in front of his neck.

Fight free? A laugh. I tried crooking my leg to see if I could still feel the knife in my boot, but I couldn't get my leg into a position to find out. I was brave or stupid enough - too woozy to decide which at that stage - to try doubling up to try and knee the scaly in the back, maybe bruise his kidneys or something, but the couple of good licks I did get in fetched up against the plates and ridges over his hide.

We stopped. I swung by numb arms as he grunted out a message. A couple of grunts in return in that yipping scavvy doggerel. Then my ride threw himself backward and slammed me into the sharp edges of an I-

beam. I yelled, and again as I got squashed. Jagged scales drove into my chest and gut and the rough steel of the beam into my back. Each time I cried out there were happy yawps and guffaws from all around until another voice cut in, a sharper, rougher voice, snapping and hounding them into getting moving again. After that I kept my movements small and sly, trying to get into a posture that wouldn't wrench my arms. Maybe if he didn't feel me moving he'd think I'd blacked out again. It was the only thing I could think of that remotely resembled an edge.

Scalies. That's what they're called, the big mutants that sometimes run with the scavvy mobs. Way down at Hive bottom, in the hellish waste-layers where the poisons are so thick nothing clean can live, that's where they keep themselves to themselves unless the scavvies can lure them up to fight. Yonni said he'd hunted them down around Lost Hope in his younger days. Said the Scalies had found their balance with the toxins that warp you and find their way through to your children so your grandchildren are nothing you can recognise. They hail become their own thing down in the chem-siinips and the dark. I'd shivered at the idea. Junktion was as far down as I ever wanted to go-

We stopped again, and I was dumped down hard to lie in the dust. I lay and tried to get my breath. I'd be prouder to say I was already thinking about freeing my hands, or getting my legs under me and at least go out resisting. Instead my thoughts ran in all directions like the rats in that double wall where maybe I would have been better off dying. Rats didn't flay and roast their meals alive for laughs.

I wondered miserably why I hadn't smelled a cooking fire or felt a knife yet. They had to be hungry. I remembered the arm I'd seen in the Tarvo trail. They'd already been hungry enough to eat at least one of their own. Surely they would need to eat more than some bony-arsed scavvy? But nobody had taken so much as a nibble at me. Maybe I was someone's personal property and too precious to hurt. For the moment.

I lay there in the dark of the wrappings for maybe another hour before I discovered that was right, more or less.

'THIS.'

I was breathing the dusty-mould smell of the scaly because its arms were wrapped around me, like a father bear-hugging a child who's thrown a fit. With the wrappings off, the free breath was enough to make me giddy.

'This.' I'd thought that the scab-eyed thing I'd seen outside the rat-hole was the boss, but no. When the thing in front of me moved there was an expectant hush. Each time it spoke there was a murmur as the other scavvies muttered its words over again.

We were in a room like nothing I recognised from any rounds I'd made near Junktion, inward-sloping walls meeting a seamed metal roof at just below head height. I could feel the scaly's chin digging into my scalp as he bent his big frame down to fit. There was almost no light, and I could hear the scavvies around the walls better than I could see them.

The boss was lit by a swaying, pallid curtain of luminous fungus-strips knotted around the weapon he held across one shoulder. A heavy matchlock scattergun, the kind that scavvies and Ratskins and outlaws use. His other hand held the two-tone, battered and scuffed, the sling-strap broken.

'This this-this?' Maybe it was the only proper word he knew, or maybe the crisscrossing scars that made his lips into flaps were messing up some other word.

You-this. Got-this.' He let it sink in, then: 'Me-this!'

It was the scavvies' cue to set up a racket, screeching and stamping and banging weapons on the rockcrete floor. This wasn't a feast, it was a gloating session. The boss shook the two-tone at me and cackled, then dropped it (with a clatter that made me wince for my poor weapon) and hopped up and down. He had dressed for the occasion in a tattered spiderhide shawl, the hem stitched with teeth, knucklebones, vertebrae. Some of them looked human.

Ornaments rattling, he pranced among the scavvies and returned dragging something through the dust behind him. Something that gleamed and clanked was shoved in my face, swinging forward to clout my chin.

'My lantern-pole', I said aloud. 'Mine. Put it down, or else.' Brave or stupid? Depended on how much it he understood. He seemed to pick up my tone though, because he leaned forward and grinned into my face. His nose had been entirely rotted away by an angry red infection that had

spread up to his hairline: just a flap of wet cartilage jutted out at me. The boss waggled his tongue - I could see right through it where a sore had rotted a hole in the flesh - and then he retreated for something else. My eyes were adapting to the dark, and 1 could see that under the shawl he wore an insane crisscross of belts and bandoliers, threaded with hides and scalps.

He dragged the next trophy out of the murk. My tool pack. Torn by rat teeth and streaked with rat faeces, which stained the boss's arms as he rummaged in it.

'This-this!'

'It's a juice-talker. Tells you how much power is running down a cable. You don't need that, you can just grab the metal and cook yourself, how about that?'

'I-this-me-this-this!'

'That's poke-foam. Buying it new from uphive is expensive, but you can strip usable stuff out of old parts if you know how.' This was insane. Listen to this! Chatting to a scavvy boss about the fine points of lamplighter kit! I wondered what Yonni would say about it.

'This. You-this.' There was a string of doggerel syllables that I didn't recognise. His tone was slyer.

'My filament lamp. Was a good one, too. Bought it myself off a Guilder.' I'd queued on the jetty at Baiter's Dock while the skiff came in over the sludge lake. The man's golden Guild medallion had shone in the lamplight like nothing I'd ever seen. 'Good luck with it. It's broken. Broken worse than your face, and that's pretty bad, isn't it, you ugly rotted little rat?'

More doggerel. The boss turned to the others, held the lamp up, and then yipped and worked the catch with his thumb. Nothing, of course, the thing had broken in the rathole. The boss screeched and threw the thing away, really flung it, to nervous noises from the scavvies. I winced at the impact crunch. It had been a good lamp. The boss had obviously wanted to show off that he knew how to ignite it, wow the troops a bit. Well, if my little lamp's last art was to humiliate a scavvy then I guessed it was dying in a good cause.

The setback with the lamp had cut his momentum. He stamped his flat feet and banged the stock of his scattergun on the floor, then cracked it into the face of a random scavvy whom I could barely make out in the

dark. The others tittered. Then he shuffled back and stared at me for a long time, until I decided that the show must be over. Feasting time. Bye bye Underhive. But he was getting ready for the grand finale. He lifted his last prize and flapped it hard enough to raise dustpuffs. My big broad-brimmed hat.

That punctured the shrill good humour I'd stumbled into, and I was suddenly furious. I loved that hat. It was my trademark So it was a vanity symbol. Screw it, I loved showing it off. My hat!

The boss knew he'd had a win straight away. He started capering again, carrying the hat around the ring and back in front of me again, jamming it hard down onto his wispy-haired peeling head.

'This-this-this-yip-yark-get-got-I-me-scratt-me-this!' The scavvies hooted and yelled back at him, and I found I still had a shout in me.

'Get that off, you thieving piece of carrion! Put it down, get your fingers off it you pus-skinned...' I trailed off. It wasn't because they were all watching me, although they were. It was because that popular Junktion insult was 'pus-skinned scavvy', and I had suddenly wondered what was the point?

And that brought that ridiculous good mood back, a mood to laugh right up at death, and so I did, quivering in the scaly's hug with these great convulsions of laughter that even frightened me. But I couldn't stop laughing, even with the boss slapping and then punching my face again and again.

I was waiting for him to cut my throat - wasn't that next? Show me the stuff he'd taken, open me up ready for the pot. Well, there were worse ways to go out than laughing at the knife.

What did stop me was the scaly suddenly pitching me sideways. The crown of my head hit the sloping wall and I dropped on my face in the stale silt of the floor, too surprised to break my fall. I thought that the kicks would come next - they would to a scavvy who got tossed down in the middle of a crowd of Junktioners - but it wasn't about me at all.

A new pair of scavvies had come in behind the boss. I could just make out their shapes in the barely-there light from the boss' glow-fungus, ducking their heads like fighting rats acknowledging an alpha male, chattering in doggerel. Their voices were pleading, warning, urgent.

Sklipp. Fitezz-sklip. Badzone doggerel for clean water, one of the few words of it I knew. Somehow the scavvies had found clean water.

WE MOVED. AND I mean we. I was along for the ride, slung over the scaly's shoulders again, my back grating along the ceiling as he lumbered out. The scavvies were yammering excitedly, weapons in their hands and bits of old meat and edible fungus stuffed into pants and belts. This hadn't been a nest or a camp, just a place to stop. These were true nomads. Nothing was being left behind, including me.

I was wondering if that was good or bad when I was thrown down and winded again. I writhed and whooped for breath as the scaly loomed down, his muzzled face in mine. I wondered if he were going to bite into my throat, with the meal all to himself now that the others were gone ahead.

Wrong guess. It was time for the wrappings again, just around my mouth this time, and then an extra length of gut binding my ankles. I tried to use the last of my bravado to insult the scaly but all I managed was a strangled gggmmgg through the gag. I lay over his shoulder furiously snorting what breath I could through my nostrils as he broke into a thudding run.

I'd been given a reprieve, and I was on fire with trying to work out how to use it. I started desperately counting the doorways we ran past, ghostly patches of deeper black, then when we passed into darkness so total my eyes couldn't sift it I counted the scaly's long strides. I think I was at about fifty-eight when the light grew again and we started to climb.

We were climbing up what Junktion folk called a shamble. A pocket of Underhive, usually taller than it was wide, a tricky tangle of loose rubble, fallen girders, collapsed walls and floors, bursts of luminous fungi. The occasional intact wall or pylon or walkway jutted through in one direction or another. This shamble was dominated by a face of broken rockcrete, pitted and rich in handholds that the scaly quickly clambered up. The light got brighter as we climbed, soft fungus-glow. Fungi meant moisture, and I craned around looking for a sight or sound of it. Nothing showed itself and when we finally climbed past the fungi themselves they were thirsty and shrivelled, their bright orange ridges stained with dead brown.

High up in the shamble (how high I didn't know, but well after I'd closed my eyes rather than look down) we clawed off the climbing face and onto

the stump of an old enclosed bridge. For a moment I entertained some half-baked plans to kick and writhe and tip the scaly's balance, tumbling us both back down, one last fightback, but we were on firm footing and loping up a sloping corridor before I could work up the courage. Probably wouldn't have been worth it anyway. I remembered Yonni's stories about how scalies could knit themselves new flesh, how once a scaly he knew he'd winged had waded into his next hunting party with no sign left of the bullet-hole. No point in sacrificing myself if he was just going to grow himself whole again, was there?

I was still muttering excuses like this as we crept forward through a dim, low walkway. Aisles of vertical metal girders marched alongside us, the paths between them choked with giant puffballs the yellow of old toenails and tethered with skimpy, glistening stalks. We moved through the puffball glades in sudden, unnerving silence: the yammering from the scavvies had stopped and my breathing was the loudest sound I could hear.

The scaly dropped to all fours and dumped me. I rolled over to try and see what was going on and came face to face with the girl, lying full length on the ground next to me with her face turned and her eyes level with mine.

She was fairly young. Not more than sixteen, if she was young enough for youth to show in an Underhive that weathers people fast. She had light brown eyes, wide open, and the elaborate beaded braids of a House Escher gangwoman, dirty now from where she'd been dragged feet-first through the muck. Her nose was crooked from at least two old breaks and lashworm scars lined the side of her neck and shoulder. Her mouth was open but only a single tooth was missing. Bottom front. She wore typical scrappy gang armour: patches of meshmail or recycled ceramite plate strapped over her jacket and leggings. Her holsters and sword clip were empty.

She was quite dead, and her open eyes were blank and sightless. I could see the knot behind her ear where the club had landed, and the red puddle underneath her where a broken-off scavvy knife jutted out of her ribs. Scuttlemites had already started to assemble around the puddle to eat her blood. Sadness and sickness swallowed my own fear for a moment. I didn't think she'd had much of a chance. The scavvy scouts must have come on her trying to sneak through this forest and-

The forest.

My eyes snapped wide and I rolled onto my back to look around again, and it hit me: we were back in country I recognised. I'd seen these puffball groves before. Ahead was the Shining Falls roadway. Further along it than I usually went, but who cared? My heart was hammering. We were back on my turf.

As though on cue came a shout, a woman's voice, strong and clear and edged with concern.

'Hup back! Carriers, close up, guards to the outer. Pointers in, pointers in! Hup!'

Now I knew where the scavvies were going to get their water. I knew who they were going to take it from. And it looked like there was going to be damn all that I could do to intervene.

I began to manoeuvre my body, trying to get my knees under me. I had no idea what 1 was going to do, but I wasn't going to lie here and listen to a massacre. Even in the Underhive, even in the bad places out between the setdements, there is a way that good people do things. I was about overdue to act like a good person.

I tried to wriggle along the rusty floor. My little flash of moral insight hadn't helped me work out exactly what I was going to do. All I could think of was getting closer to the caravan, not being left behind to listen to the killing sounds.

The scaly jerked his head round from where he lay lizard-flat under a puffball cluster and snarled at me. The message was clear: stay still, no noise. The hell with taking orders from a thing like that. I thrashed forward another half-body length and the scaly wriggled over to me, covering the distance with quick and horribly non-human lateral moves of his hands and feet. For a second time his face glared into mine and he pulled his lips back from filed grey teeth. I stopped moving and looked him in his yellow eyes and he snaked back to his position, snorting with annoyance.

Ahead I could hear rustling as the scavvies began moving forward through the puffball stems. Any minute now they would have fanned out enough for a pincer, trapping the caravan on their length of roadway. The dead girl might have been missed, but the ambush was still hidden.

It was the rathole all over again: the instant the plan was there I threw myself into it before I had the chance to terrify myself into a coma. I half-curled up as though I'd given in to despair, then drove my boots into the side of the scaly's head. There was a clank of bone-scale on girder and a rustle and pops as the riper puffballs above us burst from the movement.

I'd gambled everything on how much I had managed to get on the scaly's nerves, and gambled well. He couldn't hold himself down any more, gave out the bellow that I'd hoped for and sprang onto me. In the split-second of clear vision I saw two of the nearest scavvies twist around to goggle at the sudden brawl behind them before I was lost in a blur of dust and growling. The scaly had me by the coat-front, effortlessly lifting me and slamming me back down before he switched tactics, grabbed a handful of my hair and rammed the back of my head into the ground. And again, and then by the third time dark fog was throbbing through my vision.

In the dim distance past the roaring in my ears I head voices shouting, scavvy yelps and human battlecries, female ones, drowned out by gunfire and a tight succession of booms as a volley of grenades went off. The yelps grew to howls and a scraggly volley of matchlock shots in answer, then came a quick burr of autofire that I recognised. Their bastard boss was using my two-tone on the caravan guards.

I suddenly realised that I was hearing all this clear, without the scaly bellowing and snarling at me. I rolled and looked around. He was crouched and peering through a little clump of ropey puffball stalks, staying out of sight. I couldn't see his head or shoulders, but as I watched, one of his arms came back and tugged loose a cord. A nondescript cloth bundle hanging off his belt fell by his feet and opened into a stack of metal chunks that had been slung at his thigh by the holes in their centres. They were thick circles of floormetal, wider than the stewplates you could eat off at Greimplatz, their edges left deliberately ragged. I think I'd have struggled to lift one with one hand.

All the scaly's attention was ahead of him now. He thought I was unconscious, or he didn't care as much about a trussed prisoner behind him as much as about the gun-flashes and shouts ahead of him. He had no idea that the last ripper-discus to drop off its strap had glanced off the others at a flukey angle and skidded close to me.

I looked at the disc, at him. The idea that I was going to live through any of this was insane. In a minute he'd hear me moving and turn around to finish what he'd started. But hey, that meant I might as well go on. I put my wrists out and started working the binding against a jagged discus tooth.

Ahead of us there was the rumbling sigh of a flamer and a wash of orange light. The scaly half-stood and whipped his arm around faster than anything that big ought to be able to move. The discus in his hand winked away into the fire-tinted half-light and I heard an impact and a brief cry. The scavvies' cries turned to laughter and the reports of more matchlocks. The firefight was intensifying.

Concentrate, Kass! I ducked my head and feverishly worked my hands. A strand parted, another. My breath almost stopped as the scaly reached back, but his hand dusted lightly backward to find the next discus by touch and he picked it up without looking around. By the time he stood again and skated another discus into the fight (its path marked by the fall of puffballs as it sheared through their stems) the last strand around my arms was giving way. I sat for a moment, trying to lever the discus up. I could never have thrown it even standing and rested, but anything heavy in my hands would be good when he turned and saw me.

He carefully reached behind him, found the third discus by touch and lifted it away.

That was my last stay of execution: I was holding the last of his missiles. I sat up and aligned the edge with my shins, and the scaly's haste to get going from their rest stop had been my friend: the gut wrapped around my legs was tight but sparse, easy to cut and unravelling as I stood up.

In the back of my head was still the absolute knowledge that I was dead, but each move I'd made had brought me a better way of dying. No reason not to keep it going. I gave myself one long breath, no more, to stretch and flex my muscles so I didn't simply keel over, and then I took two, three, four tottering steps up behind the scaly with the discus held in both hands. The weight of it shook my arms as I lifted it over my head. No part of that edge wasn't sharp, and I could feel blood trickling from my fingers at the weight and the edge of it.

Don't get stupid, don't get fancy. I wasn't Brakar the Avenger, Donna Ulanti or even Kal spitting Jerico. One shot at this before it would be over one way or the other, so make it good.

The scaly must have sensed something, because he had started to hunch his back and turn his head. Too late. There was a seam in the scales over his shoulders and neck, a crease in the hide, and I brought the edge of the discus down like a guillotine. I used everything left in my muscles and dropped to my knees as well, throwing all my bodyweight into the blow.

He froze, spasmed, dropped the discus in his hand, tried to reach back for the one that jutted out behind his head like a ruff. He tried to stand up as I fell back but collapsed into a sitting position, facing me as I dropped onto my backside and sat there looking back at him.

There was a weapon by his other hand, a thick-hafted mattock with a head the length of my forearm. His hand fumbled for it, but I got there first. It took both hands to lift it and I had to pirouette my body to manage to swing it. In that time he managed a kick that numbed my thigh and sent me reeling but I stepped away, spun and swung again, connected with his face and finished it. I managed to keep my feet this time, but my mouth was too dry to spit on the corpse.

I gripped the mattock and staggered forward into the fire-flashed darkness.

RIDING WITH THE CURSE

I ZIGZAGGED THROUGH the columns, giddy with adrenaline. I stumbled every other step as my feet hit debris and as I tried to swing the mattock, striking sparks off the girders I passed too close to and knocking myself off balance. Each impact shivered down my arms and through my whole body. My memories of it are barely coherent, and I don't think my thoughts at the time made a lot of sense either. All I remember is looking for scavvies to kill. And I was spoilt for choice.

The first one was hunched over with his back to me, mumbling as he stuffed the barrel of his matchlock. I missed with the mattock and he turned wide-eyed but I got him in the ear on the return swing and he went down without a sound. I ignored the matchlock and hooked right. The next scavvy had a plastic sheet slung around his neck and cradled in it like a baby was a load of rough brown-black fist-sized lumps. They looked like rocks, but I knew better. I waited until his arm drew back to lob one into the caravan, then stepped in and brought the mattock down. I'd aimed for the shoulder joint but the hit caromed off his skull and that was fine too. He lurched to his knees and didn't drop the tox-bomb, and I pushed him onto his face with my foot and splintered the back of his head.

Grenade-boy had a friend near enough to see what had happened and he shrieked and rushed me, and there went the surprise attack. No time to lift the mattock again so I ducked under the pipe it swung at my head, put my shoulder into its chest and we both went down in a heap.

He howled and bit, and nearly had me off him when my brawling reflexes sent my hand toward my boot for a knife that wasn't there. I put a knee in his midriff and while that distracted him I got his pipe and pressed it hard across his throat. He thrashed, but the pressure quieted him until I could stand, take his pipe and give him three quick whacks to the skull to put paid to him.

I was almost in sight of the roadway now, and for a minute I sagged against a column trying to see what was going on.

The spot was a good one for an ambush, the puffball forest stretching from the shadows we had come out of right up to the roadway. The caravan's only advantage was the drop the scavvies had to scramble up onto the roadway. Unable to move forward or back, pincered with matchlock shots and tox bombs, the guards had formed up around their power-carts and were fighting like devils to keep that one last advantage.

The first rush for the edge of the roadway must have been what the flamer and grenades had answered, from the four dead scavvies lying in a cratered and scorched strip of dirt by the drop. But the woman with flamer tanks on her back was down too, slumped against one of the power-carts with one of the scaly's saw-toothed discus jutting out of her chest. Now there was a grim brawl for the edge of the road again, scavvies milling while three frightened juves and a knot of moaning pack-slaves swung clubs and axes to keep them back. There were flashes and cracks from both the caravan and back among the puffballs as each side's second line tried to support its first.

I realised the scavvies were screeching 'togz! togz!' and laughed out loud: they were waiting for my victim to lob a tox bomb into their enemies. One did fly from somewhere behind me, but it missed the carts and went long. The guards were well drilled: two of them immediately ran to the ruptured bomb with a sheet of plastic, to smother down its cloud of blinding, skin-frying chemicals.

I hefted the pipe like a quarterstaff, like my poor lost lantern-pole, and went after the next tox-bomber. Why not? I was riding it now. Four in a row, I was invulnerable. I was on fire. I bashed aside a clutch of puffballs and the shower of thick black spore-dust saved me, because on the other side of it the scavvy boss in his ridiculous skin-shawl and my gnawed-on hat fired my two-tone at me. The wild blaze barely missed me as I hurled myself sideways, catching a girder-edge on my shoulder with numbing force. The pipe pitched from my fingers and another volley from the two-tone splattered me with shredded fungus meat. Then the weapon was empty and the boss screamed and dropped it clanking to the dirt.

That was the end of him, although not because of me.

The caravan guards knew their work. You can't go forward out of a good ambush because it's set up to stop that. You can't go backward because the ambushers will have counted on that and will trap you, so you go at an ambush's weakest point: punch your way out through the side. And when the scavvies seemed to start shooting one another, the guards took their chance.

The boss had stepped through the wrecked puffballs to stand over me when the grenade went off behind him, peppering him with shrapnel he barely seemed to feel. He had a spear made out of my knife and my lantern-pole, held up two-handed. I swatted at it as it came down and the point gouged my ear, then grounded in the dirt next to my head. Then that woman's voice again, ringing over gunfire and revving chainswords.

'Arm up and swing, you cowardly little wasters! Arm up and fight for your lives! Any of you kills a scavvy, I'll write your ticket back at the Falls!'

It was the Curse, the Escher gang from Shining Falls. I couldn't have hoped for better.

Still lying on the ground, I hooked a foot around the boss' heel and shot my other leg out, square into his knee. It snapped and bent backwards. His eyes bulged and his scream had so much guts to it that his voice gave out to a hoarse croak in the middle. He toppled against the girder I'd bounced off and jabbed the spear at my groin. I curled to protect myself and tried to roll away.

Then a las-shot skewered the air between us and he looked around wildly. The third las-shot and an autopistol burst simultaneously hit the scavvy behind him, spinning it in the air, its notched knives spinning out of its hands. The boss yelped and tried to use the spear as a crutch to get around the girder, into better cover.

I wasn't having that. I kicked at the pole. I couldn't knock it from under him, but I forced his weight onto his snapped knee and he shrieked. That was enough for the women to get a bead on him and the next minute the blast from a sawn-off catapulted him forward to land at my feet. I pulled myself upright against the girder and just watched for a long couple of minutes.

The scavvies have their little tricks, their sneaks and scalies, their fighting mutants and half-tamed plague-zombies, the infamous tox-bombs

they make by pouring the worst Underhive poisons they can sniff out into little easy-to-shatter shells. But when it comes to the pointy end they always need to rig the odds. Darkness, surprise, numbers. Now they were on the back foot and the Curse, better equipped, gutsier and working as a team, went to work on them. Cutting through the dark came a heavy-shouldered woman with a screaming chainsword and a hand flamer whose light glinted off the rings and studs in her ears and face. The other Curse scrappers made a flying wedge behind her, yelling and shooting. Howling scavvies dropped or fled or made suicidal forward rushes to be cut down by the pierced-faced woman. Shambling out to watch them pass I saw them go through four enemies without breaking stride, batting aside clumsy swings with professional ease.

Next came the two of the Curse's shooters, moving more slowly with long arms at their shoulders and a trio of pack slaves to soak up any counter-charge, picking off the scavvies flitting through the murk to outflank their sisters. They were close enough now for me to see the gang-paint on their faces, the lean muscles on their arms and shoulders, the mottle that spore-rashes had left across their noses and necks.

I'd escaped from the rats and faced down the scavvies, and so of course it was the bloody humans that were nearly the end of me. If I'd been less delirious with relief I might have realised how wild-eyed and ragged I was, plastered with filth and blood. But I didn't, I just staggered forward. One of them swung and brought to bear on me, and I got out 'Wait, lampligh-' before she fired.

I DIDN'T BLACK out. I remember a blur, and a hot stripe of pain sitting across my chest from the left side of my breastbone to my right shoulder. Thumps and shocks and then light, and then a cool splatter across my chest and face - water!

That sent the blur away in an eyeblink, and I was sitting up and flailing at the cup being emptied over me.

'He likes it, I think.' A woman's voice, amused, by my ear. 'I think we can spare him another cup but no more than that.' A pair of hands had to close over mine and support my grip as I lifted the cup and gulped it, clamping it to my mouth hard enough to clack the plastic against my teeth.

I sat there for more long moments until the last of the water was gone, then doubled forward, coughing explosively, stomach heaving. I'd been hoisted up onto one of the carts and now I had to scrabble not to slide off them and topple down onto the roadway.

'And that's about enough for you, then,' said that voice again. 'I'm not riding the rest of the trail with a man spewing all over my carts, and you don't look up to walking. I might let you have some more when you can handle it.'

I focused on her upturned face, and put a hand over my mouth in case I did, in fart, vomit onto her. I had enough wit to know that wouldn't be a good move.

She was a sturdy woman, shorter than I had expected, broad-chested and heavy-shouldered, in vest and leggings of dark lizard-hide and her kit held in place with dark metal chains. Her eyes were hard and blue, her hair dyed the same shade and arranged to accentuate a livid pattern of scars and dents from some long-ago injury. Her face was long and hard-boned in the Escher way, and as she spoke a quick little smile flicked onto and off it like a moth flitting through a torch beam.

'Don't think we owe you any more than that,' cut in another. She was taller than blue-hair, her sullen face framed by hoops of braided hair stiffened with oil. She held a lasgun at hip-height.

'If Atta is a little short with you it's because you showed her up,' said the blue-haired woman. 'Hasn't been tending to her piece quite as she should have. That second it took for the beam to heat up is why you've got a brand across you instead of a hole.' She chuckled. 'On the other hand, I had a look at where she hit you and her actual aim was damn fine. Right over your heart. Her reflexes were pretty good too. Twitched that gun right around quick time. Most of the burst went over your shoulder. It all balances out, I think. Her quickness is why you're breathing now, and drinking our water.'

I looked at Atta and gave her a nod as courtly as I could manage in the circumstances.

'I appreciate your quickness,' I managed to croak.

'Crappity knockoff lasbarrel won't stay clean,' she muttered by way of response and bent to inspect her gun, purple and burgundy hair hanging in her face. The blue-haired woman vaulted easily up onto the cart next to

me. I had noticed my laspistol hanging from one of the harness chains around her neck, and she noticed my noticing.

'Ah, then this is yours. Our lugger slaves combed the field to make sure all the scavs were gone and they brought me this. Didn't take it for a scav weapon. Too clean. And it works.'

'I had another...'

'Ah, that bastardised little auto we found, that was yours too? I wondered what something with the sound of an Escher shooter was doing in a scav mob. Well, we'll think about it. It's a good piece, even with that

Delaque frame. If Junktion-town doesn't feel like ransoming you then maybe these'll be our little commission for bringing your hide out of there. Scorched or no.' Her tone was still light and amused. Nothing personal, I knew. It was just how gangers worked.

There was a girl,' I said. My voice was hoarse, but better than it had been. 'Young girl, browny hair, crooked nose.'

Blue-hair's face tightened.

'Danda,' she said. 'Point-girl. We think she fought a couple of them before we pulled up behind her. We didn't get a signal but we heard trouble.'

'She's dead,' I told her. 'I can show you where. Saw her there before I could get away from the scaly. She was already gone. I'm sorry.'

Her expression didn't change, not then and not a few seconds later when we heard the cries from out in the puffballs. I sat and looked at my lap while she got down to meet the gang-woman walking out of the grove, her comrades by her sides and the body of the girl in her arms.

IT WAS A GOOD thing I hadn't vomited on blue-hair. I had thought that she was one of the Curse's senior toughs, but as I watched them with dead Danda, wrapping her and placing her in the lead power-cart next to the woman the discus had killed, I saw the way she commanded and the way the other women deferred to her. I'd been speaking to Safine, the Curse's leader, the woman who was supposed to have stood her ground against the plague-zombies at Dying Gorge for a full day with just a sword in each hand. Now I could see the famous burn-scars on her forearms and the workmanship of the chainsword across her back, and that the pistol slung

under her left shoulder wasn't las or stub but a fat-snouted plasma. When she climbed back up next to me I was careful to show her a little more respect, and that seemed to please her.

The motors of the four big power-carts whined, hard rubber caterpillar tracks squealed on the metal roadway and the carts started to pull themselves along. Behind each one a pair of slaves gripped the steering yokes under the direction of a gangwoman: whatever machinery steered the carts had long ago broken and now they had to be hauled through changes of direction with muscle-power. More huffing slaves carried bundles of provisions on either side of the caravan and Curse gangers paced between them, tense and sombre. I looked around once for the little column-cave where Danda had died, but it was already gone around the dark shoulder of an Underhive wall.

Safine was quiet as we cleared the gloomy lichen-caves at Phostwood and entered the ruined but more spacious dome between the wood and Junktion's outer borders. The metal of the road disappeared under the packed mud of the dome floor and the cart-tracks crunched on the thin brown crust. With a murmur from Safine the gangers closed formation, and an older one-eyed woman with feather tattoos across her face directed the lifting of stablights into position on the carts. The lights were good and solid, although of no make I could identify, but the bulbs and cores were cheap yellow-burning Orlock knockoffs and the wiring down to the cart motors wasn't all it could be. I started to mention it to Safine - she had that quality of born leaders, just a way about her that made you want her to approve of you -and then caught myself. If I had a favour I could do them then I'd wait and see if I could make it count. I hadn't forgotten her mention of a ransom deal.

Everyone in the Underhive knows about ransoms, and even the gangers, all but the craziest of them, will look over an injured enemy with a cool head before they finish them off. Knowing when someone you've downed is worth more trussed up and alive than dead and looted is a damn good skill for a gang leader to have, and I'd seen the calculation in the looks Safine had given me.

If I'd been female, they might have rescued me for generosity. The Underhive knocks a lot of the sharp edges off hardcore Hive City attitudes, and the Curse are like the Berserkers, running their own little township

instead of roving the badzones, with all the compromises that a practical gang leader has to learn to make. Still, the old House upbringings run deep and Underhive males know to watch their step around an Escher gunwoman, no matter where she's from. Safine was carting me home because she saw a profit in bringing me in alive.

I was getting less and less easy as we crossed the dome floor. My hat would have made it easier to pretend that those tens of metres of empty space above me weren't there. Safine seemed to be relaxed by it, though. She dug up a flask, poured herself more water, and started to talk a little more freely. All of it was worth hearing. The Curse's territories bordered the tamed pocket of Underhive that Junktion had made for itself, but they also stretched out well into the badlands beyond Shining Falls. The way she told it, everywhere was drying up and coming out fighting.

I'd never thought too much about the Penman's Deep water-plant - it wasn't on my usual rounds. I remembered big condenser vanes sticking into horrifying pits that went up and down forever, and tunnels lined with pipes and clanging machinery. But really they were just, well, there. The kind of thing you find in the Underhive sometimes, abandoned but working or at least fixable, like the cable-cars over the Coma Gulch scrapmines. Underhivers get fatalistic about stuff like this. If you can keep it working and maybe turn a cred or three it's fine. When something happens you go on your way.

Listening to Safine tell what was happening all through the badzones, I realised that those clanking old engines must have fed water into many more places than just Junktion. The hints had been there - I thought with a twist of guilt about Enning and his family, leaving Twodog and going on the road looking for water - but I guess I hadn't really known it, not until Safine's words brought it alive.

Everywhere for days' walk around was a dustbowl. The causeway underneath Wilhelm's Crossing now just spanned a gully full of silt. At Coma Gulch the constant drizzle from the high pipes not only brought water but settled and sluiced away the metal-dust drifting down from the Hive City waste pits, but now that was gone. A chain of holesteads linking Tarvo with Junktion and the Gulch had died, one after the other, as the bores and pipe-taps they used to feed their algae pits simply no longer ran. Some families had taken to the road, and some had tried to backtrack their

water sources to try and find other supplies. Many of those hadn't been seen again.

And several places had been found in ruins, the algae vats stripped or smashed, the families dead or just gone. One had been in Curse territory, a pair of sisters from hive-city who'd barricaded off a kilometre of empty corridors near Crossing and Tarvo and farmed fungus and pudge-moths. They and their hired hands had put up a fight, Safine said with her face grim, but whatever it was had outfought them, and partly eaten them.

Could have been scavvies, but could have been any number of other things. The worse the drought got, the further the bad things had to range to find their drink and the harder they'd fight for it. I told Safine about the camp-less scavvy tribe, and a rat nest where we hadn't seen one before, and she nodded grimly.

'It's happening all over, Kass, every direction. Thank the Motherlode the Falls are partly fed by flows from elsewhere or we'd be on the road and half-parched like these other poor spitters, instead of being able to bring it into Junktion to sell. Wondering why those scavvies kept you alive?' I shrugged. 'Dancy said they found a whole crowd of them, mostly the bigger ones, with two or three dead rats each, big ones like you shot. Stuck on skewers, all in a row, neat as you please. The ones that had been gnawed on had been wrapped up to try and keep them from dribbling everywhere.'

'Rats?' My stomach lurched.

'Probably the same ones you shot, Dancy said she saw what looked like las-burns on them. You were kept alive while they ate the dead meat. The wet dead meat. It was easier to truss you and carry your water around in your living skin.'

'I follow you,' I said, although I didn't particularly like it. 'When I shot some of the first rats that came at me I used the two-tone. The autogun you rescued.' She chuckled at the name. 'When I popped some of them I remember some of the others stopping to lap the blood.'

What did you think of that?'

'I didn't, not at the time. I was busy' She acknowledged the point with a nod. 'But I'm going to guess the moisture in front of them even took their minds off fighting me.'

You're right. It's not just the people. It's be easier if it were. But the wildlife that was minding its own business off in all the hidden places is

getting desperate enough for water. We've burned more ammo than we can really afford keeping the vermin out of Shining Falls. Hell, the whole reason we're bringing a water-stash into Junktion is our end of the roadway is getting so infested not too many of the traders will come up it any more. Everything is coming out to play.' She looked over at me. 'What's wrong?'

I was staring at the palms of my hands, my eyes widening.

'Um,' I said.

I think I dropped in Safine's estimation after I remembered my other injuries, where those big mutant-bastard rats had clawed and pricked me. Truth to tell I was ashamed myself. I'd been cut and had gone crawling around in litter and filth. It should have been the first thing I saw to as soon as they got me up on the cart. A five-year-old would know better. Had I spent so much time around the scavvies I wanted to rot myself away to look more like them?

Safine didn't say any of that. All she said was 'look, times are hard for all of us and we just can't spare the supplies to treat your wounds.'

'I don't think anybody's going to pay a ransom for my corpse,' I said bluntly.

Safine laughed. 'I wouldn't worry about that. I don't think you're going to die before we reach Junktion and I'm sure they're going to do their best to save one of their precious lamplighters. And hey, if the infection's too far gone by the time we get there then, well, that's not my problem is it?'

She had a point. The scratches weren't that bad and I probably would survive until Junktion. I just wasn't prepared to take that chance. If it was just general Underhive dirt and grime in my cuts and abrasions then that was bad enough but I'd been writhing around in rat filth. Think Kass, think.

Too late for that, Safine. The infection's already took hold.' I rolled up my sleeve, carefully transferring some of the grunge and slime from my hands onto my forearm. The Escher took one look at the purple-green hue of the area between my elbow and wrist and said, Talk to Silk, with the autogun and the red hood, nearside to the wagon behind us.'

IT HAD ALL BEEN there in Safine's look. For the next twenty minutes I said it all for her in my head as Silk, chuckling, handed me a medicine bag

and took my filthy rag of a coat while I went over my scratches with stingwater and proudweed paste.

('Oh no you don't,' said Silk when she caught me eyeing a tube of medicine-gel that looked to be of Hive City make, and expensive. 'You stick to the old-fashioned remedies, that will do you fine for those kiddy-scratches.')

The cuts on my hands had worried me the most but I didn't see the swelling or weeping I'd been afraid of. On my chest the scratches were deeper and angrier, and the skin around the bottom two had turned shiny and red. They took the proudweed and started to throb. The scratches were barely even punctures, and Silk watched with amusement as I dabbed at them to sterilise them.

'Safine said you were the one who tipped us. Got the scaly fighting to give us a warning after they got Danda.'

I nodded. The weird fighting fever I'd been riding already seemed unreal, but Silk seemed to accept it. She held up a metal flask.

'Booze, this, not water. Good Wildsnake from Mirror-Bitten. Toast Danda's memory with me.'

We each took a swallow and it was damn good, barely any burn and smoky as you please. Then Silk looked at my scratches, took a second mouthful and sprayed it onto my chest. I yelped with pain as the alcohol hit my wounds and Silk threw back her head, bared her strong yellow teeth and laughed so loudly that even the pack-slaves looked around to see what was going on.

THE WILDSNAKE HIT me harder than I had expected, making me drowsy enough to stretch out on the cart, my coat wadded between two barrels as a mattress. I felt exhausted, but I must still have been wired from the fighting: despite the drowsiness I felt edgy and fidgety when I lay down.

I let my eyes half-close and made do with surreptitiously watching one of the cart guards instead. She was short, with pitch-black hair and beautiful dark eyes that slanted a little at the corners. There was only a little scarring on her, light marks across the jawline that could have been a hit from something serrated or maybe a dose of threaderman's blight that

she hadn't had treated in time. Muscles were visible in her arms and her stomach as she loped alongside the cart or leapt up to hang off the side of it to rest.

Was she about Tanny's age? No, Tanny would have been older. Still, no reason not to watch her. Or at least not until Safine next to me said you're making her uncomfortable, Kass'. I had had no idea either of them had known I was watching, but after that I propped myself up on sore arms and watched the lights of the Junktion road slowly roll toward us out of the dark.

THE BUNKERHOUSE

THE LAST LEG OF that trip home was good-weird, and turned bad-weird in a hurry.

After we passed the outer turf marker (JUNKTION burned into the face of a rusted-open metal gate, surrounded by spiked-up ripperjack and scavvy skeletons) I started to relax. It was the relief of familiarity all over again, finding myself in turf that I knew. Knew? Spit on that, turf I almost owned. I was smiling to myself as we crossed the bridgeway over that eerie carpet of fungus-cups, where I'd been fixing lights only... only...

How long ago? How long had this whole odyssey taken? I realised I had no idea. No point in asking Safine - most Underhive settlements have their own ideas about when lightson and lightsout start. Her reckoning would be different to mine. I'd just have to wait and see. I probably hadn't been away for the half-dozen lifetimes it felt like.

The mists were up over the Fog Flats, and as we rolled forward through them people started to appear along the trail edges, lines of washed-out grey shapes in the swirls of vapour. I had half been expecting people, but not the sullen silence. No shouting or pleading (and a sneaking, shameful part of me was glad of it), just mute gazes and quick scrambles out of the path of the gangers. They unnerved me, and unnerved the women, too: Safine's gangers were exchanging uneasy looks across the bent backs of the pack slaves. A new glow-green slogan was visible on a rubble-stack opposite the liftport gates: THE FATHERS DRINK AND OUR CHILDREN THIRST. With a stab I remembered the start of the whole thing, the voices of Heliko's murderers, stalking me along my rounds. Were they still out there? Or waiting up ahead? I clutched my dead, useless laspistol and looked around edgily.

The liftport guard seemed to have increased. As we wound along the road there was never a point where a guard or two wasn't pacing us inside

the fence, and as we left the Flats for the gate a knot of them stood and watched us go. Maybe it was the fog, but I had trouble picking out anyone I knew. That was odd. The lamplighters and the town watch tended to be on good terms.

Safine, her face a mask of distaste at the ruined shanty town, began calling orders that saw the caravan slow and reform. Carts in a square, the pack slaves in the centre, women hefting longarms perched up high and the scrappers strolling on each side. Walking just below me was the woman I'd seen lead the charge into the scavvies, the tiny red indicator lights on her chainsword matching the little blue igniter of the hand flamer in her other hand. Even the hint of combat had her shoulders knotting and her breath huffing in and out of her nostrils. I decided this was not a woman I cared to get to know, but when I shuffled closer to Safine I could hear the tiny, almost subliminal buzz of the plasma pistol at her side charging up. That wasn't a lot better.

We came to the gate nice and slow, all the parapet stablights on us bar the end ones, which turned outwards to light up metal shapes hanging at each end of the gate. I squinted at them, but the other lights in my eyes stopped me making out what they were. The gate lights were still bright and strong, and I felt a nice twinge of professional pride.

For all of about five seconds. Safine leaned towards me.

What was that you said about the crowds and the mobs?' she asked, and with a hard beat of unease against my ribs I realised she was right. We were four power-carts loaded up with barrels of water, for sump's sake, and Nardo and I had practically been mobbed just because we might be carrying flasks. Now I could see nothing moving around us at all. The open floor was as dead and empty as the ruined shanties had been. What had happened?

Nothing good, I was prepared to bet. We were close enough to the gate that now I could things dangling above the gateposts were.

Gibbets.

Safine's women were just as aware of the strangeness of the situation, and they were obviously and achingly aware of their vulnerability, standing in the open under lights and covered by who knew how many guns?

Well, if it weren't for them I'd be lying gutted somewhere in the puffball forest. So I stood up and stared into the lights over the centre of the gate.

'Open up! You know me, I'm Sinden Kass. I'm back from my rounds.' Helmawr's rump, that sounded stupid. 'I was taken by scawies and rescued by the Curse.' I gestured at them. 'Open the gate.'

There was a long pause. I wondered who was behind the lights. Surely not the Steelheads still? Please not the Steelheads.

'Hello, little raggedy scavvy-kisser!' shouted a scratchy voice from the rampart. Crap.

'Who you got there, women? That your pet? Sniff out your slops for you, does he?' There were hoots of laughter from up and down the parapet. I kept my voice steady.

'I'm a Junktion lamplighter, whoever you are. I don't know if anyone's explained what that means, but they should have. I answer directly to the Junktion town fathers.' Someone sniggered at that, and unease tapped against my ribs again. 'I'm coming back after being attacked and rescued. These women have water to sell, and you've got rust in your head if you think the fathers won't want to buy. Open the spitting gates now!

At first there was no response. Then, after a pause just insolently long enough to make the point that they were proceeding in their own damn time, the little door set into the main gate clanked and squeaked open and four Steelheads came sauntering out, each lit by a stablight as though they were on stage in one of the clip joints around Cyclops Square. The metallic ink on their head tattoos shone like the spikes on their vambraces and collars and the gleam off their polished boots. They carried axes and cleavers slung at their backs and their big hands gripped thick-barrelled slubbers, the kind the House Goliath factories churned out and anyone else practically needed a tripod to use.

Safine and her women stood in poses both carefully calculated and totally unselfconscious. The angles of hips, shoulders and heads, the way hands rested on weapons, the way fingers stroked gun-grips or blade-handles, the way that a casual shift of position happened to move their weight onto both feet so they could move fast in an instant. Anyone who's seen two gangs circle one another in a town or any kind of neutral ground knows about the little dances, the preening and bravado. I'd seen it plenty of times.

The Steelheads and the Curse. Goliath and Escher. What a pair to get caught between. Some gangs manage to leave their House baggage behind when they abandon Hive City, but these two? Their kind of hate even makes the Orlock-Delaque feud look like a juves' squabble. Goliath and Escher. Please, someone put me back in the rathole.

Looking up at Safine didn't suit the Steelhead deputation - not good for the pose - so they switched their gaze to the women on the ground. They grow them big in House Goliath, they brag about it, and three of the four were easily big enough to look down their noses at any member of the Curse they stood next to. I watched the grins spread across their faces as they took that fact in.

'Water tithe,' said the tallest one after another calculated pause, 'on whatever you're carrying. Payable per person. Cut of your water gets you in. Show us what you got and we'll inform you of the exact measure of payment.' Two of the others sniggered. The fourth, much younger, smooth skin and fresh tatts and all his teeth, just shifted from foot to foot and stared.

'What's the tithe for each of us, then?' Safine asked from the top of the cart. Her pose hadn't changed, one hand casually on the grips of the plasma pistol. Her voice was level.

'Depends,' said the lead Steelhead without missing a beat. 'Depends on the discretion of the duly-deputised Junktion town watch officer on, uh, watch.' Sniggers again at 'discretion'. In the corner of my eye I saw Safine shoot me a look. I couldn't tell what the thought behind it was, but I thought it might be something like thanks for the warning, I don't think. Then she stared at the Steelheads again. The tension in the air was spitting like fatty meat on a Greimplatz grill.

'Look at the water!' The juve must have spoken out of turn, because even the men next to him jumped a little. I'd started enough to have to watch my balance. My hand itched for the grips of my laspistol, except I knew the cell was dry. 'Gruett! Look over the tops o' them carts! Barrels and barrels!'

Gruett's eyes were alight. Metal glinted when he ran his tongue over his lips: piercings or metal teeth or both. Heads turned around me as the Curse looked to Safine for a cue to art. She spread her fingers. Not now.

'Water tithe might be pretty heavy for this lot,' said Gruett in a rumbling, mock-thoughtful voice. 'Bringing this into Junktion, see? Lot of value here. Think my discretion's going to let me set a pretty good tithe on this.' He was strolling around the side of the caravan, out of my view.

'How about our lamplighter, Steelhead?' asked Safine. I wondered if I'd imagined the edge in her voice. Below me on my other side the woman who'd been huffing her breath was now moaning softly, her chainsword hand twitching. Silk had moved forward and gently taken her arm.

I stood up and looked down at Gruett and his juve. If I was going to be a bargaining chip I was going to do the bargaining myself. A man has his dignity.

'I'm vouching for them, Gruett, if that's your name. I told you, I'm a Junktion lamplighter. They're coming through the gates on my recognisance. Get Yonni from the bunkerhouse, or town father Harmos. I am not going to be kept up here any longer.' Mentioning Harmos was a gamble, but this whole mess needed a circuit-breaker and soon.

Some bastard Steelhead on the gate broke it the wrong way.

'I remember that one! Came up here lightson, one before last, all crawling around on the catwalk here like a litde broken-legged rat! Shoulda seen him, Gruett! Look at him now!' Gruett joined in the laughter.

'Get off the cart, Kass.' That was Safine, speaking low and soft to me. There was no trace of anger in her voice, just calm command.

'I think I can-'

'No. You've done what you can. I'll thank you for it and spare you any more of this. Your pole and hat and guns are on the rack above the steering yoke on the back of this cart. Get them, climb down. Go through the gates by yourself. If you can find someone on that gate crew who isn't a Steelhead...'

'I understand you.' She nodded to me. If I'd tried to say anything more I'd only have stuttered and lingered and so I shuffled to the back of the cart and climbed stiffly down. Safine may have been a hard-nosed, man-hating bitch but she knew that I was her only chance of getting anything even remotely approaching a fair deal for her water.

The Steelheads were already amongst the carts, swaggering with the new confidence that none of the Escher women were going to draw down on them, not with the pintle guns on the gate covering them. The pack slaves

kept their eyes down as they were shouldered aside. The gangwomen, stony-faced, made small steps and concessions, just enough so that a mock-accidental collision or gesture from a Steelhead wouldn't knock them off-balance. I was conscious of my filthy, ragged clothes as I clapped my chewed hat onto my head and bundled my pole and the two-tone into what was left of my coat.

I was looking over my shoulder at the caravan when I walked into the Steelhead. He was a head taller than me, his vest cut back to emphasise the muscles he'd worked on the way some Goliaths do, with special exercises to make each muscle stand out under his skin. His hair was shaved up to a jagged mane at the crown of his head and slathered with metal-dust to make it shine. Thick metal bands through his septum flared his nose back like a dust-hog's. A rough tattoo squatted on the side of his thick neck, a skull topped by a dull metallic dome held on with crudely-drawn screws and rivets.

I sidestepped to go around him and he stepped to keep in front of me. He wore a bright grin and his eyes didn't leave mine.

There was a clank and boom of metal and a burst of happy bellowing. Two Steelheads double-timed past with a Curse water-drum across their straining shoulders. There were cheers from the gates, and from somewhere I heard Gruett's voice: 'Of course we tithe you on what you arrived at our town gate with, not what you might leave it with, that's only fair, of course.'

The Steelhead glared at me, angry that I wasn't entertaining him. That lasted a long moment, and then he lost interest and shoved past me to where his gangmates were stripping the packs off the Curse slaves and dumping their contents out onto the road. I walked for the gate again, resisting the urge to scamper for cover. Just before I stepped into the gate I turned and looked back.

Safine still stood proud on her cart as the Steelheads looted her water out from under her. One hand was on her pistol but she knew as well as I did how a fight here would go. She wasn't looking at me, and I decided I was glad. She'd told me to go, but now that

I was going I suddenly didn't know if I could have met her eyes.

I turned and walked away. I'm good at turning and walking away. Ask anybody.

I LOOKED TOWARD the gatehouse and up to the parapet, trying to spot anyone in this nightmare parody of Junktion whom I actually knew. Of course not, just two more Steelheads lounging by the gatehouse door. I made to walk past them, then stopped and looked again.

They were two of the three that had walked out of Junktion with me the last time I had passed through these gates, the sneering escorts who'd abandoned me at the crossroads. They weren't sneering now, just looking at me with dull anger. Both their faces were livid with bruises. One's eyes had swollen so that he had to shove his head forward to see me, the other's nose had been fresh-broken. Their Goliath finery, the nose-studs and ear-chains, had been ripped away. Apparently they had been meant to stay with me and guard me after all, and my disappearance had been taken out on them. It was sort of hard to feel sympathy.

A blob of phlegm arced down off the rampart, missed my hat brim by a fingers' breadth and splatted into the grit by my boot. Laughter from above. I took the hint and walked.

How could this be real? How long had it been since I had come through the gate and gone down to the Bunkerhouse with Nardo, coming in off our rounds and ready to knock off and buy some booze? How could I be staggering down here now, a wreck in barely-recognisable clothes, covered in cuts and welts and cramping with hunger at the smell of cooking-grease from Greimplatz? How could this not be some sump-spat dream?

I suddenly just wanted to stop fighting it. This was not meant to be my job. None of it. There was a reason I had got so good at moving on. I couldn't deal with this. I wondered what would happen if I just slumped down and waited for the whole spitting lot of it to go away.

I didn't ever actually answer that, not consciously. I saw Yonni come up out of the Bunkerhouse steps ahead of me and suddenly the despair was gone and the anger was there. It made my eyes widen and my hands twitch and it wasn't until Yonni batted my hands away that I realised I'd crossed the distance to him and reached for his jacket front.

'Kass! Ratspit, but we thought you were dead! What in-'

'Swallow it, Yonni! I don't care! What piece of offal is in charge at the liftport gate? Steelheads, Yonni! They're looting a caravan the Curse brought down from Shining Falls to sell to the town fathers! Yonni, there is water at those gates, spitting barrels of it! And the bastards with those

slogans, they're still hunting lamplighters, Yonni, they're still after me, and Heliko's in on it for sure! Are we all going to just sit while-'

It was my turn to get cut off as Yonni clamped my head in his arm and marched me back through the doors. The headlock held my jaw shut and over my angry grunts he muttered into my ear.

Things are different, Kass, use your brain and work it out. Things are not the same, stop thrashing about and yipping like an infant! What do you think it's going to do? Get your wits back, you idiot!'

Finally as we got to the stairs Yonni let me go. I staggered three or four steps and bounced off a wall, then propped myself against it and glared at him. I was panting and swaying. Yonni's expression mixed sympathy and disgust.

'You need to know what's been going on. I'm to take you before the fathers in a minute and I don't want to blindside you.'

'Want to what? What could be worse than this? Yonni, the liftport gate's being run by bastard Steelheads and there's no Junktion people in sight! They're looting the caravans! Where are the real gate-guards?'

Things are changing fast. The Steelheads and the Firebrands are on the up. The Steelheads are the gate-guards now.'

'Ohh, sump's arse, Yonni...' The anger was gone, the despair was back. I wished I hadn't heard it, wanted to not have heard it. Volk's Firebrands. Had I thought it couldn't get any worse after the Steelheads? Hah.

'Shut up and listen, Kass, you need to find your feet as fast as you can. The Steelheads you know about now. You saw it for yourself. Gruett, their leader, is a crew boss on the Junktion watch now. They're in the door. Take a minute to deal with it.'

The Firebrands?'

'We thought they'd moved on after the Curse and the Berserkers kicked them out of Tarvo but they're back. Turns out they got on the good side of town father Stope when they gave Heggoran's Nightmares a hiding at Wilhelm's Crossing and let him get his toll racket on the causeway going again. Stope's convinced they're his friends and partners and Volk was smart enough to play up to him. So they're in too. You're not the only one Heliko's after, either, Kass. He led a hit on the fathers' water cisterns and there are watchmen dead up on the Black Pile. The fathers are scared. So be warned, Kass. Keep your head down.'

What spitting town am I in, Yonni? 'Cos it isn't one I recognise.'

He didn't answer, just pointed his great bony chin up the stairs. I went.

IT WAS A FIRST - three town fathers at once, to talk to me direct and not through Yonni or some flunky. We went up past the Boodicker's Gallery to the third level, a place I'd never seen before. The rooms were stuffy and run-down, not matching the hype at all.

There was air-cleaning machinery somewhere in the guts of the building and the fathers were waiting for me in a little bare box of a room by one of the vents. The flue came out of the wall in a great bulge that grew a polished brass trumpet like a giant fungus-cup, pushing breeze into the room. The three town fathers were perched on a bench of welded metal breathing the smell- and taint-free air as it washed toward them.

Harmos was on the right hand side, furthest away from me. His shoulders were slack and his eyes half closed. I'd never seen him like that before.

Sitting on the near end of the bench was the uphive Guilder I didn't recognise at first, not until he smiled at me. It was the man who'd been waiting while Harmos grilled me and Nardo after our last rounds. His hair was held in by a cap of the same rough black weave as his dust-shawl, and the gown and leggings underneath were understated grey. There was nothing understated about the Guilder medallion he wore on his chest, held in plain sight now. It was big and thick enough for my late lamented scaly captor to use as a discus, and the rim and chain were crusted with pearl-spores and spider-eyes.

In the middle, sitting with his knees apart and crowding the other two to each end of the bench, was town father Stope, with his waxed black crew-cut and extravagant, pointed man-breasts that were pushed so far up by his great ball of a stomach that his nipples were aiming at the ceiling. It's hard to get truly fat in the Underhive, but if you're a town father you can manage it well enough.

It was Stope who spoke first.

'We thought we'd lost our last lamplighter,' he said. He had some kind of jaundice that gave his skin a sickly cast under the room's pearly white light. That wouldn't do, would it? Now of all times we need to keep

ourselves safe and well lit. This is something this town is famous for, after all.'

He seemed to be waiting for an answer, so what the hell.

'I don't know how safe or well lit things out there are going to be for long, sir. I was meant to be out on a simple round and back by lightsout, but instead I got stalked by some of Garm Heliko's gunboys and hunted by the biggest mutie-rats I've seen in Junktion since I came here, then nearly went in a scavvy pot. If it weren't for the Curse coming down the Shining Falls roadway I wouldn't be here talking to you now.'

'You're overestimating the danger, Kass,' Stope shot back over the last of my words. 'Junktion has very capable town defences and, always has... and we've added to them. Two tough leaders with excellent reputations have taken, up, deputation... papers.' As Stope talked he tended to run himself out of breath and finish his sentence hitching and gasping. The Steelheads are helping to keep the walls and gates safe and Master Volk, who, is, a... personal acquaintance of mine are making sure the streets are, kept... safe.' He wheezed for a few moments.

'Doing a better job than you lot did, Kass,' put in Harmos without looking at me. His voice was lower and his words were running together and I realised with a shock that he was drunk. Drunk or doped, but spit it, they were both unthinkable. Harmos losing control? Harmos?

'Be fair on the man,' put in the Guilder. His voice was a leisurely purr that heated up my distrust of him about fivefold. 'Lamplighters have never been supposed to keep order by themselves. Their task has always been very specific'

The lamplighters do what they're told. We told them to sniff out whoever was painting those spitting slogans. And did they? What just happened on the Black Pile?'

What did just happen on the Black Pile, sirs?' In the corner of my eye Yonni was shifting feet again and giving me a glare like a melta-torch.

'Not your concern!' barked Harmos loudly enough to make Stope jump, the folds of the fat father's neck squashing and rearranging. You do your spitting work.' His voice was rising and falling, and by the end of the sentence he was talking softly and almost mildly. Juice of some kind in him, for sure. Harmos, drugged. How had this happened so fast?

'Just some people caught up in this "water for all" rubbish,' said the Guilder. The ones Harmos thinks you should have been spotting. The Heliko criminal and his slogan-painters seem to think they're the heart of some brand-new bandit army. Some of them got pushy and were controlled. It won't happen again. You don't need to know more.'

Stope nodded agreement.

We're wasting time,' he said. What I want from you is answers, not questions, Kass. You've just come in from rounds, on the, town, outskirts... correct?' As if he couldn't tell from the way I looked. I realised that I still had my possessions bundled in my arms. 'If you've had any presence of mind in your adventures you can, do the, town a... service.'

And that was how it went. Harmos barely said another word: he stared into the flue like I've seen people stare into campfires on the trade trails. After a while he started to rock slightly. The other two took it in turns, sinking their teeth into my report, demanding I tell them things I couldn't know.

How many other scavvy bands were out there? How much water had the Curse brought? How much had the Steelheads taken, and how much more was stashed at Shining Falls? What kind of strength was guarding it there? How were they armed? Specifically what wildlife movements had Safine told me about? How much of this had I verified with my own eyes?

It wasn't until later I realised they hadn't asked anything about Heliko's thugs. About that they didn't seem to care.

I put up with it as long as I could, but the hours I'd spent outside the walls were catching up with me fast. At one point I bent to set down my bundle of gear and almost tipped over as my knees failed to hold my balance. Yonni was there with a hand on my shoulder, propping me up again, and he took the bundle out of my hands and quietly disappeared with it. I straightened up, swaying, and tried to focus.

What the still anonymous Guilder was saying was 'enough'.

We've got everything useful that we can out of him. I'd rather rest him than wring him dry and be the death of him.'

Stope made a sort of rumbling bark that seemed to mean contempt.

'None of that, now,' the Guilder replied. 'Isn't he your last lamplighter? I think right at the moment your town needs its lights running more than ever, don't you?' Stope's body shifted uncomfortably in its fatty cocoon.

Harmos was nodding forward and looked half asleep. Looking at the weird little trio, I missed my cue to leave. When I looked back at the Guilder he was inclining his head toward the door, with that soft amusement still in his eyes.

'Interview over, Last of the Lamplighters,' he told me, and tilted his head a little further. 'Be careful on the street. I don't know if that half-baked "lamplighter spy" vendetta is spreading, but thirst turns out to have a way of making people nasty. So does resentment, and I think people know you don't have to pay the town for your water ration. Watch yourself.' He kept looking at me until I managed to shuffle my feet into motion.

Yonni was waiting for me outside with my bundle under one arm, and with the other hand he steered me away from the door and down the stairs until I stood, still swaying, on the stained matting of the ground-hall. He gave me an appraising look for maybe five seconds, and then said 'you're not walking into Junktion alone looking like that' and took my arm again. Together we walked slowly out of the ground-hall and into Chartists' Alley.

I could barely take it in: in the time it took us to walk the length of the Alley toward the Black Pile I'd counted two household doors that had been smashed in, then fastened back and nailed over. Painted across each in red was the word REDEEMED. Volk's Firebrands at work. There were bodies sprawled at the alley's edges. Only one of them tried to move as we passed by.

What is it, Yonni? What happened that I'm not supposed to ask about? How can it change like this?' My voice was plaintive and cracking. I could feel every step we took. Everything I wore seemed to be made of rasp-paper, scraping at my skin. I wanted to sleep.

Yonni held me up, shushed my questions, looked around to see who might overhear us. We walked together along the route I had walked that night of the attacks, around the base of the Black Pile by the side of the canal, then past the tunnel that led to the Brass Pit.

My rooms were deep in the honeycomb of old tunnels behind the high wall that loomed over the Brass Pit and the market pits of the Bell Common. There were dents and scratches around the shutter door but I didn't pay them much mind. Yonni was practically carrying me now and once we were in the lightless metal box where I lived he let me totter to

my pallet and lit a globulb, tapping deftly at it until it brightened and gave us a room full of smeary yellow shadows to talk by.

I wanted to sleep, but I couldn't until I'd heard. 'Alright, Yonni, I'm too tired to be lied to. What's happening to my town?' He told me.

LITTLE SISTER

I THINK I SLEPT after Yonni left. I remember waking stiff and hurting, groaning and half-consciously moving my limbs, but I must have fallen asleep again when my body had loosened itself because there were things I thought I remembered about the next few hours that couldn't have happened. I was back among the scavvies in the puffball forest, but now the puffballs were as high as the Hive itself, pushing up into a giant empty space that terrified me and made me run for cover in the puffball stalks. They were all there: Safine, Yonni, dead Danda, Mudeye, Harmos, even the Steelhead boss, all looking out solemnly from hiding-places they had already found as I ran past looking for a bolthole of my own. I ran for what seemed like forever, my steps growing slower and more laborious as I felt the weight of the emptiness pressing down on me more and more, until when I was almost paralysed I saw Tanny looking at me and the dream broke.

There was no sleeping after a dream ended with her, and I didn't try. There was no crackling from my joints as I sat up, but I felt like there should have been. I shifted onto my feet and practically fell on my face as my legs all but gave way. Propped against the pallet, I dragged over the bundle that Yonni had left.

'Nardo's ration is in here too, Kass.' It was the last thing he had told me before my exhausted brain winked out. 'Only you didn't hear that from me and you didn't even get it from me. The fathers are scared. They haven't cut the rations and upped the prices for fun. Even for the lamplighters, it's no work no water. They'll let Nardo dry up and die if he doesn't come good, so you take him this and look after him, and you didn't get his water from me.'

There were four tin flasks bundled up in my old coat along with the two-tone, my lantern-pole and my ripped and grubby tool bag. I'd had the coat

for years but it was the water-flasks I hugged to my chest.

Under my clothes I wore a clotted second skin of filth. Underhivers are used to dust and grime but this was something other. If I didn't get clean I thought I might go insane.

My legs cramped enough to make me cry out when I tried to stand on them again, but I managed a scavvylike crouch-shuffle through the doorway opposite the pallet, around the corner of my little L-shaped room where the gutter-drain and washing gear was. I snagged the wash-bowl from its shelf next to where my shaving mirror balanced against the wall. There was a juice-cable hanging down in the corner beyond it and I sat there and looked at it. Getting up and clipping the lead for my heating pan to it would mean standing up straight. I wondered if I were up to it. It seemed very far away up there. Maybe if I looked at it long enough it would just float through the air and set itself down in front of me. Hah. I looked at it some more and my thoughts started to wander.

They wandered to the smashed doors I'd seen, and the news about Junktion's other watch gang. Volk's Firebrands. Redemptionists. House Cawdor gang-gunnies.

Just about any Junktioner (apart from town father Stope, apparently) could tell you that the Firebrands did not make friends. They were bloodthirsty kill-happy bastards from Hive City's House Cawdor who'd come down the Well about three years before looking for new conquests.

Cawdors aren't popular here, them and their Church of the Red Redemption. In most places, here or in Hive City, gutting and burning anyone who looks at you crosswise as a spiritually poisoned infidel in need of redemption quickly sees you on the wrong end of a gunbarrel yourself. Not in House Cawdor, or the one-sixth of Hive City they rule. The Redemption is that House's official religion, which means a steady stream of evangelical maniacs bringing it down to the Underhive with them. The craziest of all are the Redemptor Priests, the ones who've lost all interest in founding settlements or even staking out a gang turf. All they want to do is go to war. Kill and clean and pray and burn, leave a trail of blood and ashes through the Underhive. Maniacs like Volk.

I realised I was still sitting and staring at the juice cable. I blinked and experimentally nibbed my legs. They still twinged and throbbed and hurt to move. Time for some more expensive measures. I reached over,

shoulder creaking, and pulled a plastic-wicker box out from the stacked shelves behind me. The bottle of Wildsnake was in there, with that deliciously thick, clear shine even through the glass and dust. I broke the seal and took a sip. The good stuff. Brewed at Dripdown, one of the distillers' settlements at Mirror-Bitten, and almost as good as what Silk had shared with me. I took another mouthful and picked up my thoughts while I waited to see if the drink would relax my muscles.

I'm sure it's very complicated being a Redemptionist. They seem to have an endless list of hymns and prayers and curses to learn, and in my time around the Underhive I've seen their insane Redemptor Priests - usually being dragged through the town gates behind a bounty hunter crew - with heavy books or data-cages full of laws and sayings and holy writ. Those tend to get burned or smashed when the Priest goes on the gallows.

But the upshot is simple. They hate everyone and everything except themselves, and I'm not too sure about the 'except'. If you're careful not to cross them they'll settle for trying to make you as crazy as they are. If you do one single thing they don't like then they'll have you dead and burned the first chance they get. That's all I've ever really understood about what the Redemptionists believe and it's all I think I'll ever really care to understand.

I don't know whether the Wildsnake was relaxing my aching body or if it was just the buzz that stopped me noticing, but either was fine by me. I found I could stand, even stretch a little, and jack the heating pan into the wall cable. I poured a third of the first water flask into the pan and sat back to wait for the coil to heat.

The only reason the Cawdor gangs can live at all is that the need to make a living has to temper their zeal. If you burn a trading post to the ground the first time you see a boozing hole or a kootchie-joint you end up dead for a bounty or starving in the badzones, the way the full-fledged crusading Reddies all do sooner or later. So they deal with it, like the Escher have to learn to deal with males. They buckle those masks around their heads and pretend they're able to stay above the rest of us. They strike deals.

Like the Firebrands had struck a deal with Stope, after Garm Heliko came back.

That was what frightened me. When Volk and his enforcer, Brother Hetch, had come out of the badzones and taken the reins of the Firebrands, talk in Junktion didn't rate the threat so high. However bad their reputations were - plenty bad - we all knew that full-on Redemptionists were far too crazy for the Firebrands to stay stable for long. They'd go far enough over the line for even the Cawdor to turn on them, or their madness would spread to the rest of the gang and it would use itself up in some suicidal crusade and that would be the end of it.

But Volk was making deals. He had got himself into Junktion. He had had the bounty posters for himself and Hetch taken down. He was getting smart. There was something about that thought that even pushed Garm Heliko's lamplighter-hunting killboys to one side.

The heating coil was a dull red like it was infected. That was as hot as it got, so I picked the pan up by the wrapping handle and dumped the water into my washbowl. It steamed under my face as I ran a double handful of water through my hair and over my scalp. It felt as good as the Wildsnake had tasted. I rubbed my wet hands over my face and tried to keep my thoughts on track.

As I had gone through the gates on that last, horrible round, I remembered how I'd left Junktion: in shadow. Yonni had started the big arcs up at lightson, and I'd done what I could, but I'd been brooding about the dimness of the lights as I'd left. But I hadn't been there when the effects of the dark properly hit.

Fights had broken out in Greimplatz and Cyclops Square. Four traders had been robbed on the Bell Common. Refugee mobs had tried to rush the gates at the liftport and Highborn Avenue. There had been a dozen deaths at the Peelgut farms, four more at town father Wilferra's walled-in fungus-garden at the base of the Black Pile. With the water going and now the light as well, people had been afraid that the town was on its last legs and the fear had come close to being self-fulfilling.

The final straw had been an abortive riot at the water-spigot at the back of Quackstown. A lot of shouting and some punches, one or two knives and a gun drawn, and then the two watchmen by the spigot had fired a couple of shots into the air and a couple more into whoever was standing closest with a weapon still in their hands. There had been a small stampede for cover and a few more injured in that, but that really was the

end of it. Within five minutes the braver citizens were back in the queue with casks and pails and cash in hand.

But it was at a water spigot the fathers owned, and that gave Tai his excuse. Guilder Tai was the too-smooth bastard I'd listened to in the bunkerhouse, and it was Tai who bullied the town fathers into letting the Steelheads off the leash. They had cut murderously loose on the refugees right away, scattering and hounding them out of sight of the walls, then turned inward and gone to work on the town. The town watch, the real watch, had been sent up to the Black Pile to guard the fathers' cistern, and with them out of the way packs of Steelheads had simply marched from one trouble spot to another and shot anyone who fought and anyone who loitered, and then Tai had emerged from the bunkerhouse and ordered the watchmen to hang the gibbets up at Greimplatz and the three big gates and hang up any undesirables who'd survived.

For almost a whole lightson the Steelheads had been the power in Junktion, until Garm Heliko had come up through the Black Pile and the Firebrands had come in through the gates. A week ago Junktioners had seen the faces of the Firebrand leaders on bounty posters, or at least the faces of the masks that they were never supposed to take off: Master Volk, the leader, and Brother Hetch whose atrocities had put a price on his head from here to Blackenred. The Firebrands had marched up past Highdome and over the Cash Bridge and town father Stope had met them at the bunkerhouse with a proclamation in his hand. If you looked at the notice about our new town watch you could see the rough printing where the 'Wanted' section over the Cawdors' faces had been replaced.

Junktion would be a warzone soon. Hell, it was practically there already. Maybe it was time to walk away.

There was a clank from behind me, as though someone were trying the door. I listened, but nobody called out. I shrugged, slapped water onto my face and poured a handful over my scratched chest. The cuts I had treated in Safine's caravan were healing nicely. Another swallow of Wildsnake helped me to not think about what might be happening to Safine now.

'Life in the Underhive, that's all,' I told myself aloud. My voice was a little slurred. Life in the Underhive. Things happened in the Underhive it was best not to think about. It didn't matter if you deserved them or not. Safine probably didn't deserve what happened to her. Yonni said Garm

Heliko's sister and little nephew had been chased out of Highdome by a mob. They probably didn't deserve that. I don't think my sister deserved - but I was still sober enough to push that old pain out of my mind. I had walked away from that years ago.

The door rattled in its frame behind me and I yelled something half-coherent. The Wildsnake was doing more talking than I was. I helped it by drinking some more. No more knocking. Screw 'em. One of the things I liked about my rooms was the big heavy door.

The water in the bowl was grey-black and cooling to lukewarm, and the floor around the bowl was splattered with washed-away filth. I swayed for a moment, then shucked off my trousers and, with a bravado that was more booze than Kass, dumped another splash of water into the heating pan. That conversation with Nardo came back to me, something about damn rich lamplighters splashing their water around, and I giggled as I tipped the bowl out into the little gutter-drain that ran into the far wall. I tried to say 'expensive stuff!' but it didn't come out right. Some of this was Nardo's, I tried to remind myself, but the thought was slippery and didn't stay in my head long.

The shaving mirror showed me my pale body streaked with grey where I'd more or less washed off the filth. I went to work on my gut and groin and legs, watching water almost the colour of oil pool around my feet, concentrating as hard as my drunk mind would let me. It was happening again. Garm Heliko was ebbing away through the gaps in my mind like smoke in my fingers. There was only one person I could properly bring to mind when I drank.

Tanny hadn't looked much like me. She had a heart-shaped face where mine was lean. Hair thick and dark like our mother's instead of thin and almost colourless like mine. Ruddy, vigorous complexion. I dimly remember our father having good colour in him like that, back before he took sick.

She was always a quiet one, learned to keep out of the way and take care of herself. Once our father was gone, the three of us realised we'd lost whatever little claim we might have had on the charity of the Hive City outskirts and we each had to pull our own weight if any of us were to make it. I think I even remember my mother saying that to me as we left. She was the only one of us not crying. I'd rescued what I could from father's

little machine-shop, but it wasn't enough. For some reason having to leave his tools behind was still what hurt the most about leaving.

'Just walk away from it', she'd told us over and over in the yellow-lit roadpipe. 'Just keep your eyes ahead and walk away'

We'd wandered the highest, safest stretches, keeping as close to Hive City as the House militias let us, and Tanny had learned to keep out of the way. She was too small to work and small enough to get lost or be taken. The memory keeps coming back of her brown eyes peering out of the side of a wagon or a bolthole in some dirty little town, looking out at me as we worked or walked. I used to wave to her.

The one and only humiliating time our mother resorted to outright begging we were rousted by the first real Underhive gangers I'd seen. We both swore that that would never happen to us again, and started going deeper into the Underhive. I was getting better with my father's tools, and although I didn't have the swagger or the Hive City breeding to run with a gang that was no great loss. The Underhive chewed up a dozen gang-juves every day, but it had better things to offer a young man who knew juice- and circuit-work and was good with his hands. After a while Tanny was old enough to start going out on her own, trapping rats and chute-dogs the way she and I had done in the crawlways around the old 'stead. She taught herself to tan and sell the hides, learned to use a knife and to shoot the little holdout stubber I got her.

She learned brewing, too. There's always a few creds going for someone who knows how to run a still, no matter where in the Underhive you are. When life on the road started taking more out of our mother than she could spare, it was a good skill to have. We lived in a little settlement made of cavities in the walls and ceiling over the roadpipe between Drifters' Wake and Scorchtown. Fair amount of traffic. Tanny helped serve rotgut to the gangers and traders while I tinkered with their broken kit in my little nook at the top of a ladder in the roadpipe wall.

If I knew what had happened to her it would be a lot easier. She had popped her head over the top of my ladder to see if I'd finished heat-shaping the new pipes her boss needed for the still, and stuck her tongue out at me when I told her no. She waved over her shoulder as she vaulted down the ladder and walked back under the nest of stringlights to the tunnel chopped into die pipe wall, that led to the drinking den. I know that

a few minutes after that she was serving a half-bottle of Second Best to a pair of sump-gunnies who were passing through looking for bounty work. They took a shine to her, they said, and later on they were the ones who helped me try and find her.

But they didn't find anything, and neither did I, and the people who came past on the road knew nothing, and I even paid a Ratskin in money and the booze Tanny had brewed, for him to tell me that neither of the local tribal camps had seen her. She walked back across the roadpipe, her back to me, waggling her fingers over her shoulder, and there it stops. That memory. She was sixteen.

My mother went a year after that. The tiredness that had ended our travels turned out to be the white choke, picked up from some spore-rotted place along the lower trails, and never knowing about Tanny ate at her the way it did me. In the Underhive it never pays to get too attached to people, but sometimes you can't help it. She and I hung on at that shitty little waypost, and when the choke finally took her I burned her and hit the road within a week. At least with her I knew what had happened. I'd been there at the end, holding a cup of water to her lips. I'd carried her down out of our loft.

And then I'd walked away. 'Words to live by," I slurred, and giggled at the way I sounded. It was the only way you could live in the Underhive. Live light. Always be ready to walk away. I'd turned and walked away from Safine. She'd told me I could, right? So I shouldn't have stayed. I could walk away. I did. Like I walked away from Enning. Was a pity they wouldn't let him in, but there wasn't anything I could have done. I had another mouthful of 'Snake. All I could do was walk away. Not my problem. Gotta walk away.

My hands were unsteady but I managed to scrub the last of the lukewarm grime off myself with a rag, straightened as much as I could and groaned. I wasn't as clean as I wanted, but I'd done what I could. I lurched unsteadily back to my pallet and toppled onto it.

Ha. Good turn of words, that. To Harmos, wanting me to spy and report: well, I did what I could. To Nardo, lying half-broken somewhere and waiting for me to bring him his water: well, I did what I could. Safine, standing on her cart outside the Junktion gates, left with the Steelheads: I did what I could. Was it true? I didn't know. It was the kind of thing I liked

to practise saying. I did the best I could. I just do my job. More than it's worth to get involved. I'm just the lamplighter, that's all.

To Tanny, vanished and gone forever somewhere downhive. I did the best I could, and then I turned and I walked away. I couldn't be blamed for that. Except in my dreams.

'Little sister', I said, lifting the bottle and taking one last little mouthful. I was always able to say that clearly, no matter how drunk I was.

This time I didn't dream.

THERE WAS A FUZZY first interval where I could make out the crack and clang of metal, but the noise didn't wake me on its own. To do that it teamed up with sudden great retches of nausea and hunger that hit me as I opened my eyes.

Repeated physical battering, fatigue, and a good hard binge of Wildsnake on top of what must have been at least two lightsons without food. From the noise and belly-cramps I was suddenly, utterly convinced that some vicious bastard of a Hive-ghost was twisting my guts in his fingers as a punishment. I'd hung onto Nardo's water ration, this flash of half-awake paranoia told me, so here was a little spook justice.

I get like this when I've had too much booze or too many Ratskin fairytales in a single sitting, and after I'd crawled back into the other room and brought up a little yellow bile into the gutter-drain the feeling ebbed somewhat. I managed a swallow of water from one of the tins (see, Kass? not that much gone after all, so much for the hive-ghost crap) and kept it down for about a minute before I brought that up too, laced with more of the yellow. The whole lot sat in the gutter for a while - the slope Venz and I had cut into it when I moved in wasn't all it could be - and I had to sit and look at it until I had the energy to drag myself upright and back through the door.

I jumped at another clank from the door, something hitting it so hard the whole door rattled. It shouldn't have done that. My first room in Junktion had been ransacked by a trio of scummers from the rookeries, brains packed up on 'slaught and looking for tools to steal. After that I'd made sure I picked a place with a bloody strong door.

There was a rough shout from the corridor. Bad news. I looked down at myself, dizzy and naked and hung over, in a room with a gun so dirty and battered it would jam even if I had anything to load in it, and a laspistol with a dry cell. Bad, bad news.

I scrabbled for clothes. Here was a question. Yell out, let them know there was someone here? Would that encourage them or the other way around?

'We hear you in there!'

Question answered. Moot point. I was dressed to the waist now. I looked at the water flasks and took a moment to shove them behind the pallet.

'We hear you! Open up, you spying thieving bastard!'

Thieving? Whatever. I didn't stop to think about it as I reached behind the loose wall panel in one corner. I only owned the two firearms but I had my choice of blades. I knew the handles by touch: the stiletto, the fat hooked flensing knife I'd traded off a spider hunter, the sawtooth I used on cable-covers. The one I pulled out was from a weapon shop in Ghoul Bend, based on a Ratskin warknife design, a thick wedge of chopping blade the length of my forearm, fattening toward the end to give weight to a swing. I flicked it from hand to hand, then on impulse took it in my left and grabbed at my lamp-pole with my right. Nobody had undone the scavvy boss's handiwork and my boot-knife was still tightly bound to its end with a length of sinew. I felt like a Ratskin brave, tiptoeing to the door with knife and spear, my chest bare.

I jumped as the shutter clanked and rattled again. More voices on the other side of it now, a couple muffled, sounding like they were arguing. Then another, the shouting one, still shouting: 'He's got water! They all have! Get it for free! You go home and dry up and die if you want! You! Lamplighter! We know you can hear us!'

So that was it. I remembered the marks I'd seen around the lock when I'd come home.

'Open up and we won't hurt you!' The desperate cracks in the voice said that was a lie. I wondered how long I could hold out in here. This was a crowded part of Junktion, plenty of other homes along this same passageway. How long before someone else came along? If a fight started, that would be my chance. Unless it was people from the surrounding boltholes who were trying to hammer in my door now.

At least they didn't seem very well-equipped. They didn't have anything that could cut or blast. But I felt equally naked, and not just because I hadn't put on a shirt. I remembered Safine and her gangwomen. Respirator masks, belts of reloads, pistols, knives, pouches of grenades, climbing-spikes, clip-harnesses, darkvisors... Sometimes we settlement types forgot what sort of walking armouries the successful gangers turned into.

That memory brought a bit of anger back again. I hadn't been dragged through the badzones and repeatedly half-killed just to get done over in my own home.

I ground my teeth and twisted my globulb to extinguish it. Then I stepped to one side of the shutter door, found the bolt lever by touch with my toes and pushed it with my foot.

There was just enough time after the bolts thunked back to make me think of all the ways this could be a mistake. I suddenly remembered the smoke bomb that had chased Thamm out of her own place, or the trick the Ratskins had of pouring a bag of chew-roaches into boltholes where their enemies were. Who said they were going to come in where I could get them?

But they did. After a moment the shutter squealed and grated open by half a metre and a hand and gun poked in. Flattened against the wall, I waited.

'It's dark,' someone said.

'Get in there, gutless!' came the shouter's voice and the hand and gun turned into a gangly man with a paunch, staggering through the doorway. The man who'd shoved him moved into the gap, his own chunky stub pistol poking through the way the first one had.

I brought the cleaver blade down on his wrist and went most of the way through it. The pistol dropped to the floor and went off, and in the chorus of ricochets from around my walls I doubled myself up into a ball as the luckless first man took a crease through his hip. He spun and yelled, spinning around trying to see around him, and I lunged and put the knife-spear through his neck.

He choked for a second and crumpled, and I pulled the pole loose. My chopping-knife was still embedded in one of my attackers but I lunged again and grabbed up the gun as the door rattled the rest of the way open.

I back-pedalled past the pallet as the bellowing man with my cleaver in his wrist was shoved aside. Then I dived and shotgun pellets stung my back as the main blast shredded my bedding. Head ringing, I sat up and fired twice into the knot of bodies outside the doorway. The man I'd cut took most of the bullets' punch but what impact they had left, and the spray from their eruption from chop-hand's shoulder, was enough to drive the shotgunner back against the far wall.

A hand popped around the doorframe and an autopistol burst struck the shelf over my head, shattering a plastic toolcase and bouncing my spare heating-pan onto the floor with a row of small-bore holes chewed into it. I grabbed the water-flasks in a bear-hug and rolled into the other room, around the corner and out of their fire.

For a few seconds, anyway. I had one little stub pistol and a spear I'd have to reach out and pull loose from gangly-man's neck, they had autoweapons and cover. All they needed was to poke a barrel around the doorframe and pop off bursts until they winged me. The realisation that it was only a matter of time made me sick all over again.

Open the door so you can fight. Right. Nice work, Kass.

QUACKSTOWN

'I KNOW WHAT you're after!'

The shout cleared my throat almost before I knew I was going to speak. My knuckles were white on the grip of the pistol.

Nothing happened for a beat.

'I know you want the water!' Were they listening? I couldn't hear any movement. 'I've got a stubber pointed at the flasks right now! The instant, the spitting instant that I see a gun-barrel come around that doorframe a bullet goes through them and you've done all this for nothing!'

A long pause. I didn't hear anyone reloading, or any voices. Eventually, when they did speak, they spoke at once, talking over one another.

'What if we take that chance?' from one;

'You wouldn't dare risk it!' from the other.

'You think I won't?' I yelled back in answer to both of them. 'You think I'm dumb enough to think you'll let me live once you're in here? What have I got to lose except for the chance to spite you out of what you came for?'

That's not your water, you grovelling bastard! All Junktion knows what you people are up to - in with the town fathers, nice and cosy. Do you even know what being thirsty feels like?'

Now more than ever with this hangover, but the thought and the urge to giggle at it were gone in a half-second.

'It's part of my pay, if you were too stupid to think of that.' This was insane. Why was I arguing with them? 'What do you think I am, some kind of water-scavvy? Last lightson some real scawies almost killed me for the job I do for this town, by the way, and so thank you for the way you appreciate it, you sumpsack.'

'Don't get into it, Auvin, let's work out a way to finish him and get gone.' The second voice, not even trying to stay low. "You know we won't let you

live, Kass, and we know we can't walk away without a bullet between our shoulders. And there's two of us, better placed than you. How brave are you now?'

'Auvin?' I called out. Azer Auvin? The Cyclops Square smokehouse? What the hell are you doing acting like some badzone mugger? Half the people in Junktion buy meat off you.' Any time bought was good time. I was checking the load in the stubber and trying to work how quickly I could get through the door and get the pistol out of gangly-man's hand.

'Like you don't know. Your friends in the bunkerhouse own it all now, there are guards on all the spigots. Probably doesn't matter to someone who just carts his water home for free. You probably don't care what they're charging.'

I was filling my lungs to shout out something else, something about just doing my job and minding my business, when Auvin gave a yell of alarm and there was a flurry of autoshots. I took my chance by reflex, scrambling back into my big room to grab at the dropped pistol as a fight broke out in the corridor outside. I got my hand around it just as the corridor filled with smoking, roaring light.

It was nothing like the flamers I'd seen used around Junktion before. Not a drizzly stream of sticky burning liquid, but a blinding gas-jet playing across the corridor, scorching flesh into ash. The shotgunner managed one brief scream that was drowned out by the rapid bangs of his shells cooking off. The man I'd cut writhed for a few seconds and then was just smoke and bones, and the men at the doorway, Auvin and his companion, got about five steps before steps and screams stopped.

I didn't move, but my hand tightened on the pistol. I knew who used flamers like that.

After Auvin's death-cry it seemed a long time before his killer filled the doorway. I stood and met the Firebrand eye to eye while his flamer covered me. He walked a step into the room. Another. His mask was a black rat-hide hood, cut to expose his mouth, multiple thicknesses of hide around the eye-slit and brow to give the appearance of glowering. He had no visible neck: the mask buckled into a high leather collar, making his head a single tapering black shape from his shoulder up. A design had been painted near the hood's rounded crown, a crude skeletal hand gripping a burning torch.

I had seen that mask before, on the bounty posters on the column inside the liftport gate. Brother Hetch. Brother Hetch the murderer and pyre-lighter. Brother Hetch, the Redemptionist bogeyman. Brother Hetch, Junktion watchman. I surprised myself by managing to look him levelly in the eye.

A moment after that he jammed the hot muzzle of the flamer into my chest, making me yell and clutch at my singed skin.

'Cover yourself. Cover your chest and face. You shame yourself and mark yourself.' His voice was gravelly and his breathing heavy. 'When you can be looked on without shame, come outside. You have business and orders.' He turned to go, moving stiffly on the crude bionic leg I'd heard about in the stories with its flat star-shaped pad for a foot. The foot clinked against something, and he looked down. It was my bottle of Wildsnake, still a third full.

Hetch lifted his metal foot and crunched the bottie to slivers and sparkles of broken glass. My feet stung from cuts and alcohol as I picked up my boots and coat and the Firebrands watched me and sneered.

I WASN'T HORRIFIED any more, just tired and hungry and grim. I had a feeling I'd worked through all the horror when I'd seen the Firebrands' work in Chartists' Alley. Looking at them now, I couldn't believe Stope thought these people were his friends.

They had the ganger swagger about them, and the smell of burned bodies and my neighbours' shutter-doors clanging shut as they passed seemed to fuel it. I was carrying a re-wrapped water flask in my arms, as well as a knife and the two-tone and my las, for whatever those last two would do for me in their current state. My only working firearm was the fat little stubber I'd grabbed, and three of its six rounds were gone. I clung to the little gun as I made my awkward way down the series of ladders that took us to the street.

I looked over my shoulder as we came up and out of the cliff-face of my crumbling hab-block, but I couldn't see anyone watching us go. The front rooms were bright with cheap lanterns and the flicker of cooking fires, but the block was quiet and not many people moved on the trails. Then the view was blocked by the broad chest of the flamer man and I was shoved

again. His metal foot thumped softly in the dust as he walked along behind me and I could hear the igniter-light inside the flamer nozzle hissing. I felt safer with three Firebrands around me than I had with Auvin's water-raiders outside my door, but not by a whole lot at all.

Azer Auvin had enough money to run not one but three fighters at the Brass Pit. I thought about that as we came up on the sign pointing down the Pit trail. Three fighters was something when your competition was town fathers and Guilders. How could someone like Auvin not afford water now?

'Clean yourself.'

Hetch's hoarse voice, still behind me. I stopped and looked at him.

'Clean yourself. Show that you're fighting it. Fighting the taint.'

'Are you talking about the Brass Pit?'

'I'm talking about where you people come together to trade flesh and gamble and, I'm told, saturate your brains with drink and poison. Show me you're capable of acting cleanly.'

Was this the time to make a stand? No it was not. I made a clumsy imitation of the spread-fingered gesture the Firebrands had performed at the sign. There was another shove to my shoulder and we were off again.

'Are you guarding me as a lamplighter or as a prisoner?' We were walking along the canal bank where I'd been attacked about a hundred lifetimes ago, and the thought that I'd come out of that alive gave me the courage to ask the question. The lamps I'd extinguished were still dark, the others were dim or dead. The wick-burners would have used up their fuel long ago. Above us I could see stablight beams sweeping the slopes of the Pile.

You're already a prisoner,' said Hetch from behind me. 'A prisoner of the rot you invited into yourself. I weep for you that you never learned what you have to do to redeem yourself and die whole.' He didn't sound as though he were weeping. 'You'll be thankful for the day we came to your town. We will make this place better. Cleaner. The way we have made ourselves cleaner.' The Firebrand next to me held out his arms. The skin was thick with scar tissue, layers of burn- and scourge-marks. I didn't doubt they were self-inflicted.

He hadn't answered my question, but when I veered away from the 'platz toward Quackstown they followed me instead of shoving me, so I guessed

it was an escort rather than an arrest after all.

QUACKSTOWN WASN'T MUCH more salubrious than I remembered it last time I'd visited Nardo. Soiled Creek, the chain of pools and culverts that ran through the middle of it, had dried up like everything else. Now it was just a series of depressions crusted with dead algae and old chem slicks, and whatever decayed or corroded rubbish had been floating in it. I saw two human bodies sprawled face down in the creekbed, both obviously dead, and wondered how desperate you had to be to try to drink from Soiled Creek. The half-dead stringlights over the bridges made everything look livid, rotted.

There were stirrings and mutterings in the humpies and half-ruined rooms we passed. The only proper buildings in Quackstown were along the sides of the Creek, and out beyond those it was mostly rubble and half-ruins, old trashed habs and plant. Hanging from every building was a dizzying mess of signs and shingles, advertising the people who gave Quackstown its name: fortune-tellers, fake Ratskin spirit healers, scribes, apothecaries who had probably never set eyes on a genuine Hive City-made medpack but charged as though they'd invented them. We passed a tattered sign claiming its owner would, for a fee, dowse out lost archeotech hoards using an ancient Ratskin amulet. In the quiet the sound of Hetch's metal foot was almost hypnotic.

That lasted until shouts and screams from ahead of us wrecked the silence. I blinked for a moment, then pushed into a run: Nardo's rooms were just around the corner, but I cannoned into the back of the Firebrand in front of me who whirled and planted a spread hand in my face.

You go at no pace but ours. That we follow you into this cesspit is bad enough. We'll be burning our souls clean for days. You'll not run us into an ambush.' I swallowed hard, waited for his hand to return to his side, and jittered as the three of them closed me in even tighter and walked more slowly than before.

Ahead there was a burst of laughter and the crash of sheet metal. I danced about trying to see what was going on past the shoulders of the Firebrand in front of me, and of course it was exactly what I'd been afraid of.

The sloping hatch-doors down to Nardo's below-street rooms were thrown open and one of them was off its hinges. A little crowd had assembled outside them, shouting and calling, and under their feet I saw a litter of debris getting scattered and trampled. Blankets, smashed boxes, eating gear, torn clothes. I recognised some of Nardo's stuff.

The steps of the Firebrands sped up and I got another shove, out to the side and into the middle of the little street. I waited for them to close in and do what town deputies are supposed to, reef and shove them back, shout them down, crease a skull if they have to. But of course these were Volk's Firebrands.

The flamer gave a single incandescent cough of that white gas again and there were howls as clothes were scorched away from backs that were suddenly black and blistering. In perfect ganger sync, the scattergunner stepped forward behind the fire-jet, calmly aiming his sawnoff. He'd loaded hotshot shells, man-cookers, that popped in the middle of the crowd with more flames, bright enough to hurt Underhive eyes and light up the crowd as they screamed and began running. The pistolier, the man who'd shown me his mutilated arms, began roaring something half-coherent as the crowd tried to scatter, something about standing proud and the courage to repent, and then he was firing into their backs. He cut down at least seven men and women and then panted as he drew a long single-edged sword and walked forward to finish off the injured.

Later I would wonder about the people that went out under his sword-blade or the axe that the scattergunner unslung to join in the work, wonder if they were anyone I knew. There was a medicine-grinder in the Town who'd done me a tonic that had stopped my skiffer-cough. A scribe who'd rented me a hallway to sleep in when I first came to Junktion and written out my letter of petition to the town fathers for me. Some others.

But that was later. Right then all those shapes in the street were people who'd tried to get at my friend, and I hugged the flask under one arm, thumb-cocked the pistol with the other and sprinted across the street.

I was lucky not to crack my head on the top of the door frame as I dropped in, or to snap an ankle on the badly-packed dirt floor. This was a little square cellar-hall that linked the street with half a dozen other rooms that had once been storage cells. Squinting in the dark, I could see lights and hear voices from Nardo's broken-in doorway.

I had taken three steps when a single whimper from next to me made me whirl, pistol twitching. It was a woman, not much out of girlhood, with another little girl clutched in her arms, cringing away from me. In a stray flash of torchbeam from the door I saw her legs were twisted with a string of old, bad breaks. It must have been why she hadn't run. Around her, as my eyes adapted, I could see makeshift beds and little piles of possessions. Nardo had said three families paid for the right to share the cellar.

I shook my head at the woman: no further noise. She understood and hugged her face down into the little girl's. I left them like that and stepped to the door.

Nardo's face, in the yellow-white circle of a torch-beam. His right eye was closed and crusted, his nose broken, his lips split and swollen. That was the old injuries. A knife-tip was grating across his forehead, making a new one.

The man squatting down over him was heavy, slope-shouldered, just a dark lump in the back-glow of the torch but his hair and beard as pale as mine.

'No water.' That was Nardo. His ruined mouth made his usual mutter glue-thick. Told all o' you.'

'Filthy lying rat,' rumbled the fat man almost gently. 'Now here's the thing. We know you people are clever. You're clever, quick people. Aren't you clever and quick? And it doesn't please me to believe that you're not so clever and quick that you aren't holding water out on us the way the fathers are. It pleases me to believe that the only thing that all those others didn't do was be persistent enough.' All those others. Oh, Hiveghosts, Nardo, I'm sorry.

Nardo was shaking his head. The knife-point moved another centimetre and I saw him bleed.

I could see the fat man's accomplice. It was a woman, wrapped in strips of dark cloth strung with Ratskin charms and broken fragments of tech. Someone from Quackstown. I crashed my shoulder into her, hard and low so she couldn't absorb it by bending over. She flew across the little space in a screeching tangle of limbs and lank black hair and they all wound up in a pile, Nardo, she and fat-man. Fat-man flailed the knife and grabbed at a holster on his thigh and I stepped all the way into the room, put the little stubber in his face and painted the wall behind him. Half a step back to

bring to bear on the woman. I wanted to tell her to get gone, but she snarled and whipped a saw-wire at my face.

Somehow the second stub-shot seemed much louder than the first one.

I PULLED THEM OFF HIM, the man and the woman, as Nardo groaned with pain underneath them and the ugly voices of the Firebrands muttered to one another outside. Then I picked up fat-man's torch and looked at the stubber. One round left. I supposed I should have tried to use the knife. Or let the Firebrands do what Stope was paying them for. Somehow I was glad I'd done it the way I had.

'Got any cups unbroken?' I wasn't very good at being comforting. I was hoping being businesslike would do. At the sound of my voice Nardo tried to sit up, dropped back with a groan and shook his head.

I didn't know if that meant no or don't know. I fanned the torch around. Most of the stuff in Nardo's trunks was already scattered through here and out and up into the street. I saw his fast-cycle lasrifle lying by the end of the bed, smashed against the door until it was bent almost to a right-angle; there was no sign of the heavy custom-balanced autos that he'd prized so much.

There was a metal mug, though, trodden on and dented but able to hold water. I splashed a drop into it and held it to his lips while he coughed. Eventually enough trickled down his throat for his belly to make a start on.

Tell me. Everythin'.'

I sneaked a look out into the cellar but I couldn't see the Firebrands. I scooched down the wall next to Nardo's cot - his room was just wide enough that I could sit cross-legged between that and the wall, and I began to tell him.

I told him about killing the men who attacked me on the trail, and about Thamm still choking for life in a little sawbones' room somewhere, and about Venz and Mudeye (he closed his eyes for a moment when he heard about them, and we sat in silence for a few moments. Then I gave him another swallow of water and we went on). I told him about being sent out on the Tarvo trail, Heliko's assassins coming after me, fleeing from them into the rats and the scavvies, the Curse and the standoff at the gates. I dropped my voice and kept my tone flat when I told him that the

Firebrands and the Steelheads had been installed at the top of the pile of town deputies. I told him about the men who'd tried to break in on me and my idea that Azer Auvin and his cronies probably weren't the first.

And I told him why they'd brought in the Firebrands as well as the Steelheads. I told him about Garm Heliko.

* * *

THE TOWN FATHERS' private water stash was kept in the cistern at the very top of the Black Pile, in the same wired-in compound as the big Spyglass watchtower. That fed the spigot behind Quackstown where the riot had been, and after that the fathers had got scared and closed off the spigot, no matter what anyone from the town was willing to pay. That water was theirs.

'Remember Mudeye's theories?' I asked, and Nardo nodded. Everyone knew that underneath the Black Pile was just that, a great heap of rubble and a maze of little craters and cavities. Mudeye had dreamed of pouring dye into some of the bigger holes and prowling around the levels under Junktion trying to see if any of it ran through. His dreams about lost and forgotten levels stuffed with archeotech and pearl spores and who knew what got more extravagant every time he cornered someone to talk about them.

Garm Heliko had had the same idea.

He'd assembled a team from whoever out there he was leading now, bandits and scummers and men from Junktion's outskirts desperate with thirst. Yonni had known some names. A freed pit-fighter named Marezk who liked to get in close with a ram-hammer and sawnoff. A small-time leg-breaker for one of the gambling dens named Ghilolla who they said could throw a grenade clear across Cyclops Square. Spiders-Fear-Him, a renegade Ratskin scout from Scrubtangle. Others. Nine in all. The rats alone knew how but they had managed to do what Mudeye had always talked about. They had wriggled through those crushing little spaces up through the Black Pile, worked their way to the surface inside the compound and tried to take the cistern.

The first watchmen didn't have a chance. They were walking the fence and scanning the lower slopes of the

Pile with heatseer lenses. It was how the watch had spotted the attack on me. But nobody was ready for an attack from inside.

It would've been wiser to stay quiet, Yonni had said, seal off the cistern and then dictate terms. Would he have got away with it? Hard to know. It wasn't what he did. Yonni had thought they were too strung out by then, from thirst and the ordeal of dragging themselves up through whatever horror-filled little stone gullets they'd found under the Pile. So Heliko's gang drew on the first guards they saw. Their weapons weren't silenced. It was on in a second.

One salvo of pistol shots. Two dead. Guards running around the cistern, but they're looking the wrong way and instantly they're under fire too. Three more down, and Heliko and his gang are grabbing up their longarms. A few seconds for the watchers up the Spyglass to grasp what's going on and bring their scopes to bear on the foot of the tower.

Now Heliko's in the reservoir plant, between the big rockcrete cisterns and in among the tangle of valves and pipes. The guards know it's more than their skins are worth to fire in and break those. One, a lanky ex-prospector named Frogeld, gets out a hand flamer and tries to crawl in through the machinery on one flank while the others fire close over the pipes as a diversion. A burst of yellow flame that they later found had got two of them, but one of the burning men falls crosswise between the pipes and blocks the way. Frogeld can't get further in and as he's trying to back up, Ghilolla rolls a fragger in under him and there's nowhere much for the shrapnel to go but into Frogeld.

('Bad way t'go', said Nardo when I repeated that part, and I nodded. That second or two of lying there looking at the grenade in front of your face and the knowing that there's no way you'll ever be clear in time...)

The grenade blast makes the guards get serious. The sentries up in die Spyglass are spotlighting the rebels they can see and trying to get a bead, but long-range sharpshooting isn't really an Underhive thing and they can't get a shot that won't burst a pipe or smash a pump. Heliko's people are working themselves as far into the pipeworks as they can, but they can see it's starting to turn, see that now they've trapped themselves.

Someone spots the light from a hot-torch. Heliko's either trying to cut into some of the pipes or weld them shut. That tears it with the guards, at any rate: better the pipes get broken in a firefight than cut apart while they just watch.

Two watchmen angle a launcher and start skating fraggers of their own off the sides of the reservoir, trying to blow them over the rebels' heads to either drive them out or force them down. Ghilolla manages to field one and send it back, going long and over the fence and blowing a hole in the side of the Pile. Then he throws his own up and out of the pipes, two deadly accurate casts that break up the skirmish line that was advancing on the cisterns. Spiders-Fear-Him uses one of the dead sentries' autoguns - kills three of them as they fall back. They try and return fire, but a Ratskin who's had time to set up and conceal himself? They can barely even make out where the shots are coming from.

The sentries with the launcher have had time to get smart and climb up the Spyglass tower. Now they balance there, aim by the spotlights, and drop a choker grenade just behind Ghilolla, who must have had a grenade ready, because a second later an explosion lofts Ghilolla's body up out of cover and into one of the cisterns. And then the rest of them rush the pipework again.

The big gangs like the Berserkers and the Curse aren't the only ones with gorgeous hardware. The men who watch the town fathers' water are well kitted. Half a dozen guards enter the maze of pipes with photovisors over their eyes and respirators over their mouths. The choker fumes don't bother them any more than the eye-stabbing bursts of light from the flashbombs that are starting to come down from the grenade team.

The choker and the blast spoil Spiders-Fear-Him's aim and in a moment the guards are in the pipes. There's a burst of wild firing as two blinded rebels go crazy at the sound of the guards' steps, but a couple of carefully-angled las-shots end that. Another guard gets too keen and runs down a catwalk and straight in between Marezk with his ram-hammer and Spiders-Fear-Him with his machete. He's Junktion's last fatality of the fight.

Marezk and the Ratskin split up, and the guards can hear Marezk calling the other rebels to back him up as he goes hunting. None of them do, and Marezk starts cursing the others and then just screaming in rage as he

realises he's being left on his own. He manages to burst a valve assembly with the ram-hammer and bring out a gusher of water and then a frantic nothing-to-lose salvo from the nearest two guards takes him out of the picture.

Three unaccounted for, then. One miserable bastard left trapped in a dead end, trying to claw his way up a sheer bank of pipes and yelling Heliko's name over and over until the guards club him down and drag him off, and the Ratskin and Heliko himself. Nobody knows where they escaped to.

And within ten hours of the last shots being fired in the compound, the fathers are declaring that Volk's Firebrands will be part of the Junktion watch.

It seemed like I'd been talking for a long time. Nardo had managed to sit up a little and pour himself a cup of water. He tried a yawn but flinched with pain in the middle of it and put a hand over his face. At least two of his teeth had been broken. 'It's bad.'

'It is,' I said. 'And I think it's going to get worse.' Hetch's harsh laugh from the door made us both jump.

'Don't you worry yourselves, either of you. You keep yourselves pure and follow your Redemption and we will see to it that things are better for you with every lightson. Break yourselves and remake yourselves. We will show you.'

Hetch stepped in and stood over me. His weapon was slung back over his shoulder and his eyes glittered in the torchlight.

You spin a pretty story, lamplighter, but you're done with it now. Stand up and collect yourself. It's time to go.'

TOVICK AND HETCH

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT he was talking about until I remembered him jamming the flamer into my chest and rasping at me. What was it?

'Orders and business, do I remember it right? Duty calls.'

'You can't understand duty in the way we do,' he answered without missing a beat, 'but you can follow our lead and example. You'll see us start to scorch this town clean.'

I wasn't sure how that followed from what I'd asked him, but did I mention that the Red Redemption makes people crazy? I stood up.

'What's the business, exactly? Something from Stope?'

Town father Stope understands that this place needs us. He helped us strengthen ourselves in the badzones and he's brought us here to grow stronger still.'

'Good for him.' I looked down at Nardo cradling the water flask on his chest. His head had sunk down so his chin was practically next to it. What's your plan to make sure my friend is safe?'

'Compassion is the spoor that the prey leaves for the hunter,' sneered Hetch. We have grown out of and above compassion into purity of purpose.'

'Good for you, and good for your purity of purpose. What's your plan to make sure my friend is safe?' My chest was still tender where the flamer had scorched it but my mouth ran right on nevertheless. It was like the scavvy boss all over again.

Disgust showed in Hetch's voice. Maybe he knew who I'd just compared him to.

'Our business, lamplighter, is bringing you to the bunkerhouse, armed and ready. We've already indulged your delay.' I didn't like the sound of armed and ready, but it did give me an idea of a new tack to take.

'Bunkerhouse armed and ready it is. Now, as proper Junktion watchmen doing your duty to town father Stope, what plans do you have to make sure that Lamplighter Nardo is kept safe until he can recover from his injuries and take up his tools for the city again?'

The eyes in the mask-slit looked down to Nardo and back to me.

'He should embrace them. His wounds.' Was the grating voice just a touch less confident? 'Pain is what redeems. "If it doesn't hurt, it doesn't count." Do you know who said that?'

'No.' Adding that I didn't care didn't seem like the thing to do right now. Hetch's thick-gloved hands were in fists. 'Here's what I'm tasking you with in my capacity as the last Junktion lamplighter.' Nardo made to say something at that and I nudged him with my heel. 'I'll come with one of you to the Greimplatz to a gunnery there to get armed, then I'll feed, and then you'll escort me to the bunkerhouse because then I'll be armed and ready. Two of you are going to get my - get Lamplighter Nardo to the rooms you fetched me from. He can stay there with his water ration and mine.'

Hetch's eyes had narrowed until I could barely see them. I wondered if I'd pushed them too far. I put on my cards face. Cawdors didn't play cards, did they? I was pretty sure that was a burning offence with them.

Then suddenly he was gone back into the dimness, and I heard that grating voice passing on orders to the others. I dropped down beside Nardo and whispered urgently to him.

'You can't stay here. More and more people are going to get the same idea about lamplighters and water stashes. My place is better, people were banging on my door for hours but the bastards couldn't get in.' I pulled out the cord with the deadbolt keys over my head and hung it on Nardo's neck, and he stiffly tucked the keys down the front of his bloodied shirt. You rest until I get back and then we'll work out what we're going to do. These crazies-' I shot a look back over my shoulder as I helped him up 'these crazies are playing along to Stope. I think they're just sizing the place up and getting themselves ready. But as long as they're playing along we can take advantage.' I shut up as I heard footsteps, stepped aside and let the two junior Firebrands push past me. With poor grace, they began helping Nardo up.

THE BROKEN-LEGGED GIRL was sitting in the street as we came out of the cellar doors. Her head was slumped and for a moment until I saw her breathing she could have been one of the scatter of corpses that still ringed the door. I looked over at her and she mouthed the word 'water' at me, but Nardo had everything I'd brought with me, the whole flask.

The flamer-Cawdor caught me looking at her and misunderstood. He waved a gloved hand at her gnarled legs.

We do not suffer the mutant, as you won't either. We brought her out here while you were telling your little stories so we could do our good clean work. Next time I expect you to come with us and learn.'

'You were seeing if her legs were mutated or hurt.'

'Crushed in a rubble-fall, so she says, and we examined them. We agreed to accept her account. She is not mutant.'

I thought about that for a moment, the picture in my mind of the girl and her child propped up against the wall. The three Firebrands looming over her, prodding at her legs, talking amongst themselves, deciding if they were going to burn her or not.

I stopped and put a hand on the shoulder of the Firebrand in front of me, the one with Nardo's right arm over his shoulders. He gave a hiss of breath and looked at Hetch for guidance, but it only took me a second to fish the water-flask out of the crude blanket-sling hanging around Nardo's neck. I wanted to reassure Nardo there would be more in my rooms but I didn't dare while we could be overheard - I hated to think how much worse that would make it. He'd have to trust me.

I poured out a cupful, pushed the flask back into place and carried it back. The girl was able to drink it with only a little coughing: half the cup, then a quarter for her own girl, then a quarter again for her. She tried to meet my eyes as I stood up but I avoided her gaze. I hoped the dead around us were all strangers to her but I didn't like the chances.

The dirty, nasal laughter from up above made me jump and flinch.

'Look down here for the laaadieees!' I craned my head back. There were lamps hanging halfway up the walls of the building-front opposite and I had to move before I could see anything past even that dim orange glow. What I could see was a shaved head shining like the metal that gleamed from its ears and lips, and a crest of hair sculpted into spikes. Watch the ladies scramble about! Watch them cry tears for each other! Poor little

pets!' The voice laughed again and another head and another voice joined it.

'Poor little poppets got to take care of one another, now. Poor little bruised mite. Are off to drink mothers' milk, now, are we? Do we need to be made into men, now?'

'Brother Hetch?' asked one of the Firebrands. There was no fear in his voice. All three of them were staring up at the two Steelheads who were leaning over the edge of the roof to taunt us.

'Afraid, little ratkins? Running away from us?'

You going to take all our fun away, are you?'

'Little lighter there had a lot of visitors! Nice little party to watch! We've been laughing!' And they suited actions to words. Their heads disappeared from view as they threw them back to laugh, and there was a crack as one of them got exuberant enough to fire a pistol into the air. From behind me there were quiet metallic sounds as the Firebrands brought their weapons to bear. I turned my head one way, then the other, and in my peripheral vision I could see them: they had let Nardo slide down to his knees and their guns were held high in hands that didn't so much as twitch.

The Steelheads appeared again, leering down at us. They had to be able to see the Firebrands' weapons, but they didn't show it, not right away. They let it look like coincidence, the way that there were suddenly heavy, lumpish Goliath pieces in their hands. One of them had a dot-sight: every so often a dim red showed where the beam caught a drift of smoke. I could see one of them licking his lips as his gun nuzzled the air, then froze in place. He'd found a bead on one of the Firebrands behind me.

'Nice town you've got here, lighters!' whooped the lip-licker. 'Hope you don't mind a few more parties when the water's back on!'

Nobody wanted to move. I tried to decide whether to move or talk - which would make it worse? There was no Safine to send me safely away here (and I felt a quick thrill of shame at the thought). The Goliaths' grins were growing feral, and I could hear a Firebrand behind me starting to pant for breath.

'We'll...' my first word came out as a croak. We'll see about it when the water's on. For now, we've got lighters' business. No fun partying in the dark.'

A stupid line, but it did what I wanted it to: it didn't stir up the Steelheads and the Firebrands had an out, a way to leave without damage to their dignity that they'd need to start shooting to salvage. Gangers and their strutting, spitting pride. The Steelheads whooped and cackled from the wall and fired into the air again as the Firebrands backed away, reluctantly lowered their guns and hoisted Nardo up again.

Card-player face. Card-player face. I tried to make their words into meaningless noises as I walked away. I didn't let myself think about the so-called town deputies that had sat up there and watched as pack after pack had ransacked Nardo's room for water and beat him because there was no water to find. My hand was on the little stubber, but the stumpy barrel was only good at almost point-blank and there was only one bullet anyway. What was the point?

I was walking slowly, shoulders hunched as if I still expected a Goliath bullet in my back, and Nardo and the Firebrands disappeared ahead down the dim street. Brother Hetch walked next to me, silendy but with a satisfied air, as though a point had been proven.

ASK ME IF I'VE ever been grateful for the presence of a House Cawdor gunman before or since the Dry Season and I'll tell you the truth, which is no. But I'd be lying to say that Brother Hetch didn't make himself welcome twice over between there and Greimplatz. The first time when we held our breath to walk over the litde causeway over the dried-up creek and there were three scummers blocking our way. The biggest of them had time to get out 'you got water, we seen you g-' before the nozzle of Hetch's flamer came up and the three of them bolted. Hetch sent a bark of flame after them but it couldn't have made them run faster than they already were.

The second time was when the flophaired little bastard let us into the Gunnery and sneered at me. He was halfway through a taunt not a hundred degrees off the sort of thing the Steelheads had been yelling down at us as we left Quackstown when Hetch stepped through the door behind me, spun the kid round and pinned him face-first against the wall.

'See? Poison coming out of his system,' he told me, gesturing at the sore on the back of the kid's neck with the still-hissing flamer nozzle. 'I don't doubt it shows in his actions. You, litde man, would do well to build on

this. Scourging and fasting will clean you even faster until this-' he pinched the back of the kid's neck with his fingers and got a yell '-runs dry and your spirit is lifted. You may be ready for a mask before this lamplighter-man is, if you're diligent.'

The kid yelled for Tovick, thrashed as Hetch let him go and almost overbalanced. It was me he set eyes on as he got his footing back, and he gave me a quick death-glare before he loped across the shop and disappeared. Tovick led me around the counter to his workbench without comment and laid the weapons out. I tried not to laugh - I could see the sourness on Tovick's face and I knew for him this was serious. A lamplighter turning up with one of Volk's Firebrands who was roughing up the help. But every time I tried to stop grinning the kid's squawks started up in my head ('Awwwwk! Awwwuukk!') and I had to make myself not giggle. When you've been dragged through the shit it's usually the first little thing you come across afterwards that sets you off.

Hetch didn't bother to follow us. He slung the flamer and prowled about the shop, letting us know his opinion of the stock with an occasional loud snort. Tovick glowered at my gear and worked in silence, stripping and cleaning and charging. I knew weapon tinkering as well as most in town but with what the guns had been through the last couple of lightsons I didn't trust myself. Competent wasn't good enough, and since I was coming here anyway, why not get an expert. The clicks and clinks of his tools were reassuring.

'Can you talk in front of your boss?' Tovick asked me after a while. His voice was flat and quiet and I kept mine likewise.

'Not my boss. Bodyguard. Town deputy. Stope...'

'Stope's a fungus-gutted fool, everybody knows it. He personally waved these bastards through the gates.'

'I know, I know, I've had run-ins with both of them, believe it. Just be careful for a while. The Firebrands are Stope's special friends.' Tovick grimaced, his head still down.

'Never been a nice town, Kass, but never like this before. What happens next then? I suppose you know.' There it was again.

'I don't know spit, Tovick.' I was suddenly conscious of the effort it took to keep my voice down to a hiss. Suddenly it seemed important to explain this to someone, anyone. I respected Tovick. 'Half the spitting town seems

to think all the lighters were halfway to being town fathers, Tovick. It's not bloody true, but nobody cares. I used to think people liked having us around, but every third person here acts like it was me who came and took their water off them.' Across the shop, Hetch was staring at me over a drum of belted stubber rounds. He couldn't have heard the words but he had picked up the tone.

'I've been spending my time getting dragged around and yelled at and attacked for my water ration - which I earn, Tovick, I earn it from the town, and shoved back and forth by-' I shot a look over to Hetch '-spitting watch-gangers that some unhinged idiot saw fit to deputise. That's when I'm not getting sent out to be hunted by rats and scavvies.' I shoved my scabbed and battered palms under his nose. 'And people act like I'm some kind of insider who's helping all this along out of spite. All I'm trying to do is the job I get paid for. That's the all and only of it. Just my job.'

Tovick hadn't stopped working. His fingers moved as smoothly as a spider's mandibles picking a rat or a bat apart, as Safine's gripping a weapon, as mine when there were tools in them and a juice-cord or a lamp laid out underneath. He put my laspistol, now clean and glistening with oil, on a shelf over the bench and reached for the two-tone.

'So how about the Gartch's convoy?' he asked. I was silent for a moment, wrong-footed, as Tovick just kept his head down and his hands moving. 'Is that one of the things you don't hear about? You going to tell me you weren't asked to look around by the fathers?'

So of course I had to lean there on his bench and look at my feet eat and swallow every word of my great big speech. It tasted like bitter-burned ash. I thought about standing in the bunkerhouse and trying to answer the fathers' questions until I almost dropped. I thought about Yonni shifting and cursing and finally saying he could trust me with the news that Gartch wasn't coming back with water at all. The thoughts stung. Was I really what Tovick was saying I was?

At the back of my head, a little voice said Junktion's done. Time to ship out. Let it drop and just walk away.

'How many people are waiting on Gartch?' I asked and regretted it.

'Who isn't?' Tovick came back levelly. 'Lot of people going to be at the gate when he comes back from the Hook. There's even talk about cashing up a second caravan, Guilder chips and water rations hired the Berserkers

as guards.' I felt my eyes widening. The Berserkers were almost as reclusive as the Curse.

Gartch's caravan went right out of my head again.

'Caravans. There's water at Shining Falls. Who's buying it? I mean-' I caught myself and slowed down. The Curse came down out of Shining Falls last lightson.' That finally got him to look up.

'Last? You took too many knocks to the head out there, Kass, try two whole lightsons ago. They headed back up the trail at least twenty hours back.' I'd taken longer to sleep everything off than I thought. A lot longer. I thought about Nardo, lying in his room, at the mercy of whoever next decided to kick in his door, while I lay in a drunken stupor with his water ration.

And while the Steelheads who were supposed to be in the watch looked on and laughed. That was better. Someone I could be angry at who wasn't me.

'Why did they leave?' I asked.

'Why?' Tovick asked mildly. They had no water left. The Steelheads took a tithe.'

'How much of a tithe?' I was afraid of the answer.

The way I heard it, Kass, there was a gate-gang tithe that the Steelheads kept for themselves. Then there was the standard Junktion water-tithe, that's the traditional one that the town fathers brought in a dozen lightsons ago if you remember.' For the first time there was emotion showing in Tovick's voice. 'And apparently the Curse said they were there to sell their water to Junktion so there was a merchants' tax that they levied in water, too. There were probably a couple of others. I wasn't there. I didn't hear it directly'

But I had been. I remembered the Steelheads shouting and hooraying back and forth as they began hauling the water drums off the Curse's carts. I remembered Safine's hand on her pistol and the woman whose name I didn't know whose arm Silk had had to hold to keep her from rushing them.

'Was there fighting?' Tovick shrugged.

'Maybe. You know how rumours are. Anyway, weren't you there?'

'I...' I was, I thought, but I'd walked away. I'm good at walking away. Tovick, I don't know what happened to them after they brought me back.

Did they fight with the Steelheads?'

He didn't answer. Instead he put the two-tone up on the same shelf as the laspistol, then took the pistol down and handed it to me.

'No tabs, Kass. Not any more. Full rate for the cleaning and I'll take a half-chip for the juicing if you want it juiced. Same for the two-tone. Ammo's gone up too. Te- Eight per clip. No haggling, and if you can find better anywhere in Junktion then good luck to you.' His voice was hard.

'Eight?' I shot back. 'And you were going to say ten, weren't you? For an autogun clip? What, are you tipping your damn bullets with pearl-spores?' My voice was coming up and Hetch took a step or two closer. 'And no tab, you might have spitting told me before I brought my damn weapons up here to put myself in hock. I think the Guild credits I had falling out of my arse must have landed somewhere I can't spitting find them.'

'Lamplighters get paid very well, everyone knows that,' Tovick replied calmly. 'But since you put it like that, you can take your pistol with you. I'll take that little stubber I see in your belt as a part-trade on the work, and I believe I'll take the two-tone as surety on the rest. I'm sure the town fathers will juice it for you. I'll see you again when you have your chips.'

It was all there in his look. I wanted to tell him all over again. I was a lamplighter. I kept the lights running so people could see. That was my job, nothing else. How was I supposed to be getting involved with all this? Didn't my work benefit everyone? Didn't anyone see that?

But there wasn't much I could tell him that I hadn't already said. There were shadows under his eyes but the expression on his lined face didn't change.

I was following the clink of Hetch's bionic leg down the steps when the flophaired kid grabbed my shoulder just the way I'd grabbed the Firebrand's outside Nardo's rooms. I didn't turn, so he leaned forward and hissed in my ear. I could smell his rancid breath curling around my ear.

'You know 'bout Gartch and his water, I saw it in your face.' There was a satisfied gulp of air. 'Gonna tell everyone. Tell 'em you know something about, uh Gartch and, y'know, make sure that...'

I pulled away from his hand, but he kept his grip and sniggered. So I turned around, looked into the brown hair that hung in his face, carefully put my palm against his nose and shoved him back hard. I was down the crooked steps and away before he could collect himself to shout after me.

'GET HIM IN HERE.' It was Gruett, the Steelhead boss I'd last seen in that shameful encounter at the gate. After the conversation with Tovick, seeing his scarred face again was like a slap. He was bright-eyed and vigorous, not like the thirsty and exhausted men and women we'd passed in the streets. I could guess where at least part of the Curse's water shipment had gone.

We'd come to the end of a long, looping trip through upper Junktion. I'd left the Gunnery seething inside and still without my guns working (and Tovick had taken the pistol), following Hetch to meet another Firebrand I didn't recognise at the bunkerhouse. The two Cawdors had marched me straight off, down into the silt-ridden, gloomy ring-tunnel of Long-Gone Circle, its crowds of beggars and pedlars listless and frightened of the masked gangers that came tramping through the middle of them. Nobody called out to us for water. We left the tunnel almost under the Highborn Road before it curled around and met the buried lower levels of the Greimplatz drinking holes, and the Firebrands had led the way up one of the steep little burrows that connected the Circle with the main level of Junktion. It was so narrow that the two Firebrands had to go up in tandem, the younger one guiding Hetch's flamer pack so that it wouldn't jam in the little space. Something about that comforted me - these gangs couldn't be running the place yet if they had trouble with the little things.

For a few weird minutes I thought we were going back into Quackstown, but we passed by the top of Soiled Creek on a bridge high enough that the stink of the Creek was nearly bearable. We reached the foot of the Black Pile and I wondered if we were going all the way up to the Spyglass, but instead we stopped in front of a heavy power-gate where Gruett was waiting. He and the Cawdors didn't speak to one another. I stood in the middle wishing like hell I had a working cell for my laspistol.

'Get him in here,' was all. There was the whine of motors and the gate-slab squealed back just far enough for me to slip through. I left Gruett, Hetch and the nameless Cawdor behind.

I had never been into the garden compound before. Places like this had their own techs, people personally loyal to the owner. The gardens had made an ex-slime farmer named Wilferra rich enough to be admitted to the town fathers, but not a lot of what he grew ever made it out to regular Junktioners like me. I stepped as far away from the gate as I dared without

getting sucked into the commotion in die compound's yards, and looked around.

Everyone knew he grew knittermoss here to sell to the apothecaries and even some fancy Guilder medics uphive, and I could see shallow pits, home to beds of the stuff. The circular mesh-houses between the mould pits and the garden wall puzzled me until I saw a knotty tendril poking over the top of one of them. The thick wireweed beds around the sixward walls were supposed to have come from cuttings grown somewhere in town, and now I knew where. That was only the start - the whole compound was a maze of vats and beds and pits that Heliko could have hid in for a year if he'd tunnelled up in here, a bigger and more elaborate setup than anything I'd seen in the farm belt around Peelgut.

The whole place was milling with fighters. Metal-tattooed Goliath heads and oiled Cawdor masks caught the compound's overhead lights, and deeper in I saw those same orange lights glance off the smoked goggles of a little handful of House Delaque gangers as they sat on a bench bent over the autoguns they were loading. Here and there were individual hirelings wearing no gang's colours, bounty hunters and sump-gunnies lounging against walls or taking quiet nips from hip flasks. A pair of Ratskin trackers, a man and a woman, stretched out in a corner, lean and languid as snakes at rest.

I had a bad feeling I knew what this was about.

'Master Kass. Master Sinden Kass. Yes, you! I looked around. Town father Wilferra had been a hard man when he had been a holesteader in the threeward rubble-dunes, but wealth had softened him. Over his beard he still had the fierce bony face of a badzone scrapper but the rest of his body seemed to have sagged away from that angular head, stretching out into a soft pear of fat that sat over his wire-weave belt. Beside him stood the Guilder Tai, his face still relaxed and amused. Was he like that with everyone, or did I entertain him somehow?

You've got a pretty singular idea about what "obeying instructions" means, Kass,' Wilferra barked at me. 'Weren't you meant to be here half a day ago?'

'It doesn't look like I've held you up at all, sir,' I responded calmly enough, 'and as I understand it I was to be at the bunkerhouse - where I

went before I got sent here - armed and ready. Getting armed and ready as per instructions took some time.'

'You don't look armed to me,' grunted Wilferra. That's what, a single laspistol? Go on your rounds with that, do you?' I smiled, sort of. Lamplighters were such a common sight to most Junktioners that it was almost a surprise to talk to someone who didn't know us and our kit by sight.

'Not at the moment, sir, but my other weapon is... being worked on.'

'No good,' he snorted. 'Edzon, get Kass some proper kit and make sure he's fed and watered and ready. No weak links in this exercise.' Edzon, one of Wilferra's hetmen and an occasional cards companion, jerked his head for me to follow. I had almost drooled at the mention of food and managed to work up a trot as he led me deeper into the compound and through the crowds.

The fathers are throwing quite a bit of kit into this, Kass, so you'll have plenty to choose from. Master Wilferra and a few of the others, Stope and Zemmith and Horodni, are taking the attack on the reservoir pretty personally. And the Guild won't stand for it either, which is why you saw Tai back there.'

'Guilder Tai, in the cap?'

'Same. Lots of Hive City connections, I hear Spire connections too, but who knows?' We were coming up to an equipment shed that had turned into a makeshift armoury, and beside it... I stopped dead. Beside it I could see a griddle stretched over a burner-pit and smell the sizzle of fungus steak and meatcake. Before I could help it a fat drop of saliva rolled out of the corner of my mouth and made a break for my chin.

Edzon laughed. He had a moonface and a backcombed mane of yellow hair, and he liked to laugh. Except when he took me on over a card table.

'Okay, I give in. Feed yourself before you keel over and then we'll get you armed. I'd hate to think that kit's the best you could get with what you're always winning off me.' I looked at him. 'Oh, don't tell me you weren't told. No, Kass, this isn't a regulation lamplighter round, in case you hadn't guessed. You're coming to Mirror-Bitten with us. We're going to bring in Garm Heliko.'

UNDER MIRROR-BITTEN

WE WERE OVER eight kilometres out of Junktion on the Mirror-Bitten trail and I still hadn't stopped swearing under my breath.

This was meant to be over. I had the scabs and scratches from the rats and I had the bruises and welts from the scavvies. I'd come home alive. Hell, I'd have come home a legend if I could find anyone who'd let me actually sit down and tell them the bloody legend. The sort of stories that even a full ganger will still be telling the juves ten years on. This was the time to be regaling a drinking hole with stupid exaggerations, not joining some insane town father's army of vengeance.

They had given me an autogun from the guardhouse stash at Wilferra's farm. It was heavy and the balance was bad. I swore quietly at that, too.

'Your part in this,' Wilferra had told me via Edzon, 'is very simple. The 'steads around Mirror-Bitten are tough. You're going to tenderise them. This level narrows vertically between Chamberpit and Dripdown. The tunnels under it are full of mud and tox, but the high vents are clear. You should have no trouble getting through and finding their power tap.' Edzon had grinned at me over the chunk of meatcake I was wolfing. 'Bet you were wondering why they wanted a lamplighter along.' I'd diverted enough energy from chewing to shrug my shoulders. The Ratskins reckon they know the place better than Spiders-Fear-Him, who's from a different tribe and doesn't know all the hive-songs for these parts. You'll be somewhere around the holestead borders but you won't join in the fighting. There's a decent-sized mob of us going to stay behind the line-'

Chewing, I jerked my head in Wilferra's general direction.

'-right, Wilferra, Guilder Tai and a couple of fathers who want to be there when Heliko goes down. Nobody wants our last lamplighter shot, Kass. As soon as their lights are down, the gangers and bounty-boys go in and you come out. Your next three water rations get doubled when you

come back. Don't worry, they know they're going in under dark. They'll be fine.'

I hadn't thought about the gangers and didn't really care. But something else hit me as I swallowed my last mouthful of meatcake and thought about it for a moment.

'Doubled water ration? That's a lot to spend if everyone's getting the same payment. Where's it coming from? I thought-' I caught myself in time to remember I wasn't supposed to know about Gartch. 'Is Gartch's caravan coming back soon?'

'Search me.' Edzon was obviously in the know -when he dodged my question he did exactly the same twitch of the lips as when he'd got a good hand. 'It's been promised everyone who comes back from the raid, providing we get Heliko. I do know they topped up nicely with what we got out of those Escher by the gate before we sent them home.' Edzon had gone out to watch that, he said. I had been ravenous, but listening to his snorting little laughs as he described Safine and her caravan being jeered empty-handed up the trail took the rest of my appetite away.

I'd always liked Edzon, but since that moment and all through the march I'd found myself wanting to grip his saggy cheeks hard between my fingers and flatten his nose with my forehead. I breathed deeply instead - vents on the Mirror-Bitten trail mean the air is usually sweet and not very dusty - and held out my hand to the two men he had brought over.

Hoisha Oordell introduced himself first. His hand was as soft as his voice and his eyes were invisible behind his dust-goggles, which were dark even though the trail was half-lit like they all are. House Delaque, of course, narrow-shouldered and bald-headed, in a straight black thermal coat-cloak that could fox heat-scopes if you knew the trick of it. A startling, puckered scar ran from his brow right over the crown of his head and disappeared behind his ear. From the look of it a blade-stroke had lifted a great flap of flesh right off his skull that hadn't properly healed back down.

Second was Runs-Touching-Shadows, a ratskin tracker and the opposite of the Delaque in every way. He was almost undressed but for hide trousers and the giant rat-pelt around his shoulders, from the animal he would have hunted and killed for his manhood ceremony. His skin was brown and unmarked and his hair black and he didn't shake my hand.

Edzon stood there expectantly. He obviously thought we'd all get along. Maybe this was where my lamplighter lone-traveller man-of-action mystique worked against me. I wasn't quite sure where to start.

'Me ahead to scout, you two behind,' Oordell started for me. The 'skin to direct and you to tell us whhere you need to stop and whhatyou need to do.' He sighed his H-sounds, and there was that tiny trace of a lisp that some Delaque accents pick up. Runs-Touching-Shadows gave a curt nod.

'Only need to guide,' he said. He had a good, musical voice. 'Not much here to hurt your ngalot hides.' He flashed a grin at us that Edzon returned, probably because he didn't know that ngalot was local Ratskin for 'burdensome child' or 'simpleton'. Or a clumsy Underhiver who didn't know the ways of the badzones. 'We'll turn ahead there. Where the girder rides up through the metal is a shaft to climb. Wrap yourselves.' He held up his hands and showed the wrappings he would use to protect them. I looked at them and down at my own hands and the place on my belt where my pouch usually was. Balls. The dangers of having to run from home in too much of a hurry. I suddenly realised with a sink of my stomach how naked I felt. No hat, no frock-coat, no tool pack in its place over my shoulder, no lantern-pole.

No Nardo, no Venz, no Mudeye, no...

'Little under-equipped, Kass? Don't worry, we knew you'd need tools and I wasn't sure how many of your own you still had.' Edzon handed me a satchel-pack of dirty yellow plastic weave. There was a slim little stub pistol in a loop on the side and I could see the grips of tools poking out from their sheaths under the flap. Smaller, lighter than mine, for smaller, lighter hands.

'That's from the other dead one. You know, the woman, the stabbed one. She went last lightson in the Cyclops Square doc's rooms, they say'

Thamm. I hadn't even gone to sit by her bedside.

Edzon didn't see or didn't get it or didn't care. Thoughts of my forehead and his nose again. Oordell had already disappeared toward the girder in a whisper of coat. It was the Ratskin who saw it, and although he hadn't shaken my hand, now he gripped my upper arm for a moment.

'Mourn your companion for a few breaths if you need to,' he said, and left me there to mutter 'sorry' to the sad little pack before I slung it by my side and followed him.

THERE WERE CLIMBING gloves in Thamm's toolkit but they were so small I didn't even try to put them on. The whole expedition stopped to wait while the three of us went on ahead and so the whole alley-trail was full of silent, armed shapes watching me try to find some hand-wrappings by touch. I heard one mutter of 'lost your nerve, lamplighter?' in the middle distance and a small current of chuckling.

That came just as I got my hands on a pair of insulator pads and pride made me grab those out and use them to scale the girder. Once I was through into the ceiling crawlway I stopped again in the glow from Oordell's little bluelight to fasten them around my hands as well as I could. I wondered if the other two were wondering what sort of man they'd been stuck with. Anyone who travels in the Underhive keeps gloves or wrappings for places like, well, like the ladders and girders around Mirror-Bitten, where effluent drips have left hard, sharp, toxic crusts on things you might want to climb on. At least I'd put on my kneepads before I'd left my rooms.

Unreality swam over me again as I lit the bluelight away from the hole. How long was it since I'd woken up to the banging on my door? How long before that that I'd been lying under the puffballs looking right into the scaly's face? How long since I'd been standing next to Enning, reading WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH off a roadpipe wall?

It felt like five minutes and it felt like forever. I already had trouble remembering what Junktion had been like when a water flask was something you filled without thinking and you didn't see gun-muzzles in every shadow you walked past. When Nardo had been someone to drink with and chat aimlessly to about the price of ammo or the women we saw in the Greimplatz, not an awful, guilty responsibility waiting for me back in my rooms. When Thamm and Venz and Mudeye had been alive. When I could think about the town I lived in without that part of me whispering walk away from it all. You know it's best.

I needed something to distract myself, and I found it by straightening up too far. My head hit the rough ceiling and the borrowed autogun's stock scraped loudly along the rockcrete. Ahead of me the bluelight winked out and the other two waited in silence while my heart and my breathing slowed down and I lowered myself into the full crouch I should have been in from the first. None of us said anything, but I heard a slightly heavier

breath from ahead of me that I thought came from Runs-Touching-Shadows. It could have been amusement or exasperation or contempt. Then the little glow reappeared down in front and we started moving again.

This space hadn't been built as a crawlway, just an empty layer between two levels, for access or to separate two zones or just one of those meaningless, forgotten little pockets you find all over the Underhive. It was no longer the wide space it must have been built as; roof-falls and collapses had made a maze of it. We followed paths and patches of bare rockcrete and picked our way over scatters of rubble that rocked and ground under our feet, zigzagging and turning in directions that seemed arbitrary to me but that Runs-Touching-Shadows made with quiet confidence. The air smelled of rockcrete dust and the rubble and floors we passed were as bald as Oordell's scar-ripped head. No lichen. I wondered why that-

No. Keep concentrating. A second later we stopped abruptly and Oordell crouched down and motioned us back. Heart in my mouth, I backed up and watched him.

I saw now why Oordell had been in the lead and not the ratskin. The jiggle-plate under the rubble we'd been about to cross was apparent when he put the blue-light right next to it and pointed, but I never would have spotted it on my own. The impressed breath from Runs-Touching-Shadows meant I wasn't the only one.

Oordell half-turned to us and crouched with his arms and legs oddly spread; after a moment I realised that the pose fanned his coat out so the bluelight wouldn't be visible to anyone beyond us. He pointed at me and made a couple more hand gestures until I saw what he wanted and untied one of the insulator pads from my hand. Then I held the bluelight for Oordell as he hunched over and Runs-Touching-Shadows sttaightened up - nearly all the way, he wasn't tall - to scan around us with a heatseer monocle.

Oordell's hands moved as quickly and surely as mine, clearing the plate so he could get at it and then neatly trapping the wobbling trigger so it couldn't tip and close the circuit. A tilt of his head showed me where he'd spotted the shrapmines wedged into cavities in the rubble. I shuddered, he

grinned at me. Then he pulled a right black hood up out of the collar of his coat and over his head, took his light back and we moved on again.

THAT WAS ONLY THE first one. We had another shrapmine buried in the dust, then a tripwire that would have yanked a pair of scavvy-style tox-bombs onto our heads. Three times we found spines of tox crystal, harvested from the edges of chemical pools and filed boot-piercingly sharp, hidden in dust-drifts. Oordell dealt with the traps, and Runs-Touching-Shadows' instincts steered us around the places where the rubble was so thick that a trap could be too well-hidden, or that was so unstable that we couldn't cross it silently.

After what felt like hours, Runs-Touching-Shadows led us to the lip of a cavity in the floor. We hadn't been over the alley-road for some time: now we were over the giant pits and forests of support pilings that held up this part of the Underhive. I gulped as I looked over the edge. I could see floors and catwalks underneath us but there were places where the drop just went down and down. I wondered if it were possible to fall from here and end up splashing down in the Sump. Then I swatted the thought from my mind like a man fending off a poisonous insect.

The chasm we were standing over, and the rockcrete-and-girder crag in the middle of it, was called Mirror-Bitten. The crusts of chem-crystals that grow in so much of the Underhive had almost covered the crag here. Brightly reflective and razor-edged, they could deliver a wound as deep and infectious as the teeth of the great flocks of carrion-bats that infested the chasm further down. The settlers who'd founded the holesteads here had found that out early, and the name had stuck.

Covering the top of the crag was not a single town but a patchwork of them, although how anyone could live in all that nerve-numbing empty air I couldn't guess. They were mostly just fortified, glorified holesteads like Dripdown, Hanson's Hole and Shyaway, clusters of little habs and shacks clinging to the crumbling rockcrete or spreading along giant horizontal struts or chopped into the rockcrete of the pilings themselves. One- or two-family affairs, harvesting the moulds and parasitic creepers off the superstructure that went into their famous liquor-stills. I could make out

dust awnings, firepits and algae vats, fungus gardens, fermenting stills, the holesteads themselves.

That dark 'stead by the low corner of the piling was Hanson's Hole. I could only make it out at all from the vestigial rot-glow from under the thicket of man-sized waxsweat mushrooms next to it. Dripdown was on the far side of a highstump of pillar, hard white lamps on every building shining defiantly into the darkness. Shyaway was an insane knot of struts and supports bridging a pair of wide walkways, always being stripped and rebuilt, the lichen they farmed furring the bulkheads inside the collars of fencing and gates that each strut wore to mark their boundary.

These were tough places. No way were all the traps we'd passed put up just to protect Heliko. Any number of gangs and gunnies would be prepared to fight for Mirror-Bitten liquor instead of paying for it. Dripdown and Mash Pit had both changed hands violently in the time since I'd come to Junktion, and there had been at least one failed coup at Hanson's Hole. Word was the families all kicked in to trap and guard the place, working it so that no one family had a clear route in so no one family could betray the others.

The last trap was a deadfall that would have dropped an acid-bomb out of a papered-over nook in the ceiling had we kicked the hidden magnet switch. We had only spotted it because the bluelight had chanced to cast a shadow Runs-Touching-Shadows thought shouldn't be there, and it had taken Oordell and myself ten minutes to disarm. By the end of it we were both sweating and shaking from having to hold the trap parts in precise positions while Oordell jammed and gummed them in place. I was nervous. Some time, it stood to reason, we were going to come to something he didn't spot or couldn't take apart. I couldn't help thinking that not too many people who ever tried this on the Mirror-Bitten booze-farms ever came back. Certainly at least some of them had been as good as Oordell was.

But most people who tried this on the booze-farms were after the farms themselves, and we weren't. After the acid-mine we started to find more and more pits in the floor like that first one, giving us a view of the girders that crisscrossed the giant cavity Mirror-Bitten stood in. Then we began seeing holes filled with trip-webs, or lined with wireweed that was too regular to be natural, or points of red light on the ceiling that meant there

was a trip-beam hooked up to screamer alarms or an automatic gunnery rig down below. It was only going to get deadlier from here.

So we backtracked, carefully surveying the untrapped holes. Breaking into Mirror-Bitten and storming the little holestead of Walking Man was for Wilferra's gang-and-gunny circus. I didn't need to walk in their gates. I didn't even need to get right across this garden of deathtraps. I only needed to get to their juice supply. When Runs-Touching-Shadows spotted a pair of pale stones in the bluelight that turned out to mark a jutting stub of metal, we knew we were almost there.

RUNS-TOUCHING-SHADOWS slid through the hole first, wrapped hands now also coated in patches of carefully looped spider-cord to help his grip. He lay on the gritty rockcrete and oozed over the lip of the hole like a snake, heat-goggles bulging from his head.

I lay next to Oordell at the edge, and reminded myself to breathe as he hung by his hands over the drop. If he hung there long he might be seen or his grip would tire, if he moved fast he'd be seen for sure. Lean muscles bunched in his arms and shoulders as he moved carefully from handhold to handhold to the chutes.

Ice-In-Her-Hand, the other ratskin, had described them to me on the walk. She had hunted face-eaters and macroscorps through them, and told us they'd take the weight of three men. She wasn't willing to hazard more than three, and apparently Wilferra had ranted obscenities at her for that: he had fancied the chutes as an invasion route.

They didn't look like much. I remembered the metal that had buckled under me in the rathole and thought about the drop that I'd be crawling over here. Then I went to work on swallowing my heart back down to where it ought to be and watching Oordell pay out to Runs-Touching-Shadows's belt.

Then he was there. The ratskin jacknifed up and got a leg on firm footing, then the other, then carefully released his hands from the pits in his ceiling, our floor. I could see him smiling to himself and shrugging the strain out of his shoulders and arms.

I could do this. I blew out a breath, then at Oordell's nod I reached out for the line and slid out of the hole as Runs-Touching-Shadows had done.

The cord bit painfully into my wrapped hands as I hooked my legs over it. No problem. I'd done this before. Never over a space like this but screw that, spit it, never mind it, I'd done this before and I just needed to keep my hands and feet moving on the cord, Oordell had it and knew what he was doing. I looked down along the line and saw Runs-Touching-Shadows wedged into position, keeping the line fast at his end, and I moved a little bit faster. Part of my brain was still howling over the drop underneath me, but I drowned it out and breathed and finally, beautifully, I was off the cord and sitting on metal again.

The chutes hung from the rockcrete ceiling from thick metal pylons, twisting and joining and splitting like water-worms, turning right-angles to plunge down the sides of stanchions or swooping away into the dark. It was the stubs of their mountings, emerging from the rockcrete above us, that Runs-Touching-Shadows and Ice-In-Her-Hand had marked for her hunting expeditions. Rats alone knew what they'd used to carry.

Two roads came out to connect Mirror-Bitten to the rest of the Underhive. I knew there was a narrow, dew-slippery path down the far side of it, down to a causeway across an effluent river before you started up the bat-infested trail to Fume Pass. The other was the bridge that shot out across the chasm to disappear into a hacked-out hole in the rockcrete and join the trail to Junktion - where the town fathers' army was waiting. Triangulating from the bridge and the biggest 'steads, I picked out the strings of yellow lights and the cooking-fire glow that marked out Walking Man. Not much to look at. A hole dug into the slope of the piling, a shelf of floor and overhanging shelter jutting out from it. A row of stills under the lights and the gleam of metal from the dusty patch of ground in front of the house: the cellar where they were soon going to wish they'd never hidden Garm Heliko.

I was surprised by the sudden surge of relish I felt as we slithered along the top of the chute. I hadn't exactly felt like shedding a tear for Heliko's gang after their raid on the cistern had gone wrong, but mostly my reaction to Yonni's account had been basic shock at someone trying a guns-blazing assault in the middle of a settlement - the kind of thing that'll get a price on your head from city to sump. But I found it hard to resent him for trying.

Runs-Touching-Shadows took the lead now, alternating between his heatseers and a little wormglow scope, that picked up the light it saw and brightened it for the eye looking into it. He was scanning for sentries, movement in the 'steads. The more often he scanned, the more confident his movements got and we made good time.

The only reason I could have for that sudden hate for Heliko was that he was concrete. He was a face I could put on everything that had gone wrong in my home town since the raid had come down. He wasn't a town father that I owed a job and water ration to, and he wasn't some yapping scavvy or a faceless water-mUgger in a Junktion alley. He was totally hateable, real and human and all the fear and anger was starting to earth itself through him.

As Runs-Touching-Shadows led us around the curve of a stanchion to where the chutes dipped and tilted into Minor-Bitten, I realised with a queasy certainty that was surely how the rest of Junktion felt about the lamplighters. At once the relish was gone.

'Lamplighter spies get what they deserve', I thought to myself and began to belly-slide down the top of the chute.

Nothing is easy. I wanted a nice easy slide and so, of course, the metal here was so rust-roughened we had to walk our way down on hands and feet. The flat part hadn't been this bad. Maybe the holesteaders had poured something out to make it harder to move on. I'd noticed they'd shot to ribbons all the chutes that went over Mirror-Bitten itself.

We were well below the level of the holesteads when Runs-Touching-Shadows stopped us and rose up into a half-crouch. We waited for a moment while he measured up the distance, then there was a pneumatic thud and a clink and he stepped calmly off the edge of the chute and swung into the girderwork on the grapnel line he'd fired. We waited in the dark. Oordell had his thermal cloak spread over him, but if someone looked over the edge of Mirror-Bitten with a heatseer I'd shine like a torch.

Two clicks of a tiny red message-light. We stood up. Runs-Touching-Shadows had carried one end of Oordell's clip-line across with him and now it snapped taut as he anchored it. Another few moments of hanging from a line, but now the dimness somehow made it easier to cross.

'Hope you got everything picked out, Kass.' I jumped as Oordell's voice came out of the gloom from somewhere behind his bluelight. It seemed

like a year since any of us had spoken a word. But I knew what to do now.

Most holesteaders don't have the knowhow to rig up a complicated tapping array. It's easier to just put what you want to see closer to your cable. That means that if you get the chance to look down on a settlement like I just had you can pick out the main juice lines pretty easily. I knew just where Walking Man got its juice and just what to do about it.

AND I WAS RIGHT, too. I love it when I'm right. I just took it like a job like any other, like I was swapping an insulator on the Guilders' Hill path-light, like I was tinkering with a bulb filament in Yonni's workshop, like I was...

Hah, like I was climbing up under a holestead where a bunch of thirst-crazy fugitives were hanging out, getting ready to cut their juice so a small army of nutso gang-thugs my town had hired could shoot them in the dark.

Fine by me. I had (a dead woman's) tools in my hands again and I was spitting delighted to be using them. I was damn near humming as I walked up and down the struts, using Oordell's glimmering bluelight to track the juice cables. The cable attached itself to the underside of an old crosswalk a couple of step-flights above me and where cables did that they tended to...

I was right again. It snaked up from under the crosswalk, up a sheaf of other old cables that ran along the railing - I hopped over a spot where the mesh of the walk had disintegrated from corrosion - and there it entered a sheaf of other cables and then, ah, yes. Here were the newer lines trailing down from the nearest 'steads, with their rougher bundling and hand-wrapped insulator jackets, and here was where they disappeared into the main cable-tap. The join was wrapped and secured as tight as they could make it, of course, and painted with a paste of 'shroom-sap and pulverised glass to make it hard to pull free. But there are plenty of times in a lamplighter's rounds where we need to kill the juice running through a cable, and there are all kinds of elegant ways. What did I look like, some cud-chewing Goliath heavy?

Running down one side of Thamm's satchel was a belt of conductor nails with insulated tips. I pulled one of them out by the bluelight - no point in risking the glare of a filament lamp until I was in the clear - and a striker.

I've got craftsman's hands and long thin fingers, but Thamm's kit still felt impossibly delicate when I held it.

The conductor went through the jacket with satisfying ease with each tap of the striker. There were other, dead cables strung in the same bundle, and all I had to do was-

I flashed the bluelight in the direction I'd left the other two. The light was designed not to carry far, but it went far enough for them to see it. I heard a grunt in the darkness. They had understood the warning.

-knock it through the cable and into one of the others and it would be in the bag. I lifted the striker.

Tik tik tik.

That wasn't me. What the hell? I frowned and drew the striker back for another tap. Tik tik.

My first thought was rats, and my hand was halfway to my pistol. But no, not rat claws or milliasaur feet, and I'd never met a lashworm that could live in metal and face-eaters didn't make that noise. It was a mechanical sound. I looked around.

It was Oordell. I could see him clearly now, because he and Runs-Touching-Shadows were outlined by the signal lamp that Oordell had unslung from his belt. They were shining it back the way we had come, up at the bridge.

But what were the others doing even within sight? Weren't they...

From above there were yells and gun-flashes and a klaxon that bawled for five ear-wringing seconds before it cut off.

Panicking, I gave the conductor nail another hit and that did it. There was a whumph of displaced power as the conductor punched out of the other side of the cable and fused to the smaller cords beyond it. The glow from the holestead above us cut out as if chopped out of the air with an axe. I smelled the stink of melting insulator around me, and from somewhere below us came weird purple flashes and spits and cracks of white sparks as relays and breakers deeper in the system blew.

There, they had their darkness. All clear, wait in the second line out of the action, my arse. Edzon and I were going to have words.

I started to retrace my steps back through the rats'-cradle of superstructure to where the others were waiting. At first I barely noticed the change in the air and I wondered why Runs-Touching-Shadows was

sprinting towards me so fast his feet seemed to skim above the bars, shouting. From behind him Oordell's voice in a frantic hiss.

'Hold on! Ware 'bove and below! Hold!'

There was a series of metal clanks from above us, and a sudden and human scream. It was a warrior, whose name I never learned but who had the bare torso and crested hair of a Steelhead and ring after ring of ammo bandoliers around his body. He'd been hit, hand flamer or hotshot. Fire billowed around his shoulders and chest but it hadn't gone deep enough to stop him screaming over and over again as he came down. He bounced, crashed and fell, and although the screams stopped when his head smacked against a crossbar his burning body kept pinwheeling down out of sight. Somewhere below us came a string of explosions, overlapping one another as they surged up past us, the sound and flash of his ammo and grenades cooking off.

Runs-Touching-Shadows was shouting again. He punched my chest and pointed his hand down and even though his speech was breaking in and out of Ratskin I got it. That change was audible now, the screeching and rustling. We raced for a wider crosswalk and flung ourselves flat, and in the dark I heard a whisper that must have been Oordell desperately wrapping his coat tight around him for whatever protection it would give.

From far underneath us, fired up by the power short and driven wild by the explosions, the carrion-bats came surging.

A TALK WITH GUILDER TAI

THERE WAS THE time a swarm of them swooped us in a caravan run at Skinned Knee, and a nest of them that got stirred up in a slag pit at Abednego. Those were bad enough. Carrion-bats are plenty bad when you can see them. Now all I could do was lie flat, listening to the biggest bat-swarm I ever heard, a Hive-ending army of swarms, come raging up at me in the dark.

They say the bats sing to the Hive ghosts in voices only the dead can hear, and those songs give them ghost-sight as they fly through the dark. They must have been crying to the ghosts for help then, because the air thrummed with the suggestion of a sound I could barely hear and which made the hair on my arms stand on end. Then there was the squealing as their ghost songs leaked down into sounds my ears could hear. I felt my face contort as the noise worked its way into my ears like a rusty wire. I wanted to get my hands loose from the mesh and clap them to my face, jam my fingers into my ears before those scraping voices somehow started digging into the meat of my brain.

Runs-Touching-Shadows was singing a ratskin counter-song, something with deep liquid-sounding words I didn't understand. There was another layer of sound under the screeching, too, the world-filling rush of thousands of wings. The bats brought a breeze up with them filled with a filthy, rot-musk-sweet stink. Carrion-bats trail bad dust and parasites like a mist and I didn't doubt the air was as full of that as it was of their bodies and noise. I didn't dare move, though; lift myself to give them a target. If it gets the angle right a carrion-bat can sweep by you and take off a joint of your finger without slowing down, leaving an infected cut that will never properly heal even if it doesn't kill you.

Oordell shrieked. I'll never forget the sound. We couldn't see what had happened to him in the blackness, but I think a bat got in under that coat

he was trying to cocoon himself in, got trapped inside with him and started bidng. That shriek was not a man frightened that he might die. It was a man realising he's already dead. From fear or blind instinct, he started running. We heard his footsteps and Runs-Touching-Shadows shouted something. Oordell didn't listen; maybe he was beyond listening. There were shots - I counted four wild muzzle flashes, in all directions, all painting Oordell against a curtain of matted grey fur and the glint of eyes and teeth. In the last flash he was on his knees, and then we heard him bounce off a spar below us in the dark. We never saw him again.

The shrilling changed note and suddenly Runs-Touching-Shadows was powering straight over me in a flat hunters' crawl, hissing 'follow!' in my ear. I went after him, so close he nearly kicked my head each time he moved his feet. There was no way to know where we were bound, but I couldn't lie underneath these monsters another minute. I had to move.

The Ratskin must have known what the change in their voices meant, because after a moment he shouted back to me.

'Follow me! Wait to see then follow! Gets worse here!'

I thought I could feel the skin around my ears writhing. Those screams. I gnawed on the inside of my mouth, trying to focus my mind away from the noise, and then Runs-Touching-Shadows was on his feet faster than I could believe and racing for a vertical girder. He'd seen what I hadn't: there were rough handholds crudely sawn into the I-beam edges up to a branch of the chute system, a round vent-pipe with, thank the ghosts, a grating hanging open..

When in danger like this, find a Ratskin and imitate him. They know. I launched myself after him, the bluelight making crazy strobe-frozen pictures: the bats, ripping jaws jutting from under their gnarled flat faces, wings outstretched. One was right in front of my face for an instant and then whispered past my ear, crying and shrilling, before I was able to cry out. In the next swing of the bluelight a smaller bat was hitting into the crook of my left elbow. Its fangs caught in the loose cloth of my shirt, and I raced up the ladder-girder with the fluttering, teeth-gnashing bundle at my arm.

Two more collided with my legs as Runs-Touching-Shadows pulled me up through the vent-grate. Snarling, he grabbed the bat out of the crook of

my arm, ripping free the wedge of cloth still around its teeth, wrung it skilfully to death and pitched the carcass back out through the vent.

We both lay there, getting our breath and listening to the storm of animals beat against the air outside our chute. I checked my arm underneath the sleeve that the bat had torn, by the bluelight and the cheap filament lamp that the Ratskin lit, but the skin of my arm was whole. Runs-Touching-Shadows nodded and shuffled down the chute, crouched almost to all fours under the tight metal roof. He reached a corner, moved deftly into the tight angle and grinned for me to follow him again. Then the side of his skull exploded as his head wrenched sideways and by the time the boom of the shot died away Runs-Touching-Shadows was already flat against the side of the duct, slumped down from a crouch to a sprawl with the grin still on his dead face.

Panic made me stupid. My hand clanged against the vent wall as I flailed over my shoulder trying to get at the autogun cinched to my back. The gun came just loose enough for the muzzle to wedge against the roof and shove me off-balance. I went from my hunched half-crawl down on one kneecap, to a quick spear of pain.

That cleared my head for a moment and made me think. Getting the autogun wasn't an option. I'd still be trying to wrestle it around to point the right way when whoever was down there gave me what he'd given the Ratskin.

I drew my las, and wrestling the long barrel loose in a tight chute was almost as bad. (Ever wonder why those little snubnose pistols are called 'tunnel-stubbers'? Or why gangers wear them in a little upside-down clutch-holster on their shoulders? I didn't after this.) After a moment I remembered some of Venz's old tunnel-fighting tips, dropped down on my belly, drew the pistol and passed it from hand to hand, turning it over when I had it in front of me, thumbing the arming-catch just as Garm Heliko came around the corner.

He didn't look much at first. Not the human devil I'd been building up on top of the man I dimly remembered. Just a stocky Underhive drifter with unruly black hair, cursing as he tried to force his way past the ratskin's tangled body. If Runs-Touching-Shadows had been any less lean Heliko would have been stranded there, but as it was he had his head and shoulders around the bend before he looked up and saw me. By then I was

spread out full length and carefully sighting along my las, using the bluelight to aim for his left eye. Then he fired his tunnel-stubber.

I'd taken my time because I'd thought he couldn't possibly work his hand around to the angle to shoot at me, and of course he didn't. He just fired down and let the bullet skim and bounce down the chute. He didn't need to try to bounce it into me - just the very presence of the ricochets made me forget my shot and duck. I felt the bullet a hair's breadth away from my forehead as it whined by, spanked off the metal and stung my calf then ricocheted away down the vent. I yelped at the pain and the reflex jerk snapped yellow lasbolts into the top of the pipe and scarred the metal red-hot.

Heliko was all the way around the corner, the eyes on either side of his sharp nose as hard as chisels. He was blood-blotched, not all of it Runs-Touching-Shadows'. His gunbelts and bandoliers were all on and loaded, and he grabbed for one of them now.

'Tox bomb, lamplighter!' he shouted at me. His voice filled the vent walls like the gunshots he'd fired. 'Breakable as a bastard! Don't think I won't crunch it, got nothing to lose!'

He probably didn't even have it, I decided later. Who'd fling himself into a narrow pipe with something like that in a bandolier pouch where it could shatter against the walls with any movement? But the memory of the tox-bombs landing among the Curse convoy was still vivid and so the threat did what he needed it to: I went sprawling back along the chute, slithering down it while Heliko shoved past the ratskin's body and came after me. I still had the bluelight gripped in my left hand and it flickered back and forth as I moved, making Heliko a shadowy growling shape in the dark.

I snapped off a shot toward the sounds and the shape. After-image danced in my vision and Heliko roared. I'd aimed down the middle of the chute - I had to have hit something. But then another shot skated down the vent roof just above my head and in ducking away from it I half-pitched back through the open grating and hung by one hand, the bluelight dropping past me to clank on the metal below. Instantly I could feel the soft impacts as swarming carrion-bats crashed into my dangling, kicking legs.

I tried to drag myself into the vent again but suddenly there was a hand, strong and warm and hard with calluses, planted over my face with a

finger in each of my eyes, shoving me back. I growled in protest and tried to hang on but then something metal and foul-tasting started trying to work its way into my mouth: the barrel of Heliko's tunnel-stubber. I twisted my head, cried out and let go.

I dropped through near-total darkness full of screeches and wing beats. The blackness made it seem like longer, like floating, and then I crashed onto my back and shoulders, the autogun underneath me. The hit smashed the wind out of my lungs and the wits out of my head.

The shrieking of the bats might have lessened a little, or I might have blacked out for a moment. After that moment I was lying there conscious again, trying to heave breath into my lungs by main force, willing my body to hoist itself up. I heard Heliko coming down the handholds I had climbed up minutes ago and then he hopped off the lowest one and landed with one foot full on my chest, slamming me back down.

It was the second physical shock to my system, or it was the sound of him laughing as he ducked under the swarming bats and crab-walked away, but suddenly my breath and movement were back and I was sitting up. My hand had stayed locked on the grip of the laspistol through the fall, and now I shouted with anger and squeezed the trigger.

Bats bayed as a fan of lasbolts burned the air over Heliko's head, lighting up his bent back and the outlines of the mangy bats that were circling him. My third shot punched one out of the air a hands-breadth over his shoulder and my fourth skewered two in front of him.

Heliko fired three wild shots over his shoulder to spoil my aim before I could readjust it. He must have used the muzzle-flash to check his footing, because in the blink of light from the lasbolt I answered with I saw him leaping into space.

He didn't fall. He didn't die the way Oordell had. I saw gun-flashes again, and heard him shouting, not screaming, shouting oaths and obscenities at the bats around him. His voice and those gunshots moved, dropped and receded as though he were running, then jumping, then falling, but I never heard a death-cry. Just the ever-fading echo of his roaring voice gradually sinking away into the blackness and the rushing of wings.

It was Ice-In-Her-Hand who came climbing down through the girderwork to find me.

BY THE TIME I eventually climbed up into Mirror-Bitten, the holestead of Walking Man was almost gone. I walked through a mosaic of torch beams thrown by the laughing, hooting gangers, lighting up the smoke from the burning holestead and lichen beds. Every second Firebrand I passed seemed to have a hand flamer or a bandolier of scarlet hotshot shells, and the Steelheads were toting giant hammers that even their heavy bodies strained to swing, or long-barrelled autocannons, or thermal mines. Weapons to wreck buildings with.

'Here he is! Man who put out the lights!' It was Gruett of the Steelheads, brandishing a melta-gun over his head as though it were a sidearm. 'Get over here, little lamplighter! Seems you're some use in a fight after all!' The Steelheads around him sniggered rather than laughed. I started to notice things they were carrying: machine parts in slings and satchels, strips of fungus, trinkets that didn't look like anything a Goliath ganger would carry.

'Want to see it? He got away, I hear. Got away down the pipes. We cleaned the nest out, though, got them all except him. Vermin, little man, all of them vermin.' He dug his fingers painfully into my shoulder and steered me to the edge of a little shack-cellar. Take a look.'

There wasn't much to see. This was where the farmers of Walking Man had let Heliko and his allies lie low. He had had more hangers-on than he had used in the raid, either that or he had attracted more since. There were at least a dozen corpses in there, burning with grudging yellow flames. Through the smoke I saw Hetch of the Firebrands standing on the other side of the hatch, flamer at the ready to freshen up the blaze. He looked at me, impassive under his heavy mask. The stink of burning meat didn't seem to bother him.

'Little false wall down there. Whole other room and a flue down to the tunnel levels and all sorts of little surprises. Would've thought our little pet Ratty-skins would have sniffed 'em out or something. They like rubbing those little noses of theirs in the dirt, don't they?' That did get the other Goliaths guffawing.

These little scummers were all over the place. You should've seen them, lamplighter, soon 's the lights went out and they didn't have the stabbers to spot us coming over the bridge they went aaaww! Aaawww!' Gruett

flapped his hands in a parody of effeminate panic, and his gangers laughed again.

'Shoulda seen the flapheads go in, too. Turn out to have a bit of guts to 'em, who'd have thought?' I looked over at Hetch. If he registered the slur he didn't react to it. 'They're something to see with their blood up. Better be careful of them, Kass.' Meaty fingers fell on my shoulder and dug in again. 'But he's got a way of worming out, hasn't he? Heliko. Got a way of slithering out of trouble like a little worm. Good job a worm like that never crossed paths with a good solid Goliath man. We'd have seen to him.'

Gruett's other hand chopped hard into my kidneys and I gasped, falling to my knees, the side of my body lighting up. The Steelhead trod hard on my ankle, twisting it painfully and pinning my foot to the ground.

'Except I hear tell he got past you and away, you litde toad, so I think it's about time for you to start watching yourself. I don't like your skinny little techy hands any more than I like your little rat-face.' An open-handed clout. I could reach for a belt-knife, but I had seen the meshmail covering Gruett's gut and thighs, and the dozen armed Steelheads behind us. 'Seems to me my men are going to give you a little reminder each time they see you around Junktion from now on. Nobody likes you in Junktion. Not even the Heliko worm, the way I hear it.'

The final hit was to my temple and left me lying next to the corpse pit with my head ringing. I waited a few shallow, nauseous breaths and then stood up. I wished

I hadn't noticed that several of the corpses in the burning pit were very obviously not gangers. However many families had run this stead before now, they didn't any more. They didn't exist any more. I suppose I shouldn't have expected the Junktion gangs to do anything else.

IT HAD TAKEN HOURS for the makeshift Junktion army to get on the road and start for home. These people didn't feel they'd come to do a job of work, the way that most of the town watchmen did. When it came to battle they were still gangers, and so after the battle they did what gangers did: they celebrated.

It had started with the Walking Man liquor stash of Second Best and Halftooth. The Steelheads had already started on it by the time Gruett and I had our conversation by the fire pit, and as the flames died down their spirits fired up more and more. Up by the boundary fence, Volk's Firebrands were being led in some kind of service by Volk himself. I couldn't hear the details, but there seemed to be a lot of shouting and raised fists and shooting of flamers and pistols into the air.

It wasn't too hard to see what was coming, and by the time the first punch-up started - two Steelheads with ferocious facial piercings and chain-bracelets punishing one another with great haymaker swings and no thought to finesse - I was slipping away to join the second tier of the expedition. The tier I was supposed to have been in for the whole fight. I was almost too tired to be bitter about that. Almost.

The real Junktioners, the people I'd walked here among, not the bloody ganger blow-ins, were trickling back into the Junktion roadpipe. Just another bunch of dejected shapes along a roadside. Not many to count, and not much to look at. The contrast with the boisterous Goliaths and shouting Cawdor was painful.

I found Edzon in the middle of the mob, crouching on his heel and chewing a piece of mushroom-rind. Edzon who'd told me that I'd be well away from all the shooting and had nothing to worry about. I stood over him, considered bouncing his head off the roadpipe wall with my boot, then sat down next to him instead. Funny how my hands kept twitching to smooth out my coat and tilt my hat although I didn't have either any more. I missed my coat and hat.

He took out a water-flask and shook it, but from the sound it was almost empty. He gave me a doleful look and shoved it back inside his jacket. The smell of smoke wafted over the bridge.

'How much water do you think they'll find?' I asked, eventually, for something to say. Edzon shrugged.

'Wasn't one of the bigger 'steads but who can say what their stash was like? People have finally been waking up to the idea that drinking liquor dries you out faster than it fills you up. Took about a dozen deadies in the booze-holes in the 'platz to, you know, make that point properly. So word around the bunkerhouse was that Mirror-Bitten was having a little more

trouble moving its stuff than usual. Maybe that's what they're loading up on.'

'That and the gifts,' came a voice from over us. Guilder Tai was still wearing his grey and black outfit. In the bad light it looked as though his face and medallion were floating in the air. Had to be an effect he'd tried for and practised, the pompous spitsmear.

I had an idea what the 'gifts' might be, and I was right.

'The holesteaders around Mirror-Bitten have got the message,' Tai went on. 'I've been watching them bring down bottles and food packets. They're not very gracious about it. Most of them seem to prefer putting something down at the boundaries of Walking Man and then running off.'

'You know perfectly spitting well why they're doing what they're doing, Tai,' I shot back at him, 'so why don't you stop insulting them and us by being all coy about it?' One of Tai's eyebrows curved up, and Edzon's gaze was suddenly captivated by something between his boots.

There was a moment, another, then Tai shaped his face into a smile.

Would you like to walk down the roadpipe with me a way, Kass? We can talk for a while until the whole expedition makes a start back. How about it?'

I'd always thought people only did it in jokes, but Edzon was actually shuffling away to put distance between us.

What the hell. I was Junktion's one and only lamplighter (one and only working lamplighter, sorry Nardo) so what was he going to do? I levered myself up off the floor and wiped my palms on my pants as we started down the roadpipe. I plodded. Tai sauntered. It hadn't been so long since I used to walk like that. Everybody around Junktion knew me. Kass with his hat and his tool pack and frock coat. I had a feeling I was a different Kass now.

And after what Guilder Tai told me, I knew I was a different Kass now.

PLANS AND MANOEUVRES

TO THIS DAY I don't know who else Tai told, if he told anyone. There were some people I let it out to, long afterwards, very carefully, and for a long time I didn't dare drink hard for fear of what might spill out when the Wildsnake was crawling down me.

On mat long, dred, head-hanging walk back from Mirror-Bitten, I didn't tell anyone. I didn't speak to anyone. I'd given back the clunky unfired autogun and only carried Thamm's half-size tool pack over my shoulder but it felt like more than that on my back. Felt like dead weight. Dead. Once I thought I heard Tanny's voice somewhere in the walking column but it was nothing.

It wasn't my fault. It couldn't be my fault. How could anyone know that some man, some... bastard... some...

Another voice in my head now. Not Tanny, Guilder Tai.

'I HAVE THE FEELING that you're all out of pleasantries, Kass. You always had a reputation as an easygoing man who kept his head down and did his job. I have to say you're not quite what I expected.'

Classic Guilder talk, lofty and amused. The way you talk when you know you're outside every Underhive law and a town's ransom will go on the head of anyone who so much as scratches the back of your hand.

'It won't exactly be any great secret, Kass, but I feel kindly disposed enough to warn you since we're, you know, two grown men of the Underhive putting our cards on the table. Or are cards an unwise thing to bring up, given your reputation there as well?' He laughed at his own line, light and pleasant and amiable. 'But things are going to be different. They've been changing in Junktion ever since Thaki sent that punitive raid down the Well and they're going to change more. You strike me as a man who can go with changes. You just keep your head down and do your job,

don't you Kass? When there's trouble going down you just walk away from it. It's what everyone tells me you're always harping on about.'

'If we're putting cards on the table, Guilder Tai, how about you stop just fanning yours about in the air?'

'Ah, directness. Well. You can probably guess at the changes I'm talking about.'

I must have said something aloud. Tai gave me an odd look and went on talking.

'Getting the Firebrands and the Steelheads in here was stupid, at least for the town fathers. Those people aren't going to settle for a chip every few lightsons and a water stipend. Change number one. Gruett and Volk are going to be town fathers after today. Won't be a question about it. Once word gets out that Wilferra and Stope were too frightened of the gangs to order them home straight away that'll tear it.' He caught my eye. 'You didn't know that? Wilferra tried to order Gruett away from his booze-up and crawled away minus three teeth. The Goliaths weren't so drunk that Wilferra's bodyguards felt up to taking them on. Why do you think everyone's out in the roadpipe waiting for this to blow over?'

I didn't answer. I remembered what Yonni had told me about Stope. He'd found his interests matched the Firebrands' for an instant and thought that that had made them friends.

'That's why I applaud the intelligence of the holesteaders back there. They made sure the gangers knew they were going to roll over. The Junktion gangs are going to get stronger and they're going to find uses for that strength. The Berserkers and the Curse are both high on the list, Kass. After that they'll turn their attention nineward and go after the Snaptooths, the Blue Vipers and the Razors. They don't like the idea of anyone near here being able to challenge them.'

'What about the water?' I asked. Tai laughed again and clapped my shoulder.

There's nobody in a rat's run of here that can get that water plant at the Deep running again, Kass. Believe me, it's true. Don't think your town fathers haven't tried. That was what got my attention uphive. Frantic messengers running all over the settlements offering any price you can name. Parts for the little stills aren't so hard to come by, but machinery

like what was in the Deep? Machinery that can keep the water in the veins of more Underhive than you can walk through in a dozen lightsons? No.'

I remembered Safine talking about how deep and how far the Dry Season ran. How many outlets and hidden streams those pumps had kept fed. How had we ever let them run with just a handful of bored guards? But it hadn't been my job. I was just a lamplighter. I fixed things and kept my head down. That was what I did. I couldn't be expected to...

I STOPPED THINKING about it and just walked - head down, one foot ahead of the other in the dust. I'd just done my job. That was all. How was I supposed to know? I tried to walk away from the knowledge of what had happened, just walk away, but of course it followed me, stayed on my shoulders and in my brain.

We came down to the twelveward gate along the long fungus-thatched tunnel that sank into the floor outside the town walls, with its sap-tacky decking and the long stripe-lamps that Nardo had been so good at stripping down to keep working. The tunnel came out on the far side of the gate and turned into Highborn Road, with its rustling dust-awnings overhead and clusters of reeking soup-kitchens. As we started down the road I watched the people around the gate and on the road itself scattering. Some were running, others shuffling backwards, wary, waiting to see what the gangers were going to do. Gruett and Volk as town fathers; the word would get out soon enough.

That sick feeling was coming back. I couldn't be in the middle of all this noise around all these people. I imagined the knowledge coming off my skin like steam. The memories of that power tap sat in the middle of my brain and burned. How could Edzon and Ice-In-Her-Hand and all the others not know whose fault it was? (It wasn't my fault. I got told to find a juice cable and tap it. How could it be my fault?) The secret must be shining out of me like a beacon-lamp. I hunched down. I thought I could already hear the yells of 'it was you' and the first blows falling on my shoulders and back.

It wasn't my fault. I told myself that over and again. But I still thought about that juice tap. High up in the

City the lights in a corridor start to flicker. A man whose manner and face I can only imagine snaps an absentminded finger.

'Do something about that, see to it'

And down the well come men in bronze armour.

'Hey you two, what's coming down? You see that?'

How could I walk away from Junktion now, knowing what I knew? Simple. I couldn't.

I couldn't walk away.

I peeled off from the column and half-ran to a hab-warren wall, held myself up by a hand, and this time I did vomit. Behind me Steelheads shouted laughter and then were ignoring me five seconds later. The Firebrands, bringing up the rear, marched past silently and didn't look at me from behind their masks. Nobody tried to make me stay with the column.

I leaned over the puddle of bile on unsteady legs until the last of them were past, and then I walked quickly away around the Black Pile to my rooms.

Over Greimplatz and Cyclops Square and along Highborn Road, the arc light gantries went dark and the ten-hour lightsout began. Nobody had given me any rounds to snuff the lights anywhere else, and it didn't bother me at all.

Nardo lay on my pallet. Every so often he would try to stretch his limbs and grunt and mutter from the pain. I had nothing much to offer except water. All my liquor was gone. When Nardo slept I cleaned and checked my laspistol, over and over again. I already missed the two-tone. I kept looking for it around the room and remembering it was locked away somewhere at the Gunnery. Remembering the look on Tovick's face on my last two visits. I'd lost his respect. I liked having people's respect.

That made me think of Tai, talking so cheerfully in the roadpipe.

'Nevertheless, Kass, there may be channels available. There are, you know, arrangements that can be made. It wouldn't be the first time that some of the old industrial plant around the Underhive has been rehabilitated. It isn't so usual this far down, but it's possible.' We were standing between the pools of dim, muddy, light, and Tai's voice was just floating out of a vague silhouette next to me. But I could tell he was wearing that amused expression. There wasn't much that the town fathers

could offer me to make it worth my while, but I expect my relationship to Junktion to be a little different from now on. More hands-on. Then it might be more worth my while to see what I can arrange,' he'd said, the anger already welling up within me.

I was trying to keep my breathing level and my hands unclenched. Why was he telling me this? The back of my mind was yammering again. Walk away from Junktion, Kass, time to walk away.

'Of course,' he said, 'when they take Shining Falls off the Curse they might decide that that's enough to keep them in water instead.' Tai chuckled as my head snapped around.

'You like the Curse, don't you, Kass? Well, they did rescue you, I suppose. And there's your rather well-known weakness for pretty faces. Don't get too attached, though. Gruett and Volk and I are going to be wanting a good tight hold on Junktion. Maybe clearing the Curse out and keeping our water coming in from Shining Falls will mean we don't need to repair the pumps at all.' He peered at me. 'Why act all shocked, Kass? Yes, I said "we", don't be stupid enough to think I don't have my own arrangements with the gangs. The

Guild will see better days out of Junktion with people we can talk directly to. Me, I say that ramping up the lift prices is a pikers' game. It's playing for toothpicks when you could be playing for hundredweight Guild chips.' And his voice was still light and pleasant, like he was discussing the odds on a bout at the Brass Pit or what breed of rat his meatcake had come from. 'Controlling the water, controlling the light, that's going to be the game. Control that and you control the trade. The old town fathers didn't get it. They didn't use it once it started, they just panicked like everyone else.'

It hurt to think about that conversation, but I made myself concentrate. They would control the lights, he had said. Control the water, and control the light. And Heliko's thugs had whittled the lamplighters down to one man. 'We thought we'd lost our last lamplighter', Stope had said to me in the Bunkerhouse. And Tai: 'Interview over, Last of the Lamplighters.' I thought about that until sleep crept up and took me.

I dozed on the floor while Nardo lay on the pallet. I don't remember if I dreamt. I woke up thirsty at one point and checked the flasks. Nardo hadn't drunk it all. He'd saved nearly two-thirds of a flask for me. I only drank a

little so that there would be some left for him. I was proud of myself for that. Then I slept again.

LIGHTSOUT ENDED. Ten hours of lightson, whatever that was worth with only the arc light arrays working. I supposed I'd have to go out and find out what the new fathers wanted me to do, if I wanted to keep my water ration. The thought of the new town fathers kept gnawing at me, distracting me while I tried to plan.

Nardo was well enough to sit up now. He sat and worked his arms and neck through circles, trying to feel where the worst pain was and get his blood going.

I sat across the room from him, wondering what to say and deciding nothing. He wasn't a child. He knew what he was doing.

When I realised I was staring at the water flask, hoping he'd see me staring and tell me it was okay to take some, I ground my teeth and went out. Knives in my belt and boots and sleeves, the laspistol sitting on the pallet next to Nardo. I could dodge and stab, he couldn't.

There was a crowd at the Gunnery now. I found a quiet corner and waited while Tovick sold weapon after weapon and reload after reload. He was charging more than I'd ever seen him do and nobody much cared. The only people who got the old rate were the Steelheads and the Firebrands, and when they were in the shop Tovick's face went tight and pale. The little flophair looked admiringly at the gangers while they leant over Tovick and slammed heavy hands down on the counter and laughed as they told him to knock down his prices.

It took twenty minutes for the shop to empty. Tovick set the flophair to sorting a bag of grubby stub shells that some salvager had brought in, and stared at me with a flat expression when I told him we needed to talk. He took me into the range and closed the door so we couldn't be overheard, and stood with his arms folded as I spoke to him. His body relaxed the more I talked and I left with the two-tone sitting on my shoulder and a lizardskin bandolier of reloads giving a pleasant weight to my steps.

OUTSIDE IN THE Greimplatz they had corpses to raise. Spiders-Fear-Him hadn't gone into the burning pit with the others: his body was being

slung in one of the gibbets by a pack of Steelheads. As soon as it had been raised, a crowd surged forward from the 'platz's edges and began hurling scraps of metal and rockcrete. Yellow Jancy, planted squarely on her cushion-blanket almost right under the scaffolds, began shouting with laughter as the bodies swayed in the floodlights, and still laughed as the things the crowd was throwing began to drop down around her. The strung-up bodies were long past knowing the people in the 'platz were taking their revenge, but nobody seemed to care. Nobody even seemed to know what the 'revenge' was for. There was a frightened, angry taste to the air. I wondered how many people were seeing the Steelheads up there in their minds' eyes.

Two of the Greimplatz arc lights were broken. None of the Steelheads said anything about it to me as they walked past me and away. Two of the awnings stretched over us were also broken, hanging limply into the 'platz. I could see dust from the Well falling past the broken lights down into the town.

I walked away.

YONNI WAS IN MY rooms when I got back. I sat down on the floor without a word and unloaded and reloaded my pistol and the two-tone. He had brought fungus jerky and dry meatcake that tasted of road-dust. It took all my effort - practically holding my mouth closed with my hands - to make myself stop before I wolfed the lot, and let Nardo eat what he needed. He went carefully, trying to ease the load on his cracked teeth and swollen tongue. Yonni had news.

There was no ceremony or formal announcement when anyone joined the town fathers. It was just something that happened. If you took over a room in the bunkerhouse and word went around that you were a father and none of the existing fathers did anything about it then you were in. Volk and Gruett had taken some of their chosen gangers and commandeered sections of the bunkerhouse. Word had gone around that they had joined the town fathers. None of the fathers were doing anything.

(We wondered about that last. Yonni had seen town father Brye carried out of the bunkerhouse doors with a hole in his skull, and town father Kannl had fallen from a high window-slot he'd never have fitted through

by accident. Stope was catatonic with shock and fright and nothing had been heard of Harmos.)

The two gang leaders had taken up places in the bunkerhouse in different areas of different floors. I wondered what that meant. There was talk that Guilder Tai had moved himself into the bunkerhouse too, instead of staying in the warrens of Guilders' Hill. Nobody had ever heard of a Guilder doing that before.

I didn't want to hear about Guilder Tai.

THINKING ABOUT Guilder Tai made me see the dark of the roadpipe in my mind's eye and hear his voice all over again.

'Control the light?' I had asked. My voice had been hoarse.

'That was my idea. Harmos was the one who thought of using you as spies, which was stupid. But once people were thinking that even Junktion's famous lamplighters couldn't be trusted any more, well, that was just another weak point to aim through. I didn't expect anything to happen so quickly after my people spread the news, but I was impressed with how efficiently Heliko put those hits together. Who knew the man had such leadership qualities?'

Every sentence was a taunt. I shook with the effort of standing still. Thought of the other lamplighters, battered and dead. Lamplighter spies get what they deserve. Tai had put the word out. Just to stir things up.

'Oh, come on, you must have known it was Heliko behind that.' Tai had misunderstood my expression. 'Didn't you see the stash that they dragged out of one of the sheds at Walking Man? Kegs of that ugly green glow-paint that all those idiotic slogans were painted in. Why Heliko's crew dragged it all the way out here I'll never know. Still, he served his purpose. Whittled the lamplighter crew down to one man in less than half a lightson. You're far more manageable this way'

I felt a cramp in my arm and wrist and looked down. My hand was clutching the grip of my laspistol. The light wasn't bad enough for Tai to miss the movement.

'You and I both know you don't have what it takes to do that, Kass. Shoot a Guilder in cold blood in front of witnesses? Every man back there knows

he'd be rich for life for bringing your head in along with the story. Whole settlements have been wiped out for less.'

'I don't like what you're doing to my town, Guilder Tai. I don't like what you sat in your rat-burrow on Guilders' Hill and planned for my town. You had all this thought up long before the raid, didn't you?'

Tai's laughter rang out again. Good happy laughter, a man who's been told a rather good joke over a drink with his friends.

'Planned? I planned this? What we did, Kass, was take advantage of an opportunity that was handed to us. The raid wasn't the start of some buried plan. The raid would never have happened if Thaki...' He stopped and looked at me again. 'But there's no way you could know, could you? I'd forgotten that. You really do think that the raid came out of nowhere. For nothing. You really didn't think of what you did, did you? I'm not talking about Junktion, Kass, I'm talking about you.'

There was something in his tone. Something like the outline of a spring-sheathed knife under the cloth of a sleeve, something like the rasp of a lashworm starting to uncoil in its wall-cyst. Suddenly I wanted more than anything not to hear what Tai had to say next.

'I've been wondering if you knew this, Kass, except that I don't think there's any way you'd ever have a hope of finding it out, and my only regret is that it's too dark out here for me to see your face when it hits you.'

He stood there at ease and waited, made me say 'Well?'

'You won't know Vlitz Thaki.'

The one who sent the raiders down.' It was a small pleasure, watching him start, but I relished it while I could.

'How- no, I used the name myself, didn't I? Clever Kass. Well, then. Do you remember going way up through the levels about, what, fifty lightsons ago? Big trip, it would have been. Big exercise. A power reroute, making a feed from some plant buried down Helmawr knows where-'

'Yes, I remember it,' I managed, grudgingly. 'Our power was browning out. We needed another feed and I told the fathers about that one.' I hadn't liked the trip. I hated sleeping rough. The whole point of lamplighting was to have my rooms in the settlement with its light and pallet. The Ratskin map showing safe boltholes to sleep in hadn't helped much.

'Go on, Kass.'

'It was a cable tap. A bigger one than I normally do.' It had been, too. More dangerous. The cable had run up the side of a shaft where the air had been full of the juice. You could feel it. The hair on my arms stood up when I'd climbed in. I'd been so tense I'd been cramping, and not just from the drop underneath me where I'd seen the glint of web and spiders' eyes. On the really big juice cables it doesn't need metal to jump down to cook you. Thin air will do fine once you get a finger close enough.

'No more than that? Funny thing about Underhivers. The pipes and cables you all tap, the stuff you ship uphive to sell, the stuff that,' he chuckled again, 'the stuff that falls back down on you. You never really think about it much.'

'I don't need to. I've never been to Hive City. I just do my job. That was the best cable.'

'Did you know it went to Hive City?' Tai asked. "You must have. Harmos told me he wanted to send you to cross-connect a set of old feeds near Twodog, and you said you could take some from that big Hive City trunk instead.'

I managed a nod. The Twodog feeds were closer but they were in far worse wild zones. Roughing it there would have been a nightmare.

At that point my hand was still on my gun. I decided to leave it there.

Then Yonni spoke again and my attention was back in my rooms.

YONNI SAID THERE would still be lamplighting work, and water stipends for the lamplighters, but the new fathers were planning a new proclamation. Most of the town would be kept in darkness. The big arc arrays would stay on all the time, but the rest of Junktion would get by on one lamp per street. Heatseers and darkvisors would be impounded if seen. Only the

Steelheads and Firebrands would carry them. I had been going to ask when my next lamplighting rounds would be, but that was a joke now.

We sat in silence for a while, and then I started to talk. I didn't tell them about Tai's power-tap story, but I told them everything else. The gangers' plans. Control over water and light, higher water-tithes and lower rations. Conquering Shining Falls to keep their own supply.

And there were other things the conversation turned to. I told them about my visit to Tovick at the Gunnery. They listened, solemnly, and Yonni left ten minutes later, full of purpose.

While Nardo slept, I cleaned the two-tone again.

DURING THAT LIGHTSOUT there was a shootout near Wilferra's garden compound. The rumours as usual were quickly exaggerated to the point of stupidity, but I managed to piece it together. Two of Volk's Firebrands had been on their way up the trail to lay claim over the reservoir at its top for Cawdor use only. They'd been too late. There were already four Steelheads guarding the compound, three more in the Spyglass tower and two at the base of the trail. Neither side would back down and nobody could say who drew first. One badly gut-shot Steelhead managed to drag himself almost to Wilferra's gates before he died and the other, bleeding, staggered up the trail as his gangmates ran down to meet him. They fired thunderous heavybore autogun bursts after the Firebrand who'd survived the initial exchange but by then he was a disappearing shadow. The other Cawdor was sprawled on the ground with half his head gone and his chest and belly las-burned almost to ash.

I'd seen this coming ever since the wrecking of Walking Man. I just hadn't expected it this early.

I kept at it, though. For next two lightsons I made sure everybody saw me all over Junktion. I went up the scaffolds that Heliko's men were hanging from and let everyone watch while I repaired broken arc lights. I told the fighters from both gangs that it would be stupid to let bandits get another crack at the reservoir the way Heliko had and spent four hours on top of the Black Pile, going over all the leads and fittings for the pintle-lights and floodlights there and doing what I had to with them. I even went to the liftport gate where I'd had my first run-in with the Steelheads all that time ago and did the same, working until lightsout on the gatehouse lamps and the parapet stablights. I mapped every circuit and lead and connection I made, and I made sure Yonni had copies of everything. My head was clear and my hands sure and firm on my tools. That whispering little voice telling me to walk away from Junktion was silent now. It knew what my plans were.

The gate was almost unguarded now, just a lazy Steelhead lounging on the roof of the gatehouse and a nervous townie on the parapet who wouldn't meet my eyes. With the gangers spending their energy on one another in the town, the crowds outside the gates were starting to grow again - refugees, thin, water-starved, sitting in circles. Their heads were bowed and their postures hopeless. Not too many spoke or looked up. They weren't mobbing the gate any more, this was just as good a place as any to wait for the thirst to finish them.

I kept my mouth shut and finished my job. There wasn't much time.

AFTER NEARLY TWO hours of searching and half a flask's worth of water-bribes I found Drengoff the poacher sprawled face down in an alley at Highdome. I didn't have time to fetch Yonni, so I got him to my rooms the way Yonni had got me, his arm draped over my shoulder and his head hanging down in front of him.

He was dehydrated and half-delirious, and we found wounds on his chest and down his ribs. We wondered how he'd got them, but who knew? Thirst was biting, violence was in the town's breath and brain. Tai's notion that Junktion would be easier to rule this way would have been funny if I hadn't had to live through it.

Nardo tried to talk to Drengoff as best he could while I cleaned off the wounds with a precious splash of water that I soaked into a strip from my old coat. It took him nearly two hours to wake up, hungry. About a heartbeat after he'd finally sat up and looked beadily about him, the last of the meatcake and a chunk of jerky I'd had my eye on were gone. The din as he slurped down his second - and our second-last - cupful of water seemed to rattle the walls.

Nardo was quick and hid the flask, so Drengoff wiped his lips and stretched flat on the floor and wanted to talk. That was fine by us.

AN HOUR AND A HALF later I walked Drengoff out of my rooms and back to Highdome. We walked slowly at first, but he stepped livelier as that little bit of water brought back his spirits. I hoped it was enough. It would have to last him quite a bit further.

We parted at one of the little slot-doors in the wall below Highdome, where the mess of sixside alleys fetched hard up against the town walls. It was usually a crowded part of town, rowdy with the overspill from the rookeries. It was quiet now and the dust Drengoff and I kicked up settled quickly as we walked.

There was only one Firebrand walking the wall above us, a scrawny kid I didn't recognise carrying an autogun. An elaborate sighting monocle was built into one eyehole of his full-face black mask. He wasn't interested in Drengoff going out through the gate, just in the streets behind us. I guessed he was looking for Steelheads. That we were coming down the alley and opening one of the slot-gates was something he seemed utterly indifferent to. That was useful to know.

Before Drengoff left I gave him an autopistol that Tovick said was one of his best, a boxy, sturdy Orlock piece with two matt-grey plastic magazines. The weapon disappeared under his jerkin as he stepped through the gate. Then he winked at me and patted the carry-pouch at his hip as I swung the creaking gate closed and locked him out of Junktion. Behind me the arc lights were dimming.

Lightsout.

THAT NIGHT, I couldn't sleep. Guilder Tai's voice over and over again in my head.

'Vlitz Thaki,' declared Tai as though the past minute of conversation had suddenly un-happened, 'is the Mercantile Guild Senior Deputy Comptroller of Satrapies for the Eighty-First Subdivision of the Hive City of our all-providing Hive Primus. You don't know what half of that means, but it doesn't matter. Thaki is a Guilder like me, belonging to no House. I report to men who report to him. Not a powerful man in the scheme of things, but to you, powerful enough.'

He looked at me to see if any of this was sinking in.

'Master Thaki spoke with me when 1 travelled uphive last. The master and some of his advisers within the Guild with whom I'm on good terms. Apparently they had a little irritation. Their lights started flickering. All the lights in the Guild chambers. Thaki's counting-houses are in the Orlock quarter and the workhouses around him were bright enough. The Guild

takes its juice from separate lines, you see. Ones that go down into the Underhive.'

I thought I could see the shape this was taking. I remembered Nardo and I, sitting silently and thinking about that way to die, the second when you knew there was no escape from what was about to happen and all you could do was watch the grenade roll toward you...

The funny part is, I know for a fact that Thaki didn't say a word about Junktion. He doesn't know your town from the hole he craps into, Kass. All he said - are you listening? - all he said was "do something about that, see to it". That was all. His artificers and techmen cross-fed some juice and stopped the lamps flickering, and then when they backtracked and found some Underhiver's bodged cable-tap Thaki's adjutant told one of his captains to make sure there was no more trouble from those inbred scum. It's how they all think of you up there, you know.'

The grenade was here, fizzing in front of my face, and there was nothing to do but watch as it went off...

'I don't think that the captain led the raid either, it wasn't really such a big deal.' Tai laughed again. 'It was one of his subordinates who came down your Well. I don't think Thaki even knows anything happened down here. His adjutant doesn't either, nor the captain. The only report that went back up the line was that everything was fixed, and Thaki's happy because his lights aren't flickering any more. That should mean something to you as a lamplighter, shouldn't it? The lights are running again. So it's all for the best.' Another laugh.

'I'm going to see how the party over in Mirror-Bitten is going, Kass, and when myself and the new town fathers are ready we're going to go happily back to Junktion, and if you want to get indignant about any of this then why don't you just have a think back over whose handiwork the whole mess was, back in the beginning? Do we understand each other?'

Humming to himself, Guilder Tai walked up the roadpipe. His shape swam into clarity as he moved under the light and then he disappeared through the cavity to the Mirror-Bitten bridge.

For a moment I thought I was going to vomit again, but the sensation passed. I stood there in the darkness until my legs went and I sat down hard, and then I sat on the roadpipe floor, my arms and face and mind stiff and numb.

Lightson.

I WASN'T LOOKING forward to going back to the bunkerhouse, but Yonni was going in there almost every day and I owed it to him to work up the guts myself.

Nobody challenged me as I walked to the doors, still broken from the raid. There were stringlights looped between poles around the house now, but nobody had seen to them and the bright necklaces of glare-bulbs were weaker, dimmer, gapped like broken teeth The space around the bunkerhouse had been eerie enough when it was empty of people, but now it was darker than I'd ever seen it. Keeping the stringlights running had used to be at the top of all our daily rounds, the town fathers didn't care what else had been going on.

Still, I wasn't frightened as I walked up the stairs to the Bootlickers' Gallery. I was even a little curious: I wanted to see if the house really had been divided into the armed camps that Yonni had described. But I never got that high up.

Town father Stope was sitting on the floor by the top of the stairs. If I'd wanted to walk up off the top of the flight and out onto the Gallery I'd have had to climb over his legs. On a good day his gross body at least managed to make him look powerful, frightening. Now he seemed rotten and melted, as though his flesh was about to run down his body and puddle on the floor around him. I could see ugly red scar-pocks over his ears now, where the inflammation had never settled: some time when he was younger he'd been attacked by sinker-worms. His breath wheezed and whistled.

'Kass, tell Volk you'll... you'll keep working. It's important, Kass.' He panted for a moment. 'Kass, they think the Steelheads are going... to...' He gulped. Try and get you. Just for their parts, of... Jun-Junktion. They say I'm to... deal... with you and...' He wheezed, and again. '...Yonni. They'll have the... Black Pile reser... voir soon and then they can... promise you...'

'Promise me water. What about you, Stope? Why are you out here? Won't they call an apothecary for you? Didn't the town fathers always have their own medicine men?'

'Killed him. Burned... medicine man.' Wheeze. 'Said he was... witchdoctor. Sinful. Trafficking with... unclean...' Stope flapped a hand at me. 1 got his meaning. They want to clean me, Kass. They want to... they think I'm...' Distress got the better of his breathing for a moment and he tried to grab my shirt-hem. I backed away a step and coolly watched him. Think I need... their kind of cleaning. Promising it to me like a., some kind... blessing. Like a favour. Think they're going to... help me...' I could imagined what they'd offered him: the same thing they did to themselves. Scourging and branding and scarring, fasting and bleeding themselves to the point of delirium.

If I took a good steadying grip on the railing I could deliver kick after kick to that fat flank. I wanted to lean into his face and scream 'What did you expect?! You decided they were your friends because you thought they could make you powerful and you got what you deserved, but you took all the rest of us with you! What did you expect?!'

Instead I thought of myself in that shaft, nervous because of all the juice thrumming under my fingers but happy because this power tap would take care of our problems for a year or five, what could go wrong? I stood over him and looked down over his shaking hulk of a body and waited for Yonni.

Stope didn't even bother trying to talk to Yonni when he came past, and the big man didn't look down at him. He just swung a long column-trunk leg over Stope's robe-skirted legs, then another, pushed past me and down the stairs. Brother Hetch came behind him, stepping over Stope with greater difficulty. His mechanical leg raked its foot along the swell of the town father's belly and made him squawk and pant all the more. Hetch had shucked his flamer, but the gun-rig he wore couldn't have been much lighter. A short shotgun hanging behind each shoulder, a brace of pistols at his hips and a belt of grenades across his barrel chest.

You've made the right choice to follow us, lamplighter Kass. Volk is very pleased. He's told me to monitor your progress. You're going to feel like a new man very soon. The rot will be burned out of you. It will hurt, but you'll be thanking us before you realise it.'

Card-player face. I looked at him.

'But for now, you work. That will do you good too. Be clear, you take orders from us, not from the Steel-heads. If you're as devoted as Yonni has

told me you wish to be then you'll not help them sink their hooks into this town any deeper. We've cleared them out of the bunkerhouse...'

Ah.

'...but they still control that reservoir and the sentry tower. They can see too much of what's going on. We have about half the gates each and, well.' He stopped. He'd been starting to tell me too much, I supposed.

Tonni says that the two of you have to work on the switching-hole where the juice lines meet.' I nodded. Card-player face. It was the story we'd worked out, although I hadn't counted on Yonni promising the Firebrands a convert to get them to swallow it. 'It's an important place,' he told me. 'It needs to be well kept. Our ability to control the stteets against the Steelheads is going to depend on the work you do there.' Because of course I really needed a lecture on what the spitting switching-hole did from a one-legged gang-bastard who was going to use it to turn my town into a battle zone. The card-player face was getting harder to keep up.

'Sir, we'd better be getting on,' Yonni said in the deferential voice he'd always used with the town fathers. The hole has not been attended to for some time with all the troubles, and we should-'

'Yes. You should, then. Now'

And the rat-turd clanked after us into the bunkerhouse equipment stash while we loaded up with components and tools. It was only a short walk from there into Long-Gone Circle and to the switching hole, but it felt longer under the eyes of the Junktioners who were trying to find comfort in the Circle's slightly cooler and moister air. It felt longer because of the Cawdor mask Hetch had given me to wear and held a gun in my face until I put it on.

THE SWITCHING HOUSE where we used our piecemeal knowledge of juice tech to redirect and balance the lines, and control the web of bodged taps and feeds that kept Junktion lit and humming. The first cross-switches had been set up in here before even Yonni had come to Junktion and the forest of cables had grown steadily ever since then. They grew out of the walls in humming bunches, knitted themselves into bundles or splayed apart like fingers, were strung on long racks or hung from the ceiling,

threading through sparking, fizzing switch-panels. Yonni moved through it all with easy confidence in spite of his size.

I'd been going to help, but Yonni's story was working better than he had planned. As I was bending to crawl under a rack full of inverters with a juicemeter in my hand, Hetch kicked me with his flesh leg and shook his head.

'Leave it. If you're going to be a disciple of the Redemption then you'll learn to comport yourself like one. You can learn from self-abasement but keep your pride. Let the people beneath you do the work that's beneath you. You'll learn the subtleties as you go on.' I set my head and my shoulders in what I hoped was a proper pose and wondered how long I'd have to keep this up for.

But for now the pose was useful, I told myself. Hetch's coming with us had made me nervous: a lot of the gangers who carry the flashier weapons are the ones who know their tech, and I had been thinking about traps and trick-shots I could safely try in here in case Hetch turned out to know more about what we were doing than we could allow. But a disciple was a good distraction for him. We stood together under the caged glare-bulb, Hetch occasionally giving me a comradely nod that revolted me. I was sweating under the mask, water I couldn't afford to lose, and my skin crawled at the mask's touch. I was an ace away from ripping it off my head and to hell with the deception when Yonni resurfaced from the cable nests with dirt on his hands and face.

Hetch just grunted as we walked out, but he paid attention as Yonni rewired the traps: the juice running through a strip of floor, the air-piston spikes and the choke gas grenade over the pressure plate.

This place should be guarded,' he said, 'not just trapped. It's a weak point. Volk will want a man here.' He looked at me. 'Kass, you'll stand guard. He will continue the lamplighter work. We may have to try taking this Black Pile by force soon. We're going to be stretched thin and the Steelheads will be looking for points to hit back at.' The man was clueless. Any one of the sprawled shapes in the greenish light of the Circle tunnel could be a Steelhead spy, or just someone who'd swap information for water. Hetch had been out in the badzones for too long to understand settlement ways. Good.

'Hetch, I can't stay here because we have uhhhn-' I doubled over the shotgun stock that Hetch had driven into my gut. The hit had amazing force for a movement I'd barely registered. As I toppled forward he grabbed a handful of hair and wrenched me half-upright again.

'What you will do is learn to obey joyfully. You were given an order by a Brother of the Redeemed House of Cawdor. Learn.' He let me drop to my knees and stood over me until I'd picked myself up. I went to the door and stood there with the pistol drawn. Yonni walked away down the Circle and, after a moment of staring into my eyes, Hetch spun and went the opposite way, back toward the bunkerhouse.

I waited until his footsteps had gone, then walked quietly away from the door. When I was sure I was out of sight in the gloom I ripped the Cawdor mask off my face, threw it into the dark and ran, gulping grateful mouthfuls of air.

BATTLEGROUND

I HAD TO MOVE. It was happening too soon. I didn't know what Drengoff was doing or where Yonni was or what was happening inside the city walls let alone outside them. Nardo could help, but he was a long way from fully healed. As I ran my nerves hummed and spat like the cables in the switching hole.

Which way back to my rooms, then, which way? Around the trail on the sixward edge of the Black Pile, where I'd be clearly visible from the Spyglass and the sight of me running might mean questions? But how suspicious was I? All the gangers knew Kass by now. Kass the lamplighter. Kass the joke who got pushed around by everyone and never answered back. It'd be a shame not to use that.

Or through Quackstown, then cut twelveward across Highborn and past the Brass Pit? More people, more mobs, more chances for things to happen. Much closer to where the Steelheads and the Firebrands had their front lines drawn. If Hetch saw me skipping his guard duty there'd be no 'harmless little Kass' crap to save me.

That was what decided it, and I came up one of the little boltholes out of Long-Gone and went at a quick clip along the shore of the canal. The bridges, which were supposed to be strung with bright lanterns at all times, were dark masses I could just pick out by the glow from the Greimplatz arcs.

I was passing around the spur of the Black Pile when the gunfire started somewhere in Quackstown. Loud and punishing, shots with enough grunt to them to make me flinch even from this far away. Goliath and Cawdor guns.

The Pile was dim enough that I was able to make out gun flashes. Nothing powerful at first, but then there was the chattering bellow of a

heavy stubber. Then the rich yellow-white glow of a Firebrand flamer, and the crump of grenades.

I ran. All I could think of was getting into my room, putting a door between me and all this, hunkering down with the two-tone in my arms. Just for a minute. Just while I got calm. There had been too much to deal with. I realised my hand was scrubbing my face where the Cawdor mask had touched my skin.

EVERYBODY KNEW something had started. It was in the air like spore dust or some kind of sour magnetism. In the ragged windows of my hab-warren the fires were guttering and most of the hanging lights were dark, but I could see movement in the windows. Hard to spot in the shadows, but there. As I got closer, breath shortening and the stitch growing under my ribs, I could make out flashes and shines of metal, throwing back what light was still coming from the top of the Black Pile: gun-barrels jutting from over windowsills and heads leaning out to see what was going on. People were arming up.

Nobody spoke to me as I clambered up through the warren to my own passageway. Standing on the metal floor still blackened from Brother Hetch's flamer-blasts, I gave a sequence of taps on the door, a lamplighter code that we sometimes used out beyond the walls, and heard tapping back. I waited. It would take a minute for Nardo to open the door.

'It's started, hasn't it?' I wheeled around at the voice. They were standing beyond the weak ceiling bulb, a crowd of dim shapes. My memory flickered and for a moment I was talking to Enning out on the roadpipe. I almost caught myself looking for the slogan on the wall. Water for all, not just the rich.

'We can hear them fighting on the Quackstown side. Something's begun.' I thought I could place the voice although I didn't know the name. She was a tattooist with a little substreet shop-hole near the sixward end of Helmawr's Bridge. There were murmurs behind her. I could feel the tension in the air, and I remembered another slogan. Lamplighter spies got what they deserved.

'Are they killing us, or each other? Who's running the bunkerhouse now?' Another voice I half-knew. Boh? Bowe? He worked in the smoke

pits fiveward of Cyclops Square, melting and remoulding plastic and rubber stripped from old Hive machinery. It occurred to me that the work of the last few lightsons might have gone smoother if I'd known some of these people better.

Then Nardo grated the shutter-door back, supporting himself on my lantern-pole with the two-tone and the reload belt in his other arm. The people in the hall must have known what had happened to the lamplighters, but I guessed they couldn't have seen it for themselves. There was a gasp at the sight of him, sagging against the door with the bruises and welts still on his face. Yonni had splinted one of his wrists and his right eye still wouldn't open.

We got ourselves organised. Nardo had sorted what was left of my tools and Thamm's. With an elbow on my shoulder and my lantern pole in his other hand he could move well enough. We'd got him a lasgun to sling at his chest, a short-stock fast-cycle Van Saar piece that was the closest Tovick could get to Nardo's old customised one. He'd wrapped a length of flakcloth around his abdomen for want of proper armour. We were as ready as we were going to be.

There was no point in lying to the others.

'Yes,' I told them. 'It's starting, I think. Be as ready as you can. I can't tell you what's going to happen.'

There was more murmuring and they began to move. By the time Nardo and I were halfway down the passage they had all melted away, to their homes or shops or families or hiding-holes or whatever it was they felt they had to go and defend.

Think fire spreads fast in a dry lichen-field? Think plague spreads fast in an overcrowded Hive City barrack district? Watch rumour spread through Junktion some day.

WE HEADED AWAY from the Pile and turned onto the Haulers' Way, under the giant overhangs from the old Dome walls, their lichen forests brittle and dying now. We were on our way to the Nineward Sump, where hab-holes clustered hard against the canal banks and the sixward wall properly began. By the time we were making a painful way over the stepping-blocks at the canal shallows there were already stirrings. People

were coming out of door-hatches and along the trails cut into the rubble slopes, staring. Weapons were out here, too, pistols and blades, but none of them were raised as I helped Nardo off the blocks and up the stair-trail. The slope didn't stop, and we were climbing over people's homes on our way to the town wall when Nardo had to stop and rest.

While he did, the questions came again. A man with a hand replaced by a battered steel hook and all his front upper teeth gone, wearing a stained imitation of a scarlet Orlock bandana, propped himself on the wall below us and called up to us. I could hear him passing my answers to a muttering crowd in the narrow alley we'd just climbed out of.

Was it true the whole Greimplatz was burning? It hadn't looked like it when I last saw it. The fighting seemed to be elsewhere. Was it true Garm Heliko was leading a great army of pit slaves and scummers up through the Black Pile to make himself king of Junktion? Garm Heliko wasn't doing anything of the sort. I told them to trust me on that. Who had taken over? What was going to happen to the losers, whoever they were? I didn't know. I didn't even properly know who was doing the fighting any more.

There wasn't the purposeful moving away that had happened back outside my door. Nardo nodded to me and I helped him to his feet. We moved gingerly away along the rough base of the town wall, stopping to rest at the base of each light pylon. The man in the dirty bandana, looking dolefully after us, fell out of view under the rockcrete overhang.

ABOVE THE LONG FLAT stretch bordering the Highdome alleys, where the slot-gates are and where I'd seen Drengoff out, there was a steep slope made of the other side of the rubble-banks that cut Highdome off from the Nineward Sump. That was where we found the wall was still guarded. We hadn't expected that.

We pieced it together later on, when we had time. The Steelheads had concentrated their numbers more than the Firebrands, and pushed the Cawdor back from the base of the Pile with a ferocious string of close assaults through Quackstown and along the dry bed of Soiled Creek. But Volk had seen the fight coming sooner and had set his men up better: the Firebrands had commanding points through Greimplatz, the bridges and

the town walls. It was a strategy that damn near paid off for Volk, but it almost did for us first.

There was a crack and a bullet chopped into the slope by our feet. Nardo and I were picking our precarious way down the hill toward the flat sixward zones, making for the slot-gates. We stopped at once and tried to back up, and almost pitched over as our feet skidded in the dust and each of us spoilt the other's balance.

It was a warning shot. The Cawdor sentry on the wall was a different one to when I'd come through with Drengoff, but he was armed just as well and if he'd wanted to hit us he would have. When he shifted to reload and bear on us again I saw his piece. It wasn't Hive City but Underhive made, a heavy single-shot stubber that loaded with a bolt and lever, the kind that holesteaders call a rifle. The Firebrand peered down the barrel at us again, and I wished I'd kept Hetch's spitting mask after all. Then the sentry looked over his shoulder, back at us, away again, then ducked behind a stablight gantry for no reason I could see. He shouted something at us that I didn't catch..

'Y'hear him?' I shook my head. Nardo's hearing was sharper than mine, but he hadn't made it out either. But if the wall was still guarded things could get a lot harder for us soon. The sentry put his piece to his shoulder again and I got ready to frantically wave for him not to shoot, but then he pointed it out beyond the wall, waited a breath and fired a shot.

My heart leapt.

We started down the slope again, Nardo leaning against me for balance, the two of us clumsily keeping our empty hands stretched out to show we weren't attacking. I heard another yell, another shot of the rifle. I was close enough to hear words now but there were none, just desperation. Then the whimper and whine of lasrounds and I saw the impact flashes in the metalwork by his head and shoulder. He ducked and scrambled back to the edge of the parapet.

'Lamplighter! Kass you be, the lamplighter! Get this light flashing! Get it shining into the town! We need-' a stub round whickered over his head '-we need to signal. They left me no klaxon. I don't know where they are and the vermin are coming in! There should have been men on the way!' He held out an urgent hand. 'Give me your piece, else arm and get up here!

They skulk at the end of my scope range and won't come close, but with another piece up here they won't dare rush me, I said give it to me!'

'Our enemies are inside,' I told him, trying to recapture the bluff I'd used on Hetch. There's shooting at the Black Pile. Gruett betrayed us and Volk and Hetch will burn him clean.'

Then there's treachery' the Cawdor said. He was tall but too thin, the way a lot of Redemptionists get with their neurotic fasting. His mask had a band of steel across the nose and bronze hoops around the eyes. 'We need you on the wall, lamplighter, until more brethren come from the gatehouse. The Orlock reputation is a lie, these are cowards, when there are more of us they'll run and we can flense the Steelhead wretches.'

It was no trick at all to make my grin look triumphant. Orlocks. It was working! 'Nardo will fight here with you, he's good with a las. I'll get word to the gatehouse. We'll drive them back to their sinkholes!' Nardo nodded to me and I helped him lean against the wall. He was still weak and his thick brown hair was damp with sweat, but he knew what to do. I trusted him. I left the sentry nervously reloading and Nardo leaning in a slot-gate alcove. I ran away along the base of the wall and I didn't look back.

I passed two more sentries on the way to the gatehouse, both staring out into the badzones. I could tell they were getting cockier as whoever was out there (Orlocks! it was working!) stayed at the limit of the wall lights. They were right to be cocky. Thought had gone into the Junktion town walls. The height, the lights, the wireweed, the flat dead spaces beyond. Even a well-armed attacker would take terrible losses with only the most minimal defences. Whoever was skulking around at the fringes of the lit strip were right not to come any closer.

For now. I realised I could hear gunfire in front of me through the empty alleys of Peelgut toward the liftport gate. And I also realised I was grinning again.

THE FIRST THING I saw coming out the other side of the maze of orchard-alleys was that last Steelhead sentry who'd watched me earlier. He was sprawled in a broad red puddle in the middle of the Quicklime Road. The liftport gate was definitely in the control of the Firebrands now.

Four of them were on the parapet, two aiming the working stablights out through the ruins of the shanty town and two with weapons trained somewhere beyond the wall. They were less controlled than the man we had found over the slot-gates, firing bursts and screaming oaths at targets they surely didn't have a scavvy's hope of hitting.

I stopped, panting, and listened to their cries for a moment. Repent and redeem, yeah, pay for your sins, yeah, sure, bum in the afterlife you filthy... women. Women. It was working!

I wondered whether to hail them, to keep up the charade, but why bother? They hadn't seen me. I didn't need to complicate things. I moved to the wall and in under the walkway and their sightline, timing my steps to the gunfire in case they had sharp ears. The gatehouse door was hanging open - the Steelheads had kicked it in to ransack the place for cash or water. But they had left the juice panel untouched.

The test. Time to see if my plan was good enough. My hands were shaking as I repositioned the leads and snapped connectors open and closed. Twice I had to step back from the panel and collect myself. It had sounded a lot easier sitting in my dim little room flapping my mouth with Yonni. Talk was cheap.

Enough putting-off. Nardo was out there somewhere. I made a little grunting sound and snapped a bank of switch-levers closed.

For a moment, nothing. Then a hum, a spark, two, and then the liftport gate and the Peelgut wall and the entire sixward stretch of Junktion wall fell into darkness.

THE WALL GUARD didn't stand a chance, of course. Outside the walls they knew what was coming and were ready with heatseer goggles and darkvisors. The instant the light was gone the defenders' advantages were gone too.

By the time I stepped out of the guardhouse the shouting and the fusillade from beyond the gate was already over. I looked around carefully before I flicked on my filament-lamp, but I had counted four Firebrands over the gate and now I counted three limp bundles sprawled on the walkway and another lying in the road. Breathing hard, I stepped to the

little door set into the gate, drew the bolts and lifted the bar and swung it open.

Nothing. I put the lamp carefully around the edge of the door and flashed it into the darkness. No shots. I withdrew my arm.

My heart sounded very loud to me in the darkness. I counted over two hundred beats before the voice said 'We're here' on the other side of the door and made me skip one.

Carefully, gracefully, guiding themselves by little weapon-mounted bluelights like Oordell's, the Curse came into Junktion. Their clothes and hair caught my lamp-beam in quick shouts of colour. Their faces were calm and their movements sure. Atta, Dancy, Silk. The juve-girls with their swords and pistols. Woman after woman, they spread out and took silent possession.

Safine was the last through. She stood there and watched me swing the door to, re-bar it, switch off my torch.

'We didn't think we had much reason to trust you any more,' she said after a moment. 'And I'm still not sure if we do.' I nodded. The memory of walking away from them at the gate still made my face hot.

'I trust you, though,' I said and I was surprised to realise I meant it. Safine gave a small amused noise. There was faint ghost-light spilling over us from the rest of Junktion but my eyes hadn't adapted yet.

I did a double-take. The rest of Junktion was still lit. Yonni should have had enough time by now.

'I have to go,' I said. 'I don't know if the fighting in the middle of town is getting better or worse but I have to see to the arcs. There won't be a signal. We couldn't work out a way of providing one. Sorry.'

'This will do.' Her tone was a little easier now. 'Give us some time to move further in. What about the others?'

The Berserkers got the same letter you did. I know they were outside the wall at Highdome. A sentry saw them there. They should be over the wall by now, or through the gate if Nardo was able to open it for them. They know you're here and you know they're there. Watch out for one another.'

That didn't come out the way I had meant it. Safine gave a low laugh in the darkness and turned away to her gangers as I legged it down the Quicklime Road.

I COULDN'T REMEMBER when I'd run this much. My legs were rubbery and my throat felt like it had been chewed to rags. Good. If I concentrated on the sensation I didn't have to think about what might have happened to Nardo down inside the wall at Highdome, or why Yonni hadn't... No, don't think it.

Maybe he had a reason to wait. I clung on to that as I got to the top of Anselm's Alley and sagged against the corner for the red fog in front of my eyes to clear. That must be it. I could hear gunfire again now, closer too, echoing out of Greimplatz and from the twelve-ward end of the bridges, but now the fight was multiplying, throwing out sprouts and seeds. Shots and shouts echoed down from the high levels of the rookeries.

Volk's foresight almost turned the tide for him. The Steelheads pushing back the middle of the Firebrand line were being flanked by the Firebrands that Volk had spaced out through the town and Gruett's advance was slowing. A ferocious running brawl broke out between both gangs' juves along Brotherhoods' Alley where each had tried to outflank the other, but neither side could swing that and it ended in a bloody stalemate as the firelight around them bogged down. Yellow Jancy swore to me later that she'd seen Gruett go down with her own eyes, when he tried to rush the doors of the saloon on the 'platz where a window full of Cawdor had his pack of scrappers pinned down.

All I knew at the time was that the ripples were spreading. Anselm's Alley was full as the rookeries emptied out onto the streets. There was a weapon in every hand and murder in every eye.

And they weren't particular. I had to shoot two before I was halfway down the Alley, and it made me furious. I dodged cleaver-swings and fired the laspistol from the hip, and knocking them down, dead or out of it, I didn't care. As I hurdled them and kept running I found myself shouting at the other poor grey shapes propped up on the doors and steps, coming out for the fighting, turning their bleary eyes and chapped lips to watch the lamplighter run by.

'Out of the way you idiot spitters! I'm doing this for you! Out of the way! We've got one shot!' I frightened myself saying that, but it was true. The Steelheads and the Firebrands were dug in to fight one another but they'd be just as well placed to turn on the Berserkers and the Curse. And

they knew Junktion better and had recent practice fighting side by side. Yonni and I had known we needed to even the odds somehow.

'Out of the way! You want water? Help me bring those bastards down and we'll have it!' What the hell was I promising? I didn't know or care. My mouth was in free fall. I cleared the alley ahead of me with the sheer force of hot words. 'Out of my way! Coming through! Coming through!'

Momentum carried me out of the alley mouth. I almost flew headlong over a dozen sprawled bodies before I caromed off a lantern pole and switched direction past the bunkerhouse, down to the switching hole.

I FOUND YONNI sitting against the wall of Long-Gone Circle just before the walls curved overhead and it became a full tunnel. He had his knees drawn up and his hands clasped over his belly. I recognised the posture. Gut shot.

And I found someone else too. There was a slouching, lanky shape standing over him cackling out loud. My footsteps were loud, loud enough to be heard, and he turned and stared at me, put down the foot he'd been kicking Yonni with. Those cockroach eyes looked at me from under the flop of hair he was never without. Tovick must have sent him to see how things were going. I wondered why he couldn't see this little spitsmear for what he was.

Thought you lamplighters were going to do your jobs properly from now on.' Every syllable was poisoned. There was an idiot glee at Yonni's pain in that voice that I don't think I'll ever understand. Thought you were going to upset everything and get on top, didn't you? Thought you were going to sell out Tovick and lord it over me and... uh...'

Finishing that third sentence was a bitch, and it beat him now for the last time. There was just enough time for his expression to change as I brought the laspistol up and then the shot laid him out with a black crater between his eyes. I didn't look at him again. I crouched down and helped Yonni lift his head.

'Yonni? Yonni, is it ready to go?'

'Kass...'

'Yonni, it worked. At the gates, it worked. Drengoff got the letters to them and they're in town. The

Berserkers and the Curse, they're both here, they're going to help. They're coming. We need to kill the rest of the lights. Did you set the breakers?'

'Kass, I tried, the Cawdor...' His words tapered off into a groan. I wanted to let him lie back, let him rest, do something other than press him to talk, but we were out of time.

'Yonni, concentrate. Please. The breakers?'

The Cawdor, right in the city. Lines behind lines, guarding, big spots...' I was frightened that he was delirious, but he was trying to explain. 'People far back, caught me... on way here... didn't get the room... he was stationed... Watch out, Kass... Hetch!'

As he said the name I ducked sideways and grabbed the two-tone off its sling. I saw the igniter light bobbing like a glowfly in the switching-hole doorway and realised he'd been waiting, waiting for me, and now he had me.

I threw myself flat and the billow of white fire flew over my head. I felt the back of my shirt and jerkin cook and char. I fired a burst but went too low and all I got was a puff of sparks and a laugh from Hetch. I'd hit his metal leg.

I was dead. With a simple waggling motion he could fill the whole tunnel with cauterising white flame. It wasn't even worth trying to roll out of the way. I just had to make sure I took him with me. I fired a longer burst and Hetch roared in pain - I must have got him somewhere across the thighs. But he didn't drop. The igniter light did. It dropped to point right at me and the hiss of the gas jet filled my hearing.

That wasn't the gas jet.

There was an explosive cough from the doorway and I saw Hetch double over. A blurt of flame puffed and spread on the tunnel floor at his feet and the motion toppled him off balance as he stood on his wounded leg at a bad angle. He dropped to his knees.

I caught a quick whiff of a vicious, throat-hitching smell and almost laughed out loud. A round must have ricocheted and knocked the choke grenade out of the ceiling, the first and most basic trap in the passageway to the switching hole.

There was a grating whine from Hetch's metal leg as he began to stand up. I don't know how I got to my feet so fast but I was running then,

running at him full tilt, firing wildly, the shots not coming close to him. I saw the tiny igniter-light and screamed as though I were already burning and then I crashed into him, landing across the bulbous flamer barrel, grinding the muzzle into the dirty floor, snuffing the igniter out in the dust.

Hetch snarled and staggered to his knees again, then brought the flamer around in a full-blooded swing that connected with the side of my head and knocked me sprawling. My skull rang and suddenly my limbs seemed very heavy and very far away. There was a metallic noise and his metal foot stamped down onto my chest, making my whole body jerk and heave.

Looking up at him, I saw he had the mask he had tried to give me slung around his neck, its face nestled against his chest.

You were never redeemed,' he told me as though I cared. 'Not all the flame and flaying in the Hive will be enough to clean you.' He gave me a kick. I was able to roll away and take some of the force out of it, but I still couldn't help yowling. Hetch was swaying on his feet and his flesh leg was slick with blood. You did a worse thing than anyone who's ever taken up arms to us. You lied to me. You promised me a disciple and then threw the mask away' He stepped forward for another kick and I scrabbled backwards to...

...the door to the switching hole. I'd got past him.

Hetch kicked out with his metal foot and I rolled onto my side and got my own in the way, catching the steel shinpipe on the sole of my boot. The shock went right up my body to the crown of my head, then I grabbed the grip of my laspistol and fired through the bottom of the holster, the beam scorching the side of my leg. It hit Hetch in the middle of his belly and doubled him over.

I went through the doorway in a fast all-fours scramble, scored skin off my shoulder as I hit the hacked rockcrete of the wall and fell on my face an instant before I would have triggered the second trap, the trip-beam that sent the air-pistons up from the floor. I lay looking at the sockets in front of me for a dozen long breaths before my thoughts kicked in and I groped at the wall for the hidden disarm-catch. Another four to cross the trap plate, haul myself up the wall and stagger on.

There was no safety for the third trap, the electrified floor. You just had to remember to kick what looked like fixed-down matting around to cover

a patch you could walk across. Doing that nearly overbalanced me onto the killing grid. I could hear Hetch was groaning outside. I shouldn't have left Yonni out there but there hadn't been time. The two pairs of gangs could come face to face any minute. I had to do my job.

I walked unsteadily across the matting and into the switching hole.

I had watched Yonni set this up. I had discussed it with him, poor Yonni. I wanted to tell him I was sorry for it all but I had no illusions. I wasn't going to find him alive. I didn't want to walk away from him, but I'd had to. I shook my head and made myself concentrate. I knew the switching hole setup. I knew what to do.

Grey fatigue. The Berserkers were the toughest gang in the district, everyone knew that. The Curse were bad too. Surely now they were in, they didn't need...

No. I had a job. I'd been telling myself ever since the whole thing began that I just did my job. I stepped forward, and then pitched over sideways as a shell shattered the rack next to me.

'NO REPENTANCE!' It was Hetch's voice. Please oh please, Helmawr's rump, what did it take to kill this sumpsack? I lay full length and yanked the laspistol out of its holster.

'No redemption! No cleaning for you! Watch my soul fly away from yours when we go there, Kass! No cleansing for you! You'll die filthy!'

Another shell punched through a cable-rack where my head would have been if I'd sat up. Solid shells, fired from a sawn-off piece by the sound of it. I stuck the laspistol over the rack and sizzled off two-three-four quick shots and was flat on my back by the time the next round came smashing through the arrays of cables and switches. I crawled like a milliasaur, humping my body up and forcing myself along the floor and around the end of a plastic frame full of juicemeter dials. The switches I needed were at head level. If I wanted to do this I'd have to stand up and-

A shot creased my shoulder and then hit the meters. Glass fragments and broken dials tinkled down around me. Ahead I could see the three big switch-levers. Yonni had marked them with yellow tape. He'd rubbed grease into the tape to make it look old, unsuspicious. Yonni was a good man. I'd been lucky to know him. I crawled forward as a shell came

through low and split cables a fingers' length above my head. Fat white sparks rained down.

I got up on my knees and reached for the first switch, and in the doorway Hetch howled and put a round through the switch plate, showering me with shattered plastic as I fired back. The despair was creeping up on me again. I didn't understand how he couldn't be dead. And the switches, the switches were broken...

Brother Hetch came for me through the maze of fizzing, smoking equipment. Slow, painful as I had been. The sawn-off clattered to the floor.

He stood over me, blocking out the light. He drew back his metal foot for a kick that would stave in my skull.

'I burn in clean light and holy pain, and you drown in-'

His foot came around on an arc, aiming to crush my head against the rack next to me. In purest blind reflex, I whipped my head down and my cheek hit the gritty floor, Hetch's sharp metal toes scraping my face. He was swaying and off balance and his other leg was injured and the kick went over my head and embedded itself in the broken bank of juice feeds.

The sparks and arcs were right above my head and I writhed away, shouting, my hair crisping. I pushed myself away as Hetch spasmed and jerked with the juice dancing in him. His arms flailed, his hair burned. His skin started to crackle, and his fingers brushed the shattered switch.

It only worked for a moment, but it worked. The surge hit the low-strain breakers we'd taken from the depot, that Yonni had carefully worked into the switching room and I had put in the arc light arrays, cross-routing the juice away from them until we were ready to throw the whole of Junktion's lighting grid onto our finely-placed weak points. There was a thump that I seemed to hear with my whole body, another one, a chain reaction of thumps that marched away through the switching room and out into the wall. Junktion went black. The Steelheads and Firebrands were in the dark as the Curse and the Berserkers came for them. I'd done it.

I'd done it for Junktion. For Yonni. For Sebyo and Backni and Nardo and Venz and Mudeye and Thamm. For the memory of Safine standing outside the gate watching me walk away and Bizer Enning, wherever he was, calling out to me, for Tanny, too. But mostly, at the end, it was for Sinden Kass.

I lay full length in the pitch darkness of the switching hole and laughed until my sides felt like splintering, laughed as the tears ran down my cheeks and pooled on the dirty floor.

EPILOGUE

WATER FOR ALL, NOT JUST THE RICH.

The words were written in glow-green paint, three feet high across a slag outcrop overhanging the Scrubtangle trail. Although the light was bright enough to properly catch the paint, it didn't leap at the eye the way it had used to do. It had taken more than a month for the paint to start fading, but in the Underhive everything corrodes.

Nardo was walking on a stick still, and the two apothecaries he trusted hadn't been able to promise him he'd ever be able to stop wearing the eye patch. He could still get vision on his left if he had to, but the eye was watery and tender and too sensitive to dust and chem-fog. So the patch stayed on.

We hefted our tool packs and I hoisted my lantern up. It was a new one, a pale slightly blue-tinted one with a globe design I didn't recognise. A trader had brought a box of them through not long after the liftport had opened again. I'd mounted it on my lantern-pole under the spear-hook. I'd decided I liked the spear-hook.

Nardo and I inspected our handiwork. There was still so much fixing to do in Junktion itself, and only the two of us to do it - we had finally held the wake for Thamm, Venz, Mudeye and Yonni the lightson before. There would be more lamplighters. The new town fathers - Grail and Crossbones of the Berserkers, an envoy of Safine's named Pholta and their hangers-on - had told us there would be more. We had been promised the picking and training of them ourselves. But for now, Junktion was still overwhelming, even with the blown-out switching hole repaired and the biggest lighting arrays back on line. The rookeries were insanely dangerous in the dark and scavvies and ratpacks were coming closer to the walls than they had in years.

In the town itself the wakes and grieving for the people the Dry Season had taken still weren't over. I felt the outline of the water-flask in my pack. That was a universal mannerism in Junktion these days, with the water Safine was carting in from Shining Falls still fetching top-notch prices. The Berserkers and the Curse had been arguing over the new rationing regime for three lightsons. Most of the argument was over how the profits were cut and what Safine's mark-up would be. The refugees who'd started trickling in again who thought 'water for all, not just the rich' was now a promise not a threat were getting nasty surprises.

The two victorious gangs had made sure everyone in Junktion knew who the winners were. Trophy masks and scalps hung over the Greimplatz like bunting, but no matter how heated the arguments between the new town fathers got they remembered what had happened to Volk and Gruett and carefully avoided coming to blows. 'Steelhead' and 'Firebrand' had stopped meaning much, anyway, since the last survivors of each had been hounded out into the badzones with packs of Junktioners on their tails. Rumour had it Volk was still alive somewhere past Chamberpit, or would be until one of the bounty killers found him. In the Cyclops Square gambling holes the bookies were giving him three more lightsons, tops.

Stope hadn't outlived the Firebrands' overthrow. Somehow I wasn't surprised. Harmos was still around somewhere, but I didn't know how long he'd last outside the bunkerhouse. Guilder Tai had switched sides with practised smoothness. Last I had heard he was negotiating toll rights to the liftport road with the Curse and hiring a caravan to bring back salvage from the broken holesteads at Mirror-Bitten. That didn't surprise me either.

But the lights were back on. The trade was coming through again and the winches were running. Rumour was that Berserker scouts were looking for old plant downhive to rebuild Penman's Deep. We'd even found some new power feeds and had got them hooked up to supply Junktion. Things would get better.

Even the welt on my face and the bruises from Hetch's feet felt good in their way. I could look Junktion in the eye. I could look myself in the eye. Maybe I could even lay Tanny's ghost to rest. However long it had taken me to do the right thing, at the end of it all I hadn't just walked away.

'C'mon,' I said to Nardo. 'Let's get a drink.'

MEANWHILE, somewhere in Hive City, the lights in Vlitz Thaki's counting house flickered off and on again.

STATUS: DEADZONE

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A WORLD ABOVE
BY ALEX HAMMOND

THE FLOOR RACED before him, yellow guide lights casting harsh shadows across the face of his driver. Thin hum of an electric engine, rubber wheels dashing across the steel, the rush of the air: the connecting corridors were lonely, humanless places. Fingering his las pistol, to a passer-by Aldus Harkon would have seemed to be simply scratching an irritating itch under his coat. Aldus watched the driver closely; an unimpressive-looking man, but his enemies knew Harkon was cautious of hit men and his escort ready for anything. 'Shuttle Bay 5b, sir.' The driver spoke with a mid-hive lilt.

'Come up in the world?' Aldus returned his hand to the cane lying upon his lap. 'Yes, sir. Used to work on the factory floor. Brother went down-hive, I was recruited up. Saved the foremen from a Delaque assassination attempt.'

'Made your masters proud, no doubt.' The man saluted. 'Ran Lo shuttle number five should be docking shortly' The transport's wheels skidded briefly, only to be muffled by the sound of the rush of depressurising air as the cart entered the landing bay. Almost immediately a throat-scaring rush of fumes hit Aldus full in the face. He inhaled deeply, painful though it may be -the shuttle bay would be witness to the biggest deal of his life.

The transport cart scuttled away, small wheels competing to keep up with one another. Aldus dusted down his coat and stood, cane in hand, poised near the edge of the tight mile-high precipice. About him men struggled with fuel pipes, prepared magnetic clamps and clung to the sides of the shuttle bay as though at any second the whole thing would lurch forward and toss them out into the night sky, down through the noxious clouds to land a bloodied pulp in the ash wastes so far below Aldus loved Hive Primus. If you were strong-willed there were places for you. Places

to find greatness, places to make a life for yourself in a giant city almost bursting with the pressure of millions of souls. If you were cast of iron like the city, you could go far. Aldus stepped closer to the edge of the shuttle bay's entrance. Winds battered him, slapping him hard in the face, stinging his old, cunning eyes. Peering out into the night air, he breathed deeply. A freshness unknown to his sickening body filled his lungs. The stars in the sky, every one a new solar system, were each a place for those of iron to reach greatness.

Aldus hacked hard into the front of his mouth. Sliding the phlegm about his mouth he manipulated it with his tongue until it met his approval, large and heavy. He leaned forward. A bay attendant behind him shrieked. Aldus delicately raised his hand and cast the phlegm from his mouth. The dark yellow globule dropped into the rushing winds and was swept around and backwards into the gusts. Now part of him would travel into the wastes, carried, perhaps, for ten miles or a hundred before it dropped upon the dead earth below. Aldus smiled within. 'Sir!' An attendant, arms replaced by machine loading mitts, screamed into Aldus's ear. 'The hunting party... their shuttle!' Aldus nodded and began the long walk to the end of the runway. From beyond, from the dark sky, a bright green light burst into view 'They're going too fast!' A tech-priest looked up at the flickering, ghost-washed display panels before him, sweat running down his green-lit face, tracing the contours of the electronic sight that replaced his eye.

Aldus remained stationary as the bay was suddenly plunged into bright red light, warning beacons alerting fire safety crews to prepare for action. The jagged shape of the shuttle grew larger. Aldus could make out the Ran Lo signature on its cockpit, the arcane R and L set in their white circle contrasting sharply with the arched windows above. 'Sir, get behind the fire wall!'

Aldus remained still, with the exception of his calm hands fondling the silver cast at the top of the cane.

As the shuttle continued its wayward plummet towards them, attendants began throwing themselves to the floor, the strobing lights staggering all movement. The tearing of metal screeched about the runway, the shuttle throwing sparks into the smoke-choked air as its wings clipped the sides of the bay. Bulbous wheels screamed like agonised creatures as they struggled to slow the oncoming craft. Small fires leapt up on the floor as

the white-hot sparks ignited patches of fuel. The shuttle sped towards where Aldus stood, noxious fumes pouring from its vents. The shuttle veered off its path for a moment, almost colliding with the wall, only to spin back on line with Aldus. With an unutterably deafening screech, the wheels finally succumbed to the brakes and the shuttle screamed to a halt, its steel nose cone so close to Aldus' misshapen body he could have reached out and patted its flaking metal prow The beaming face of a young man smiled down at the stationary figure through the arched cockpit windows. He waved and Aldus shook a hand in recognition. Attendants rushed about the shuttle bay, pouring foam directly from their augmented limbs onto the spot fires. Meanwhile priests moved in to consecrate the machine's safe landing with oils and unguents. Amidst the flurry of movement, a staircase was lowered from the shuttle's side, its gradual release incongruous with the speed of the men. Four body-suited figures, two boys and two girls, leapt from the access port. Only a robed man, leaving the shuttle last, used the stairs. This, Aldus Harkan knew instantly, was Terrak Ran Lo.

The sage old man walked gracefully towards Aldus, grey hair and groomed goatee painted red in parts. About him the youngsters leapt and shouted, slapping one another on the backs. Their combative prowess was immediately noticeable as they aimed mock kicks and lashed out at one another, pulling short with bladed weapons mere muscle spasms from one another's faces. 'I must apologise-' Terrak Ran Lo began.

'Scared as a cess rat!' The young pilot from the ship grinned at Aldus like a big dog, nodding his shorn head, revealing it to be tattooed with the kill marks of a seasoned hunter.

Aadon, you oaf, you almost ripped the ship to pieces!' A woman in a tight-fitting body suit, dark, lacquered braid curled tight in the customary manner of all of the women warriors of Ran Lo, spat out the words at her companion. 'Does it matter. What about the thrill?' Aadon snapped back.

Aadon, you're a genius, did you see them run for the barricade?' laughed the other boy. He was huge, a full head taller than those about him. 'Call me Takarr. Thanks for making this hunt possible, Mr. Harkon.'

'Don't mention it,' Aldus replied. 'You should thank Lord Terrak for having the sense to come to me.'

'You can guarantee that everything will be in place by the time they get down there?' Terrak Ran Lo asked, his voice calm and commanding.

'Yes. As long as they keep to the schedule they'll be having the hunt of their lives.' 'You'd better hope so, Mr Harkon,' the dark-haired woman said snootily as she stepped forward. 'You're being paid a small fortune to make sure this is good.' 'I've had ten years' experience dealing with Underhivers. Four miles below us I have over thirty seasoned contacts; at six I have another forty. I'd like to think that my dealings with these scum has provided me with enough insight to know when something is worth it.' 'Excellent,' the young woman purred and spun on her heels. 'The mice will be in trouble tonight.'

HIGH ABOVE the Underbive, the air is cold. High above the Underbive you cannot breathe for the lack of atmosphere, leer miles above the savage wasteland of Hive Bottom is where the city's peak lies. This where the souls of the dead will travel. This is where they gather. This is where tbey are blown across the four winds. Scattered like shards of glass. Scattered souls bear no memories. Blood...

Blood ran down Knife Edge Liz's face. She could feel it sliding down her chin, charting a course past old scars, through the valleys of new wounds. Liz reached her hand up to her face. She might as well have been attempting to lift a steel girder. She let the limb fall to the ground again. Slow waves of red washed over her eyes again. High above the hive the air is cold. Liz no longer felt her legs. High above the hive you cannot breathe for lack of atmosphere. Liz drew a heavy breath into her lungs. It fell short and sunk only as deep as her throat. She dragged her hand across the ground, feeling for something, anything that could help.

Her hand came across something soft and moist. Feeling up it - a small ring piercing stone cold skin, tattered cloth, the small face of a girl, eyes open. Big round eyes like a cat. Kat.

Kat was dead.

Liz snatched her hand away. Blood rushed to her head. Liz rose to her feet pushing hard so that she fell away from the corpse. She staggered forward and fell upon a cushion of flesh. Arms slick with someone else's blood. Underneath her she could feel the cold grip of death. Someone was

beneath her. Dead. Liz rubbed at her eyes, grit tearing at her pupils. For each layer of blood she wiped off, another would arrive -hers or the corpse's, she could not tell.

'Hive daemons take me!' Liz groaned, rolling off the corpse in panic. Liz's limbs struck at the ground, each fist striking in search of a dry place, a steel place. Somewhere where there was no blood. A fist ricocheted off a steel case. Pain shot up Liz's arm, sending spasms about her shoulder and shooting tendrils of needle-sharp pangs about her. The steel case. Liz ran her fingers over its mesh texture, searching for a sign. She flipped the case over and felt again. Small cross-hatches, like the mesh of the walkways she knew were above her. The criss-cross ended abruptly; a smooth disk lay in the centre of the case, medical cross engraved into its surface. Liz flipped the medi-kit open and rummaged inside it with trembling fingers. She swallowed pills, wrapped bandages about her wounds. Took out a hypodermic, shook it and was rewarded by the slosh of the liquid within. She had to stab four times before she found a vein. Arm rushing with warmth, Liz fell back and continued falling.

In the darkness there was beat. In the darkness the sound of the hive drifted away. Liz rolled around. The painkillers, like the hands of a lover, held her tight and ran their fingers about her body. They sank deep into her skin. Deep into her soul. They traced patterns across her back. Spelt words she could not understand. Rubbed thoughts into her tired brain.

Kat was dead. She'd come from the streets. Wanted to join a gang. Looked for a way to find a meaning. A meaning for the Underhive. Couldn't have been more than sixteen. Dead so young. Half a life is more than none. Half a lie.

Liz rocketed into consciousness. A lie. Somewhere there was a lie.

Liz snapped her eyes open and looked about her. Smoke still rose from potholes in the ground. Electric conduits still buzzed and swung from the platforms above her. Beside her lay the medi-kit, plundered of all its contents. A few bright red slims lay scattered about on the ground. Liz carefully picked these up and secreted them down the side of her boot. Something bit sharply into her ankle. She struggled with the boot and removed a hard, white card. Guilder credits. The lie was unravelling itself Liz regarded herself in the sheen of an effluent pool. Her leggings were

torn. Deep gashes carved their way through her flesh. Her hair, once dyed blue, was a deep brown, nearer her natural colour.

Liz had fallen close to Bekka, Bekka the Harvester. Liz stared over at her corpse. Deep pock marks had cracked open that seemingly impenetrable body of hers. Hundreds of hours of weight-built work, cast aside like a child's rag doll. For so many Bekka was the paragon of Underhive womanhood: in control, strong, with a mind as strong as steel. Beside Bekka lay her weapon, its kill markings still as bright as they were the day they were scored. The day they captured that heavy bolt gun from their rivals, the Sump Pirates, had been one of their greatest. An offworld weapon, and ammunition too; an incredible prize! It was a victory that had led them through every bar in Deep Town. They'd got drunk on Second Best and collapsed on the barroom floor.

From the signs a story unfolded: the blood-sprayed walls, laceration wounds to her dead comrades. They had come to ambush someone. It should have been simple. A mistake? They took it too easy? Something had gone wrong. Desperate faces, terrified eyes - the dead faces betrayed much. Bekka. Her augmented eyes and powerful weapon would have given her the drop on any assailant. By the ruby scores, sunken into her flesh, perhaps she had been the first to go. A trail of light imprints in the earth belied some rapidly moving assailant. Liz slowly rose and staggered forwards, hand clutching delicately at her leg. With each step the wound tore open a little. The imprints led to the body of a stranger, wired into a still-pulsing fighting suit. Bloodied mat of hair, disgorged eye sockets. The mechanical enhancements that had once filled these places lay torn on the ground. The stranger was young, Kat's age perhaps. Bladed gauntlets still moist with blood hung by his side. Liz regarded her leg. LIZ! - A SCREAM from behind her. She spun around, las gun at the ready. Kat was holed up behind a rock, heavy shells like blast caps erupting the rock from about her. Kat kept her head down. Liz scanned the smoke-filled tunnels for her assailant. Somewhere above, at the narrowing of the walls. Text-book bottleneck. They were surrounded. 'Liz, hel-' Kat gargled into silence.

Liz spun to catch sight of her comrade. A dark figure stood over where Kat had been hiding. Unashamed, he held pan of an Escher girl above his

head like a trophy. 'Sonofa-! Liz threw herself towards the figure that was now dancing about Kat's shredded remains.

Cracking explosions splintered girders, concrete flinging dust into the air. Liz threw herself through this haze and fell upon the figure, unleashing a fiery beam of death from her lasgun. Hot shells crashed about her, some searing her skin as they bounced about the ground. The figure leapt, lightning fast, and threw itself towards Liz, sharp blades like cleavers dripping wet.

Liz spun about, anticipating her assailant's speed, and clipped him. Right arm a mangled pulp, the figure swept hard with its left. Blades sliced across Liz's leg. A sharp pain and sudden dizziness rushed over her. She rolled through the filth, the dirt clogging the wound, blood rush stemmed to a trickle. Liz unsheathed her chain sword and flicked its spinning teeth into action. The figure darted to one side and tumbled across the ground, its suit pumping stimulants into its dying body. Chainsword buzzing, Liz lightly swept it in front of the oncoming figure's head. Her timing was on line. Like spearing a sump eel Liz timed the blow to anticipate the movements of her attacker. The chainsword caught on the augmentation about the figure's head. Its weapon suit sputtered into a death rattle as armour plates and implants were ripped from its body. Both Escher and attacker crashed to the ground.

Liz readied her lasgun and took aim on the hidden sniper's position.

Using a bent girder to bract her arm she peered into the darkness.

'Help me.' A voice nearby.

HELP ME: A voice nearby. Liz woke.

She had fallen by her bladed attacker's body. Her arm lay draped across his carcass. The battlefield was silent, her head and leg bandaged. Liz reached into her boot and pulled out some more stims, swallowed them. The tiny red capsules almost came up again. Internal bleeding somewhere. Forcing the medicine up again. Liz rubbed her throat, making sure they were digested.

'Olaana?' The voice was weaker now Liz staggered to her feet and moved towards the noise. Crumpled at the base of a shell-pocked concrete

wall was another suited figure. A woman, young... Kat's age. Dark hair tied in braids hung from her head; a las wound to her chest wept tarred blood.

'The mice, Olaana. The mice fought back.' The woman groaned. Liz watched silently. The woman flapped uselessly at a respirator hanging limp at her side. Liz followed the stretch of conduit cords as they wrapped their way about the woman's suit back to their starting point at the base of her skull. Her face mask was torn and conduit fluid from the cords ran past her brow, across her open eyes. They did not blink but stared white-pupilled into the air.

'Damn suit's got me so high on stimulants that I'm having trouble dying. Olaana?' The woman looked straight at Liz but her eyes made no sign of recognition. 'Yeah?' Liz mumbled, leaning back against a giant girder. 'I-1 can't see.' The woman's voice broke into a faint sob. 'I know'

'Thank the Emperor it's you. Thought you were one of those Underhive freaks.' Liz paused, mind racing. 'No. They're all dead.'

'We won?' the woman sat forward a little, the effort causing her to gasp. 'Yes.'

'You going to get a head? Take it back?' the woman said, smiling despite her discomfort.

'Why would I want to do that?' Liz crouched before the woman and silently levelled her lasgun at her.

'You've done it after every other hunt.' Liz blinked. The woman remained still. Liz regarded the nose of her lasgun. Greasy effluent from a walkway above dripped down onto its power cell. The thin hiss of the boiling water was the only noise in the rubble shelter. Tainted rain began to fall. It drowned out the sound of the hissing lasgun. Somewhere in the city above them, the factories were resuming a new shift, emptying spent coolants into the levels below.

'Remember the time we came down and fought those scum at the ash falls? We herded them into that field of razor grass. They were so desperate they ran though it. Remember? Like a pack of mindless sump rats. Only one came out the other end. Lost so much blood he couldn't even pull his trigger. Easiest hunt... we ever had.' The woman's voice was getting weaker. 'This one was bad,' Liz whispered.

'The worst. Wish I'd never come. It was meant to be easier... fun. The plasma's still burning, Olaana. I can feel it through the pain repressors...

Olaana? They won't wait at the ash falls for long. You should go... or you'll never get back.'

Liz rocked on her feet. Dizzy.

'Olaana?' The woman reached out towards Liz. 'Hold my hand?'

Liz remained still for a moment. She looked over her shoulder at her dead friends. Her gang. Her responsibility. 'Olaana?'

Liz reached out her hand and took hold of the woman's. It was soft, scarless. Liz stared at it in silence.

'Why was it so hard? They have nothing. No training, faulty weapons. They're animals. Barbarian scum with no right to kill us. We've got noble blood. We own this damn hive. They should be thankful we come down here and put them out of their misery... Harkon promised us an easy hunt.'

Liz released the woman's hand. 'Olaana? I don't want to die.' The woman broke down into tears.

Liz stood up and cast her eyes back over the battlefield. Harkon. Liz remembered that name.

WHO'S ALDUS Harkon? He's our contact from uphive, Bekka.' Liz's voice echoed through the tunnel as they strode towards the site of their planned ambush.

And it's a House Orlock shipment?' Bekka asked, strapping tape about her thick, tattooed arms. Liz had always admired her strength in the face of the rat scars she suffered as a child.

'That's right. He's paid us in weapons, up front, to take care of the shipment so that he can offer to finance the deal instead. Least, that's what he told me.' 'Sounds complicated.'

'Uphivers tend to be.' Liz wrinkled her nose like she'd smelt a bad stink. 'Kill their mothers if it paid well. They're worse than mutants.

'We're here.' She turned around to face her gang. 'Take up your positions. We're in a bottleneck, so they won't be able to run.' Liz's colleagues moved swiftly but silently down ladders and ramps into the dried-up canal.

Sometime later, the air still. 'Liz?' Bekka whispered, looked her square in the eyes. 'You trust this Harkon?'

An explosion silenced Liz. Rubble flew high into the air. Conduits burst and threw gas into the tunnels.

Ambush!' Kat yelled from down in the bottleneck.

'The Orlocks know?' Bekka screamed. No - uphivers! Look!' Liz pointed to a girder high above them. A figure clad in a dark, bladed suit. 'Sniper! Get down!' Liz yelled to Bekka.

Liz's muscled second ignored her. Bekka braced herself against a concrete block and let rip with the heavy bolter. Hot shells spewed from the ejection chamber igniting small chemical puddles about Bekka's legs. The uphiver dashed along a thin girder at full speed. Shells rang after it but failed to make a hit. 'Get down, Bekka!' Liz shrieked over the noise.

Below her Liz could hear the screams of her gangers. 'Harkon, you bastard.' she growled and leapt forward into the bottleneck. She took up cover behind a jutting girder and looked up to the lip of the rise above her.

'Bekka, you coming?' she called over the noise of the heavy bolter. 'Bekka?' The noise stopped. An ammunition belt rolled down the embankment. 'Bekka!' 'Help! Liz!' Kat screamed from across the battlefield.

'Our heavy's down!' Liz howled, trying to be heard above the ricochets. 'Retreat.' Liz looked over to Kat. She was pinned behind a bolder. Liz looked up to the embankment, grabbed hold of the chain of ammunition and used it to pull herself up. 'Bekka?' Liz lay flat in the dust, parallel with a fallen girder. 'Bekka?' she hissed. A pack of ammunition lay by the discarded heavy bolter. An explosion ripped open the ground about her. Liz peered through the haze smoke. A large figure was lumbering towards the sniper's position. 'Bekkar.

Liz followed as Bekka began her ascent towards the sniper. Liz pressed her back up against a bulkhead and dragged the heavy weapon towards her. Feeding the ammunition over her thigh, she braced a foot against a boulder. Gripping the bolter between her arms, Liz pulled its trigger. Massive shudders shook through her arms and shoulders. Liz dragged the gun around to the sniper's position. She let its bullets ring about the tower.

'I hope this gives you some cover,' Liz puffed as she struggled to stop the weapon spinning loose. Within a few seconds discarded shell cases had piled in a steaming heap about her.

Liz paused and drew breath, watching stunned as the battle continued. Smoke plumes burst from the battlefield, and more of her companions

dropped. Thin bursts traced their life fluid through the air. Chips of rubble rose and fell with each new barrage. They were being taken apart.

Liz's ears stopped ringing, thin trickles of blood gathering in her ears the only reminder of the weapon's ferocity. She looked skyward in an attempt to mark Bekka's position. The girders and walkways rose like an industrial cliff face. Bekka was nowhere. Bursts of light, las fire, flared in a dark recess above her. Liz craned her neck to see further into the darkness. With unearthly poise never granted in life, Bekka burst out of the darkness through a curtain of hanging chains and spun for a brief moment, like a classical dancer, on the precipice. And fell. Bekka's body curled into a ball, childlike, before crashing into the battlefield below Liz.

'Bastards!' Liz screamed as she saw for the first time the face of the sniper: a thin man, wired skull cap linking him to a body suit of angular metal pieces and bladed edges. Liz grabbed hold of a new belt of ammunition and began ramming it into the gun. The man leapt after Bekka's body. As he fell he unfurled thin metal meshes, joined from his wrists to his arms. Rather than drop like a stone as she expected, he glided rapidly towards Liz, unleashing bolts of burning light in her direction as she struggled to aim the heavy weapon at his slender form. links of ammunition fed into the heavy bolter and finally it kicked into life. The winged sniper dropped faster towards her, darting between walkways and platforms. Liz reeled and pulled the trigger, letting the weapon throw her backwards as she attempted to follow the sniper's movements.

White-hot casings rained about her, leaving scald marks on her arms as she tried to keep pace with the sniper. The shells rang about the layers of steel above her, bursting through platforms, cables and piping. The sniper landed gracefully on a platform above Liz and lowered his las rifle in her direction like a viper spying a mouse for the first time.

Liz pushed hard against the girder and threw herself onto her back. The heavy bolter crashed down on top of her. Inside her chest something snapped. A burst of blue-green light impacted where Liz had lain. Aching all over and bleeding on the inside, Liz aimed for the structural supports of a walkway above the sniper. Her weapon thundered into action again, releasing burning hot metal at the supports. A second later and the walkway came crashing down. The sniper looked up for a brief moment. Liz no longer saw him, she didn't have the time. Flipping the heavy bolter

onto its end, Liz huddled about its base and prayed. The walkway smashed through the platform on which the sniper was standing and continued downwards towards Liz. The girders and grated walkways crashed about her, knocking hard into the heavy bolter and smashing into her body.

Liz opened her eyes. The bolter remained upright. The sheets of iron, mesh barriers and steel girders had fallen about her, the heavy weapon keeping the heaviest pieces from crushing her. The bloodied ganger pulled on the trigger and let the weapon carve a way out of the rubble.

The battle was going badly in the gorge below. Most of Liz's gang had fallen back into a large crater. Liz scanned the horizon for signs of the gang's assailants as she climbed down the embankment. Crista, one of the gang's veterans, sat spread-legged and slumped upon the ground. Liz reached forward to feel for her pulse. Crista looked up bloodybrowed at Liz and shook her head.

I'll get you outta here,' Liz whispered Crista shook her head again and her eyes widened. Liz started; reflected in them was a large figure. A trap. Liz snatched Crista's autogun from the ground and threw herself to one side. In that instant, an explosion burst into Crista's body and the concrete about her. Liz was showered with sharp flints and washed in crimson. Liz rolled over, struggling to remove a steel shard from her side. The figure lumbered forward. A man in a massive suit of meshed-plate armour. Oversized arms and shoulders provided protection to all but his head. Fibre cables were attached to the base of his neck Massive gloved fists clicked and snapped as he walked forward, like a pianist preparing to play. Liz ripped out the shard and pulled the trigger of the autogun. It was light compared to the heavy bolter before it and she overcompensated for recoil. Her shots ran wide and the armoured man rushed her. Liz pulled the spray back and let several bursts impact into his chest. 'Die!' Liz screamed. The man lumbered on, uninjured.

Liz swung the autogun at his head. Its shoulder stock caught him across the temple, gashing a wound open above his eyes. The man slapped the gun out of Liz's hands and lunged at the ganger before she could fling herself aside. He wrapped his arms about her and lifted her off the ground. He breathed hard into her face. His breath was young, untarnished by years of filtered air. His steel blue eyes were all she could see beneath his combat mask; they blinked at her.

The man's arms flexed, and Liz's spine was racked with pain. She slapped at the pouches on her legs, trying to get a hold. The armoured man bounced her hard to strengthen his position. Liz's hand slapped at her leg again. She had it. Her back spasmed. Her head rushed with blood and the battlefield spun. Liz looked down into the face of the man, the blood from above his head running into the seamless cracks of his impenetrable armour. His eyes narrowed in strain. She smiled. His eyes widened in surprise. Liz brought her hand into view and opened it to reveal the grenade she held.

With her head spinning Liz punched her hand deep into the fibre cables about the man's head. She felt her hand slip down past his sweating shoulders. Liz pushed hard with her legs, trying to throw herself to the ground. The man struggled to pull her in two. An explosion burst inside the suit. Liz was flung back against a bulkhead. The suit remained untouched, but the man inside it could no longer be seen. Liz pushed forwards against the bulkhead, a jarring pain running up the length of her arm. The battlefield was silent. She shook her head; perhaps the explosion had unsettled her. Feet throwing up spent shells, she staggered forwards towards the crater where she had last seen her comrades. Liz lifted her head and in that instant her cover burst apart, dust and smoke replacing her protection.

The Escher lurched forward, running blindly through the smoke towards the position she'd last seen her gang. The ground burst open beneath her feet - her assailant was persistent. Her foot collided with a fallen girder. Half-falling, she crested the crater's lip. Liz tumbled over, fortune rather than precision timing throwing her out of the way of an explosion.

A twisted wrist and broken rib later, Liz reached the base of the crater. Her stomach, already giddy with fluid depravation, ran molten hot at the sight of carnage before her eyes. Her gang, some of them with their swords only half drawn, lay dead. Lacerations and deep red bruising the signature of their killer. The script was fluid, deep lines intersecting others with deadly precision. 'Liz!' A scream from behind her. Kat lay prone, barely concealed behind a rock. She was now the focus of the barrage of weapons fire. Similar blast pattern, same angle of fire. There was one more assailant. No, there were two: rising up from behind Kat, unfurling like a giant insect, was yet another attacker. Spines stitched in to a lacquered

body suit, with two piston pumped blades attached to gaundets on each arm. The uphiver rose like a mantis about to strike.

The young ganger, pinned down by enemy fire, could do nothing but remain in her position, fumbling with her long fighting knife. An arc of blood rose slowly into the air. Liz ran forwards, drawing her chainsword at the last minute to engage with Kat's slayer. The battle was brief. Wounds were exchanged. The reach afforded Liz by buzzing, bladed weapon had given her the advantage. The spiny uphiver lay broken on the ground.

Liz scrambled up a crumbling set of stairs, desperately trying to get herself out of the firing line. She scanned the bulkheads, recesses and cables of the walkways and the burnt-out shelters of the bottleneck about her. An air filter ground into action in one of the bulkheads, throbbing dust from the ground up into the air. A slow wind began to pull past her head. Liz paused in silence.

Closing her eyes, she trained her ears first to the noise of the hissing power cell in the weapon in her hand. Small electric sparks, thin and tuneless, rose and fell like ebbing waves. A sophisticated exchange of charged particles, undiscernible to her ears, was taking place in the sword in her hand. The approaching footsteps sounded like a jackhammer in comparison.

Liz remained still. Her head swam and her body ached. She had little time left and would have to make her stand quickly. Hundreds of these seconds would pass every day unnoticed. Now in the stillness of the final conflict they seemed to be glorious hours, dense and full of promise.

Liz waited. There was the crackle of a weapon charging behind her. Releasing all the tension from her body she dropped like a marionette with its strings cut. At the exact same moment an energy blast rocketed over her head. Liz swivelled on the mesh flooring and kicked a foot into the abdomen of the advancing uphiver. It was a woman, curving black stealth suit and long braid giving Liz dues to the identity of the masked attacker. The woman's speed was unnatural. Augmented legs kept on pushing, knocking Liz from her precarious balance and sending the woman flying high over her head. They both collided, hard, with the metal floor.

The attacker released several charges from the plasma weapon in her left hand. Liz rolled across the concrete as it was carved up behind her. Pulling a grenade from her leg, she pulled its pin and let it follow the course

carved by the plasma blast that had so recently followed her. The woman leapt high over the grenade's path. The timing was off. The grenade exploded and Liz was thrown back, the uphiver flung after her. In an awkward moment, afforded only by chance, Liz hit the ground seconds before the woman, then the woman from uphive landed on top of her. Their combined weight caused the broken mesh on which they lay to creak alarmingly. A sudden movement and they'd both plummet to the ground.

Liz stared into the eyes of the woman from above. In another life they may have been sisters. For a brief, alien moment they were cast together, their blood intermingling, the danger of the situation something they shared.

The woman did not speak, a quick intake of air the only noise she made. Liz looked to her side. Through the mesh she could make out the smouldering battlefield below. A rivet popped out from the joint where the mesh was anchored to the walkway and spun away for the ground below. The woman gingerly raised herself off Liz. Her eyes darted from Liz to the popping rivets.

The Escher looked back at the ground, calculating. Deciding. She flicked her chainsword into action and severed the mesh in one sweeping thrust. They both dropped through, accelerating as they plummeted. Liz lost her grip on the woman. Neither screamed as they hit the ground. I THOUGHT THE FALL would kill me.' Startled, Liz turned to face the woman from uphive with a grunt. T thought the fall would kill me, Olaana. I fell with one of the prey. No regard for her life. Like an animal. Let us both fall to our deaths.' 'You're... you're going to die...' 'Yes.' The woman's voice was unnaturally calm. 'The suit will try and repair what it can but it's fighting a losing battle. Soon the stimulants will no longer stop the pain. If it's damaged, it will try and knit my skin to its circuitry. It's happened to others down here.'

I've heard the stories, Liz lied.

'The pain is meant to-'

'What is it?' the Escher blurted out.

It's starting.' The woman punched her own arm in agony.

'The suit's damaged?'

'The pneumatic pistons on the right arm. Damn! Nnghh!' The woman punched harder, frantic.

'Let me see.' Liz pushed the uphiver's fist from her wound. A deep wound had cut deep into the arm of the uphiver. The arcane offworld circuitry was attempting to repair both flesh and steel. Stitching bone to gears.

'Nnaaaaagh! !' The woman's scream was something unnatural, alien.

'Get out of the suit!' Liz shouted, hands fluttering over her.

'Olaana!

'Out!' Liz pulled the woman forwards and begun tugging at the magnetic locks that fastened the suit together.

'My access code! It won't open without it!'

'Call it out! Free yourself!'

'That's against the laws.'

'You're going to die.'

'Olaana, promise you nngh-' Pain forced the woman's words to stop. 'Alpha two-five... ugh... twelve.'

The magnetic claps hissed open. Liz unwrapped the cords, pulled the skintight fittings and unplugged implant interfaces. The woman slid out of the bloody suit like a newborn from its placental sack. Her right arm was a mess of machinery and muscle. 'Olaana...' the woman moaned.

'Here. Take these.' Liz pushed some of the stims into the woman's mouth. 'They'll help with the pain.'

The woman went still. For a moment the Escher thought she was dead. Then the uphiver spat the stims out again. The red colouring from the pills was indistinguishable from the blood in her spittle. 'What?' Liz looked down to the blinded uphiver. The woman said nothing.

'You know,' Liz said grimly. Her words hung in the silence.

'You're the woman that fell with me. Their leader,' the woman sneered in a wracked voice.

'That's right.'

Suddenly the uphiver flapped her hand about the ground for a moment and came up with a stretch of pipe. She swung wildly at Liz. Stunned for a moment Liz didn't move. The pipe caught her on the knee. Liz fell backwards.

'Stinking Underhive rat!' The woman strained, blood coursing from her wounds. She the veins on her temples ran hot, her face contorting in pain.

'You're nothing better than an animal. You're filth to be trodden on by your betters. Thought you could buy your salvation with kindness?'

'No,' the Fischer snapped back. I'd rather you died like the rest of your kind. Slowly. Let you bleed to death, alone and in the dark. You killed my friends!' As did you.' 'We were set up.'

'You thought the ambush would be yours. How are you different to me? I hate your kind and you hate mine!' The woman flopped back in the dirt, spent. Liz stood slowly. She regarded the woman's damaged body. She looked at the machine-melded arm. At the suit. At her dead friends.

ALDUS HARKON stood on the edge of the shuttle bay, staring out into the night sky for the second evening running. The city below him was lit up by thousands of lights from twenty-four hour furnaces. Higher up, the lights of each landing bay, jutting out from the hive like gargoyles. City lights. Star lights. There were almost as many tiny points of light emanating from Hive Primus as there were stars in the sky. Aldus could almost imagine he was staring into a lake.

Aldus spent a lot of time staring. He let his mind wander on these occasions to stop boredom from seeping in and addling his brain. He spent a lot of time waiting. But that was part of the job description. He needed the time to mull over and orchestrate his deals. It was during all the time that he spent thinking that he first realised that the highest price was not always the fastest way to the Upper Spire. Protection, security, special handshakes and powerful patrons were far more useful in the long term. In the sky above him, Aldus saw one of the stars move. He brushed his lank, greying hair out of his eyes. Minutes passed. The star grew larger until Aldus could make out the Ran Lo symbol on the shuttle's nose. The lights marking the runway lit up. Aldus began his long walk back to the safety barrier at the runway's end, casting tall shadows along the walls as he passed over each guide light.

Harkon sat and watched, reassured to see the shuttle land at a reasonable speed. He began his approach as it settled on its landing gear and jets of steam poured from conduits. The stairs lowered and a lone figure stepped out of the hatch. Aldus recognised the hunter from earlier. Monomolecular sword sheathed at her side, swagger in her step, braided black hair. Moving

slowly; she had been wounded. And her companions? Dead? Aldus stalked forward, rubbing his fingers. 'Welcome home.' He bowed severely before the woman, came up grinning, I hope the hunt was as successful as I promised.'

'The hunt, Aldus Harkon,' Knife Edge Liz replied, 'has only begun.'

THE DAY OF THIRST
BY TULLY R. SUMMERS

SURE YOU'VE GOT a heavy stubber. You just better hope Krug hired you to use it, and not for something else.

Oh, I'd rather not say. If Krug hasn't told you - and he obviously hasn't, because you're here - it's not for me to go spilling the beans. Drink your WildSnake, it'll take your mind off that hand of yours.

Of course it stings. The initiate brand ain't meant to tickle. Supposed to impress upon you the seriousness of joining the Black Hand. Don't pick at it, you'll catch spore rot and the arm'll drop off, then they'll have to bum it someplace else. What? Well of course it's watered down. The way you Black Hand swill the stuff I wouldn't have enough WildSnake to souse a sump rat.

Uh huh, that's right. Took you on to replace Dramuck. It's In what capacity, you should be worried about.

All right, I'll tell you if you promise to stop calling me 'Weasel' - a most undeserved moniker for such an upstanding gaming den proprietor such as myself, and I don't care what Krug says. It was a quiet day at the Bonesapper's Lounge-Yes, that's what they call this old heap of a troop transport. Why? It's a gambling den, you figure it out.

Nope, hasn't moved for years, ever since whatever it was that blew its left tread off hit it - though some swear it's going somewhere when they get enough WildSnake in them. Look, do you want to hear this or not?

Anyway, it was relatively quiet, with half the Black Hand out working their territory. Krug Face-Mauler sat in a corner with a Guilder from Dead End, hacking out a slag mining contract-Yes, I'm sure he has a brand somewhere, even if you can't see it behind all that admanterite plate he wears, he started the gang, for sump's sake! Shall I continue or do you want go search Krug for distinguishing marks? Very well. Not far from the

hagglers, watching with steely eyes was Horgen, Krug's personal guard. Yeah, you've seen him before, probably using those two chainswords on some poor gob in the fighting pit at Slimecrawl. Yes, that Horgen. Beside Horgen, Flange was primping and combing his long pink mohawk. He's something of a dandy, quite a feat in a crew of Goliaths. The only reason Krug and the others don't kill him is that he's good with those pistols. Soft moans came from the back room where Agar, who usually takes care of Black Hand's 'business' here at the Sapper, lay sweating on my sheets with the shakes. He'd paid some Ratskin to give him a glow mould tattoo the day before, that thing on his face that pulses green with his heartbeat. It's the glow spores under the skin, you see, but it made him sick as a Scavvy when he first got it. On the other side of the room - the others trying to sit out of blast range - was Dramuck, a huge mountain of muscle. That suicidal heavy bolter of his dismantled for cleaning and scattered across my best rat-wheel table. Me holding my breath every time his tinkering set those unstable bolt shells rolling around.

No, I didn't ask him to move. Sure his bolter was dismantled, but his fists weren't, and I didn't feel like eating my teeth just then.

That's when Mother Dark came in, clanging through the two hinged tread pieces of the door like she owned the place. Everyone froze, like a flag had just landed in their lap, and they were waiting to see if it'd go off. Behind Mother Dark strolled in three of her gang, like some kind of erotic carrion bats in black and red leathers. Who's Mother Dark? You'll find out soon enough. Mother Dark is the High Priestess of the Blood Coven. A secretive Escher gang to the south, practising an obscure religion of their own. Up until recently the Coven had pretty much kept to themselves. Then, for no apparent reason, they began making bloody raids on surrounding territories. The raids themselves seemed rather pointless, with no obvious goal except carnage. Well, carnage and captives. Gangers and settlers taken by the Coven were never seen again. That's when the rumours started of dark magic and unspeakable rituals.

This, then, was Mother Dark, their leader, standing in my entrance, and staring at

Krug Face-Mauler like he was the only one in the room.

'Guilder leave!' she commanded, her voice like a razor through velvet.

The Guilder, sputtering indignation at being given orders, gathered his robes about him and scurried out past the warrior women.

Krug rose slowly, the muscles of his jaw working as he bit back his rage. 'You dare break our pact, witch?'

One of the Eschers behind Mother Dark raised a heavy stubber, levelling at all in the room. Horgen's hands flew to the chainswords sheathed on his back, and Flange's pistols were already out, aiming from his lap beneath the table.

'We have held our part of the bargain, and not entered your territory,' Mother Dark purred icily, ignoring the weapon- filled tension. 'But you have yet to deliver one for sacrifice.'

Until now Black Hand had not tangled with the Coven, but by the incredulous looks they directed towards their leader, they obviously had not attributed this to some dubious pact. The shock on their faces quickly turned to fury, and for a moment I thought Krug would be gunned down by his own men.

'You'll get your blasted sacrifice when we capture one of those Orlock scum!' Krug growled back, admirably keeping panic out of his voice.

'No, Krug. The time to sacrifice one of a rival gang is passed. The Day of Thirst approaches! So say the Books of Letting. Preparations must be made. The Sacrifice must be one of your own, one of Black Hand. You will bring the chosen one to the Drinking Stones in exactly four hours, or prepare for our wrath. The Day of Thirst approaches.'

And they vanished out of the door again before anyone could respond. Krug turned to his men, who still held their weapons in their hands. All that babble about the Day of Thirst and the prospect of being chosen for sacrifice had done nothing to calm the men's nerves. 'Well, Krug, what's it going to be?' Horgen asked, his finger twitching on the trigger of his chainsword.

'War!' Krug barked. 'No sump-sucking Escher wench is going to give the Black Hand orders! We hit them. Hit 'em hard, and hit 'em now We'll catch them on the way back to their hideout.'

Krug's plan, though a relieving alternative to sacrifice, had its problems. First of all, only five Black Hand gangers were present, and with Agar sweating out his glow mould, that left only four gangers to 'hit 'em hard'. That's when I was deputised. No, I can't shoot or fight worth a damn, but

Krug wanted numbers. I refused at first, of course, but when Krug offered to wave his 'protection' fee on the Bonesapper's Lounge for a couple of weeks, well, my credit book got the better of my judgement. By all the gods, if I'd only known... I would've paid Krug twice as much not to go. The second problem with Krug's plan was time of departure. It took Dramuck an hour to reassemble his heavy bolter, and another hour trudging through chemdust plains, across gantries and down air vents as we made our way into Blood Coven territory. We never caught the Coven on their way home.

We emerged from the air ducts at the Drinking Stones, and a right mess we were too. The chemdust on our clothes had turned to mud in a particularly steamy duct, and our hair was thickly matted with ventmite web, but as we weren't there on a date, it didn't much matter.

The Drinking Stones served as the Blood Coven's headquarters. They lay in an ancient and crumbling dome, filled with debris and rusting catwalks. The Coven had erected the circle of standing stones and a strange altar made out of broken chunks of concrete. Mother Dark and two of the Coven that had been at the Sapper were moving about the stones in bizarre circles. Miraculously, the heavy stubber was not there. We were two hours early, and had apparently caught them in the middle of some ritual. Dramuck opened fire from the gantry on which he emerged, three storeys up, raining death into the circle of stone with his heavy bolter. I ran to a junction and down the air vent to the next opening about five paces away and began shooting wildly the borrowed auto pistol bucking awkwardly in my hands. Krug, Horgen and Flange leapt down ladders to the rubble-strewn floor.

Things went well at first. The Coven had scattered and taken cover behind the standing stones, and Dramuck's hail of bolts were keeping them pinned there. I can't say my own shooting did much but add to the noise, but I think that was Krug's idea anyway.

He, Flange and Horgen took the opportunity to rush the Stones on the ground. They were almost there when the back of Flange's thigh burst open in a bloody spray. He went down, clutching the spewing wound.

Krug and Horgen spun to face their new attackers. A hatch had opened in the dome wall behind them. Sister Quench, the witch with the heavy stubber, stood in the opening, sending burning chunks of lead into the

three Goliaths. Behind her, also drawn by the sound of gunfire, were two more Eschers, charging to their sisters' rescue.

Krug bent, grabbing Flange by the collar, the ground around him flying into sharp concrete slivers. Meanwhile Horgen, chainswords screaming, charged the three Eschers at the door, who wisely sought to avoid the onslaught of the maniacal pit fighter behind its steel jamb. Krug used the brief respite to drag the wounded Flange to the nearest cover, the steel lattice of a catwalk support pillar. Horgen changed the direction of his charge and followed suit.

High above, sweat poured from Dramuck's body, veins bulging like cords in his neck and arms. The heavy bolter ate belt after belt from its huge ammo pack, spitting those bolts from its glowing red muzzle with a sound like chugging thunder. The Coven's reinforcements had come through the hatch directly beneath the gantry that Dramuck had positioned himself on, so he continued his fire into the standing stones, unable to draw a bead on the new threat.

Me, on the other hand, being twenty feet off to the side, could just barely see the bottom of their entry hatch. With a target finally within range. I redirected my fire. Mother Dark and her cronies, the stones exploding around them, would periodically duck out to snap off wild shots. The two witches with Sister Quench made a dash through the hatch toward Krug and Horgen. my bullets sparking harmlessly off the nearby wall.

Krug aimed his shotgun through the crossbars of the support strut and blasted one of the charging Eschers. The solid slug hit the Coven juve in the neck, practically severing her head. Her lifeless body hurled back and crumpled on the floor amidst a rain of blood and bits of vertebrae.

Sister Quench's crouching form suddenly filled the part of the hatch I could see. Heavy stub slugs began pelting the ductwork around me. I pressed myself to the vent wall, only to hear the metallic shriek of the support lattice giving way. The whole air shaft I was in twisted, buckled, and plummeted to the ground like some huge rusted worm in its death throes.

When the noise and dust settled, I realised I was somehow still alive. I was on my back, buried up to my shoulders in twisted metal. The ventilation tube was still attached to the wall at the other end, slanting

down at crumpled angles to the floor where I now lay, trapped and immobile.

As if things weren't bad enough, Dramuck's pumping bolter finally overheated. The huge machine seized, jamming bolt after bolt together like a tube train crash. It exploded in his hands, sending his body soaring over the edge of the gantry His fall halted with a sickening crunch, impaling him on the jagged end of a support that had held my fallen air shaft. I frantically tried to free myself and was rewarded with a new avalanche of debris that covered me completely.

That was it. With two men down and his heavy bolter skewered on a girder, Krug was hopelessly outnumbered. His harried voice came ' Out and back! Out and back! Note!' The Blood Coven jeered and fired off parting shots as Krug, Horgen and Flange fled the dome through a crevice in its shattered wall.

'Come again, Black Hand!' Mother Dark mocked. 'You're welcome any time!' My stomach turned with sickening realisation that I had been left for dead. The pile of metal covering me had pinned my head to the side... if only it had broken my neck, I would have been spared the horrors I witnessed next. For though trapped and concealed from view, there was a small hole or tunnel through which I could breathe and see out of, directly in front of my face - staring directly at the Drinking Stones. Some time went by, in which I assume the Coven were tending their wounds, and scouring the dome for survivors. They did not find me. For that I can give some little thanks. I saw them finally enter the circle of stones carrying two bodies: that of their mangled juve, and Dramuck, who they had somehow managed to drag off the impaling support.

And this is the worst part: Dramuck was still alive.

Any normal man would have died in the blast of his exploding weapon, never mind a careening fall onto sharp metal. It was his massive physique, you sec. An iron constitution that refused to let go. The wounds through his shoulder told me that the support hadn't passed through any vital organs. Poor (ragging bastard. If only it had hit his heart... Mother Dark appeared, wearing a robe made of, well, I couldn't swear, but it looked like skin. Yeah, human. No. I don't know for sure. Look, I wasn't that calm at the time... Anyway, she stood before the altar and produced a large bound tome that I chose not to inspect too closely. She began to recite words

from the book, strange garbled stuff that I couldn't pronounce, even if I could remember them. A witch with a chainsword began slicing up the dead juve on the floor while four others lifted the groaning Dramuck onto the table-like altar.

I winced and grit my teeth as horrible stone spikes were driven through his wrists and ankles into holes bored deep into the stone surface. This nightmare continued as the rest of the sisters began painting the pock-marked stones with strange symbols and arcs, using the bloody appendages of the dead juve. I could barely watch. This done, the Coven gathered in a circle about the pinioned body of Dramuck. Mother Dark looked up from her recitation. 'The Day of Thirst is approaching! So say the Books of Letting!' she shouted, lifting the book above her head. 'Preparations must be made!'

With that she opened her robe, revealing a girdle made out of leather. It was covered in dozens of loops and pockets, each holding a gruesome bladed hook, like some horrible surgical instrument. The Coven members filed past Mother Dark one by one, each taking an instrument, and descended on Dramuck.

I thrashed, contorted and beat myself against the restraining pile of metal around me, in a desperate attempt to free myself. Desperate to be away, desperate not to see the hideous dismantling of Dramuck. Chunks of metal crashed to the floor with my exertions, but their reverberating clangs were drown out by the inhuman screaming coming from the Drinking Stones.

I finally succeeded in freeing most of my body, but the evil piece of rubble pinning my head would not budge. I could not look away. I caught one nightmare image before I clenched my eyes shut to the abhorrent act before me.

It wakes me at night. Screaming. Dramuck splayed out like an anatomy book, the witches with their little hooks and blades, teasing tendon, vein, and organ from their rightful places, rivers of blood coursing down the sides of the altar... and all the while, Dramuck's screaming...

It seemed to go on for hours, tears streaming down my cheeks, my face aching from pressing my lids together so hard I thought my eyeballs would burst. And then it stopped. I lay there, eyes closed, breathing, for what seemed the first time in weeks. Sometime later, when all was

completely still, and I had heard the Coven depart, I chanced a look into the Drinking Stones. Dramuck's remains had mercifully been removed, though the red stone still glistened wetly. Mother Dark knelt at the base of the altar, praying.

Then, as the quiet of the dome carried her voice to me, I realised what I had taken for prayer was conversation. She was talking. Looking closer, I saw the altar sat upon a large drain, like a sewer grate. She was cooing as one speaks to a dear, small child. 'Yes. Yes my sweet. Drink. Drink deeply, for your day approaches. The day you will emerge and all the Hive will tremble before your glory'

My blood ran cold. There was something beneath the altar. Something huge. I could hear it, a slashing gelatinous mass, flopping and banging around in some vast liquid filled metal vat. She was talking to it. And at the pinnacle of my terror, it spoke back. A sucking, gurgling mockery of human sound echoing from the pit. In an insane surge of panic driven energy, I wrenched my head free of its vice-like imprisonment, leaving a good portion of my scalp hanging on its edge. Bleeding, I ran like a madman up the twisted tunnel of the hanging air shaft and out of that accursed dome, but not before Mother Dark's sickly sweet voice came drifting up the metal tunnel.

'Yes, my sweet. Preparations are being made...'

SURE, YOU'VE got a heavy stubber, but you see the question you should be asking yourself, don't you? Have I been hired to replace Dramuck to fight those sump-sucking degenerate witches...

Or have I been hired to replace Dramuck as sacrifice to that thing, that abominable monstrosity beneath the altar?

You see, I'm not sure wily old Krug and that witch Mother Dark haven't got together and come to an agreement since our last- No, wait!

Where are you going?

You haven't paid for your WildSnake yet!

BADLANDS SKELTER'S DOWNHIVE MONSTER SHOW
BY MATTHEW FARRER

THE CENTRAL thoroughfare of Fever's Break started at the fortified gates and snaked under the huge ridge of metal where the dome floor had buckled during some upheaval hundreds of years before. Where it reached the moving stairs into the cliff-face that formed the uptown, it opened out into a plaza against the dome wall. That was where all the local hawkers, preachers, beggars and hoods spent their days, and that was where Skelter stopped and had his people set up the tent.

Starkey had unhitched the two biggest pack-bison from the main wagon and was using them to pull the poles upright, while his brother and daughter ran back and forth with magnetic clamps for the guy-ropes. Skelter's own kids were already at work, running back and forth through the streets nearby trying to look like locals and shouting

'Skelter's show is here! Skelter's show is here!' to each other. They were good at it. By the time tickets went on sale, everyone would know about them.

Another half-dozen of the troupe were strolling back and forth around the tent and the rows of wagons and trailers parked in a jumble beyond it, relaxed but watchful eyes on the crowd that was already building up. Skelter glanced out at the faces and did some quick mental arithmetic, and liked the result. In a few minutes he would begin his pitch.

Amongst the cages bustled the rest of them, making sure the covers were closed and the more excitable exhibits were staying calm. Kamusz, the retired Bounty Hunter, winked at Skelter as he let a fold of tarpaulin fall away as if by accident. Instantly a huge scaly arm shot out and grabbed at him, got him by the front of his jerkin and yanked him toward the bars.

There were screams from the crowd. Kamusz yelled as if in fear and Skelter got in on the act, running across and whacking at the arm with a pistol barrel. It retreated and as they put back the tarp Skelter saw Issig the Scaly snort through his nostrils in salute before he curled back up to snooze again. They sauntered away. 'That should sell us another couple of dozen tickets,' Skelter murmured. Kamusz nodded. 'Are you putting Issig in tonight?'

' Sure.' There was a flapping behind them as the banner went up: 'badlands skelter's downhive monster show!'. They kept walking. T don't think the line-up we tried at Rathouse Gulch worked too well. I'm going to bring Issig on last. Most people up here by the Wall are so green they barely know what a Scaly is. Remember how they screamed the first time we brought him out at Winchcrag? I'll put on the Sump Toads early, maybe even have someone walk one around on a leash this afternoon to raise interest.' Kamusz nodded, then tapped Skelter's arm as a wave of shuffles and muttering rippled through the onlookers. 'Trouble.' Silent figures were making their way through the crowd, silent figures dressed in heavy cloaks and hats that made them look a head taller than the townsfolk around them. The gawpers melted aside as the leader stalked over. The two showmen tensed. The ganger was easily Skelter's height, which was unusual enough, but his heavy frame loomed where Skelter's long limbs just gangled. Kamusz began idly whistling the little tune that the troupe used as a signal for everyone to get armed and ready. There was a rattle behind them as the doors on the cages were loosened. 'Where is the Wyrd here?'

Skelter gave Kamusz a quick 'I knew it!' look, then brightened up and tried to look attentive.

'No Wyrds here, sir, I assure you. We have Guilder stamps of passage, everyone's been cleared by the Adeptus themselves. Just years of experience in the worst of the Badlands at the very Sump of the Hive, and training that brings out these creatures' natural behaviours. Brought up to these peaceful towns for the first time ever!' He raised his voice a little for the benefit of the crowd. 'For your education, edification and amazement, we give you-' 'There is a Wyrd here!' The leader cut him off.

Skelter suppressed a sigh and idly wondered if the man was from a gang he'd heard of. With practice, you could pick the Cawdor flunkies: lovely

resonant voices. It was all those hymns and sermons. Not that it made up for the trouble they caused. 'Psykers and carousing and harbouring of mutations! This so-called "show" is a stench in the nostrils of the Emperor. The townsfolk would not listen to our warnings, but I know your kind - thieves and swindlers all.'

Another meaningful glance between Skelter and Kamusz. Damn, usually it doesn't happen this soon.

The ranter shoved a hand under his cloak for a weapon. Skelter let his needle pistol slide smoothly from his sleeve to his hand and fired a single, silent shot into the man's throat. The townsfolk yelped and dove for cover as two more gangers fell before they could bring weapons to bear.

Then the cages swung open and Tara ran past, blowing a whistle. Six huge Sump Toads recognised the signal and bounded out of their cages, chasing the last few gangers away down the street, as four of the troupe's wranglers grabbed nets and leashes and took off after them. The crowd parted before them, and Skelter was gratified to hear catcalls and clapping as the gangers scuttled away. The prone leader was beginning to stir and groan, so Kamusz kicked him hard in the temple. He slumped again as Skelter fitted the little pistol back into its slip-sheath. 'How long have we been working the big-towns circuit, Kam? I can never get over the so-called "settled levels". Call themselves gangers? Soft as spider-gut. I mean, the banner and all our posters say I lived at Hive bottom for years. Why doesn't anybody ever act as though they believe me?' Kamusz was bent over the unconscious gangers. 'C'mon, best not to rob them. You know there'll be the Watch along in a second. Let them be the bad guys, hey?'

I'm not robbing them, Skelter. Recognise these? The way the chamber and sight are set on the stub-gun here, the barrel configuration. And look, that knife, chisel-point and no quillions. Only one House makes that design. Give you odds he's got a mask collection at home.' 'Great. Just great. Back at the Gulch they told us this was a nice, fat, quiet town.' 'Probably is, most of the time. This whole level is only just within the Underhive by most people's reckoning. The upramps to Hive City proper are only a morning's ride away. Things up here get run pretty tightly. I had people ask around. There are two deputised Watch gangs, the Fireclouds and the Gunsmoke Shadows, and they're both Escheraffiliated. Cawdor loyalties in a town like this mean you have meetings in a cellar and keep

your mask under your mattress. We must be something special to bring them out of their burrows.' Kamusz looked around. ' Skel, your crowd's getting pensive.'

The showman nodded, then wheeled around and raised his arms. 'That was no excitement, ladies and gentlemen! That was a scuffle any Downhive child could have won! I hope you think you were entertained before, folk of Fever's Break, because tonight I'll prove that wrong, wrong, wrong! Tonight, at 'Badlands Skelter's Downhive Monster Show!'

Behind him there was a rattle as the shutter went up in a wagon's side and the ticket window opened. Most of the crowd jostled for spots in the queue, and Skelter straightened his waistcoat, twirled his moustache and beamed at everyone.

THERE WAS a grey adamant slab set at eye-level in the far wall of the anteroom, with two lines carved in plain, blunt letters: we determine the guilty we decide the punishment. Skelter read them for the eighth time, scowled and shuffled his feet. Next to him, Tara gave an ostentatious yawn.

'It was those tickets we sold, wasn't it?' murmured Kamusz from Skelter's other side, and that was too much.

Skelter flapped his arms about. 'Refunds! There are no more hateful two syllables under the Emperor's sun. We had to give refunds!'

'Really? No syllables more hateful?' Kamusz scratched his thin white beard as he thought. Tara rocked on her heels, slender hands twitching. They had been disarmed when they were brought into the bunker, and she was missing having a weapon to hold.

'I mean, coming and griping about the show, that was fine. Wasn't that fine? That was OK! I welcome that! I welcome everybody to come and have their say, no one can say I'm unreasonable about that.' 'How about "Scavvy"?' Kamusz said while Skelter drew breath. 'That's pretty hateful.'

'I would have been happy to discuss the whole thing with them. Open a bottle or two, sit around a table, discuss any problem they had at all. But nOOO...' -Cawdor", of course,' Tara put in. 'Two syllables and as hateful as you want.' 'Out they come and they get the bloody Arbites on us! Not the Watch, you'll notice, not the duly deputised Guilder representatives

delegated to keep the peace and protect the interests of the community. Oh, no, that's too simple.' -Lashworm"?' Kamusz suggested. Tara shook her head. -Lashworm" is a very congenial two syllables.' She ducked a particularly vehement gesture of Skelter's. 'You can train lashworms, you know. Mother's family taught me. You can teach them to pop out for certain types of sounds or smells. Tricky, though.'

'Really? How about - no, that's not two syllables. How about "No sales"?' 'Even Arbites would be acceptable!' Skelter pointedly raised his voice a notch to try to ride over them. T mean, Arbites, OK, we've dealt with them before. I mean, they say they serve the Emperor Himself, even Helmawr can't gainsay them. Oaths of loyalty, upright and true, all the rest of it. Fine! But they waited...'

'Ooh. "No sales." Ooh.' Tara rolled the words around a little. 'Yes, that's hateful.' 'I said they waited until we were almost sold out and then brought every damn thing down! I don't think you two have grasped this yet. Me! Skelter! A showing of the Downhive Monster Show cancelled! We have had. To give. Refunds!' Skelter could see from Tara's face that she was framing a tart reply when the far door clanged open and the Arbites marched in. Hukling after them came the Cawdor leader Skelter had shot, in full regalia now: dark tunic, oiled-leather mask, a stickpatch over the cut the needle had left in his neck. He was fidgeting with triumph or agitation - Skelter couldn't tell through the mask and shapeless clothes. The senior of the two Judges, in black and grey tunic in place of armour, walked to a heavy chair that rose silently through a floor-panel and settled into it in a swirl of his black cloak. His deputy watched impassively through a gleaming, mirror-tinted visor. 'Which of you is Skelter? Stand forward, please.' Skelter took a slow half-step. 'You have had something of a... fraught introduction to this precinct, Skelter. This district is a quiet one. Laws are obeyed. You, however, seem to have aroused some passions.' He flicked the showman an appraising look over steepled fingertips and suddenly pointed to the Cawdor. 'Citizen Jago, of the, urn...' 'Light of Fury!' boomed the mask.

'Light of Fury brethren has a number of claims against your, what is it, "Downhive Monster Show"? He has declared it will encourage lawlessness and riot. I understand there was a scuffle when you set your exhibits up earlier. One that it was necessary to bring before the Adeptus.' The Judge's

tone was ironic, but Jago had apparently missed that: he nodded in evident satisfaction and folded his arms. 'I can't understand that, sir. No alcohol is to be sold, certainly not drugs, not even food. There are some dangerous creatures, true, Milliasaurs and Ripper-jacks and so on, but we keep those in secure cages and simply charge people to look. I realise that these are settled parts, sir, and people aren't at ease about untamed hive life. That's why we also have acrobats, trick-shooting, more. We will be bringing out creatures from the lower Underhive, but I can vouch, sir, that through tireless training and tight technique that has tamed and...'

He realised he was pitching again, and cut himself short. 'We've been in this business for years, sir. We like order at our shows. Jf we start trouble, we don't get to come back. Our self-interest is your best evidence, sir.'

'Lies and ever perverse lies,' the voice snarled from under the leather mask, 'told to one who labours in utmost dignity in the service of the Emperor himself?' Jago made an elaborate holy sign at the word Emperor which Skelter didn't recognise. 'The Imperial seal is upon your shoulder, and yet this man profanes.it! I came to you, Lord Justice, because surely you must see that the vicious poison of tolerance and loose thought that permits this parade of filth will rot away this town! Mutants and savages lurk in their camp, even show themselves here in a house of the blessed Adeptus! Every hour that the simple people around us are drawn away from prayer, fasting and persecution is an hour that they lose from the path of their Redemption. Consorting with mutants, tricksters and wallowers in pleasure, and those who bring the curse of the witch into the midst of the faithful!'

Skelter shifted uncomfortably. Good grief? I'm standing in a room with a man who can actually use the word 'midst' in cold blood.

The Judge nodded, and his gaze pivoted back to the showman.

'And there, Skelter, you have another answer to give. I have ample testimony on the creatures you have in your menagerie, and how co-operative they are. Now there are certain types of outcast with unnatural... affinities with Underhive animals. Outcasts whose names I will not speak here, but against whom I have fought in the Emperor's name. An honest showman such as yourself would have no truck with such, I trust?

That is not a common-law crime, Skelter; it is most surely a spiritual one. You must know the penalties decreed for it.'

In answer, Skelter slipped a set of scroll tubes out of his carry-harness and held them out. Jago started to give little twitches of his head as he looked from Skelter to the Judge, trying to work out what was going on, and Skelter allowed himself a little smile. He stood a little further upright as the parchment was unrolled. 'Mutants!' declared Jago, who seemed to realise he'd lost the spotlight. 'Mutants and witchcraft. My brethren and I will soon have the truth. Hand them over to me, Lord Justice.' There was a rustle from the desk as the Judge rolled the papers up again. 'Thank you, Skelter, for you bringing these. I understand you have had to do this before?' The Judge's manner had palpably relaxed, and Skelter allowed himself to smile.

'Yes, sir. We usually keep them handy whenever we come into a new town. I mean, it's an understandable conclusion.' 'Are you serious, man, uh, my Lord Justice?' Jago pressed. 'With respect, lord, we cannot let the people see that these, these "entertainers" are tolerated just for having some kind of shady paperwork...' Jago's voice tailed off as he saw the Judge's face. Skelter took a discreet step back. 'What I have just seen, Mister Jago, is a certificate from a Primaris Psyker' - Jago gasped at the word - 'with one of our garrisons in Hive City. Its endorsement is less than a month old. It testifies that all the members of this troupe have been examined by an Adeptus Psyker, mark you, and there is no trace of any psychic spoor that signifies association with a Wyrd. There is an inspection chit from a Guilder technician stating that all the animal cages and pens are sound and well-built. And I have also just seen a permit to perform, on condition that that psychic examination is conducted every six months to make sure no Wyrds are recruited. That permit carries an Arbites counter-seal.' He held out the tubes, and Skelter hurried forward to take them. 'Mister Jago, downhive I suspect knowing when to quit would be a liability Up here, it's an asset. Think on that.'

For a long moment Jago quivered in frustration, and Skelter wondered whether to feel sorry for him. Then the man began to speak.

'Though here today a court of my fellow mortals, even under the name and oath of the Great Emperor himself, has deemed my words and my cause unworthy, I shall speak one last time. For though my voice may be as a whisper of breeze in some long-dark corner of this land, one day, that breeze may stir a draught, and the draught may stir a current, and the

current will become a great clean wind that shall rise and sweep-' And Skelter cut him off with a delighted cry. 'I knew that speech sounded familiar! I know that show! We toured with some actors once, it's one of their plays! The Triumph of Grimnar! This cretin's pinching his speech from a children's fairytale!'

Jago stood frozen as a statue, one arm still flung out in front of him, while behind him there were strangled sounds as Tara tried to stay solemn. Then Skelter saw the junior Judge put a hand over his face as if to cough, and couldn't control himself. Jago stamped out of the room and Tara and Kamusz exploded into laughter. Skelter's eyes caught the Judge's and he was sure he could see the faintest of glints. ISO?' KAMUSZ ASKED after they had walked awhile. What do we do tomorrow?' They had left the Arbites bunker at the top of the uptown, and were picking their way down through the sloping tunnels back to the plaza. The glow-globes were still in their day cycle up here, giving the three the novelty of light bright enough for sharp black shadows: Skelter's tall and thin like a giant black mantis, Kamusz's the square and jutting outline of his heavy jacket and cap, and Tara's as small and slender as she was. The breeze from the township's convector-fans tousled their hair. 'We go on. I think Jago knows he's lost the initiative tragically, now. And we should have packed out at least three shows in advance after the last couple of hours. Let's do all the shows we can in the next few days and rake it in. Hopefully the fool won't work up the nerve to do anything until we're out of town. I might get you to keep-' 'Extra eyes tonight, sure. What's in the show?'

'Most of the animals. I don't think Tara can spare any to use as guards. And I still think we're safe enough for a while, at least. I'd rather put everything in, have a great show, half a dozen full houses and roll out of here on a high note.' Skelter sighed. 'Why can't we have more places like the Gulch? Lovely, well-policed, cushy settlements who'll pay up for a good show. If I wanted hassle like this I'd still be down-hive wrestling plague-zombies.' The three of them strolled on. At the plaza gates they stopped while Tara bought a cup of the salty gruel that the downtown markets sold.

A level up, a knot of dark-clad men buying clip after clip of bullets turned to watch them through the barred window of the gunsmith's, staring after them until they disappeared into the crowds.

OH NO!' THERE WAS laughter as Tara put her hands on her hips and glared. 'Look what you've done! It's everywhere!' Behind her, Genca was soaked in a watery brown dye that looked repellent from a distance. Bolitho, wearing a too-tight coverall that made his gawky body even more comical, goggled at her. Tara, in spangled leotard and boots, turned to the audience.

'I'm so sorry, my lords and ladies. We'll carry on for you anyway.' She waited a few moments for Bolitho to start pretending to clean up what he'd spilled, and after a silent count of three blew a staccato note on her whistle and cracked the glittery display whip. The three pipe-lizards immediately jumped onto Bolitho's bent back, instead of their stools - as they'd been trained to do. More laughter. Genca clapped his hands to his head in mock dismay, paunch wobbling. At the tent entrance, Skelter shook his head and muttered aloud.

'These people are taking forever to warm up! What's wrong with them?' 'Dhunno, Bhozz.'

'Issig!' It always surprised Skelter that the alligator-snout could make words at all, let alone ones he could understand. Issig was peering past him into the tent, where Tara was pretending to scold the two men while the lizards turned somersaults behind her. Sss'funnhee. Thhey'rr noht lahhffhh'ng. Ss'ngthnnn whhrd.'

'Maybe they're just not into entertainment in this place. Too straightlaced and well-fed.' Even as he said it, Skelter knew how unconvincing that sounded. There was something about this crowd that made him prickle.

Bolitho and Genca walked out past him, mock-arguing, then stopped, grabbed harnesses and waited. Behind them a mohawked silhouette muttered to itself and did shoulder-stretching exercises. 'You ready, Eva?'

'Yeah.' The ex-ganger pushed her way past the two men into the strong yellow light from the tent. She flipped her pistols out of their holsters, span, juggled, tossed and caught them, and snapped them home without taking her eyes off Issig. Eva had only joined the troupe two months before, and still hadn't come to terms with trusting a Scaly - she'd complained bitterly about using quarter-strength ammo for her act. Skelter supposed he didn't blame her.

'Cheev is controlling the targets from the box tonight, and Tara'll stay in there and do the thrown ones for you.' Eva nodded, her bright crest of hair catching the lights. 'Grim-faced crew, aren't they?' she muttered, then shuddered and touched an icon at her neck as Issig loped past her and disappeared into the gloom around the tents. 'You read my mind. But they were fighting for tickets all afternoon. Not a single empty seat.' Eva shrugged as their cue sounded, then sauntered out into the ring as the lizards trotted past her to be leashed and harnessed. Out in the ring, Tara took a large sequin from her belt and flipped it into the air, where Eva nonchalantly shot it in two to gasps and cheers.

Why are they so grim? Those lizard tricks are sure-fire. They're still not smiling, most of them. Just_ attentive. There was an idea, something big and spiky that his subconscious was trying to push at him, and he found himself shifting from foot to foot and chewing his lip. Half the audience seemed to have their hands in their laps, fiddling with bundled-up clothes. That made his mind spin a little faster, and he didn't know why.

Something is so wrong here.

Just as he felt the thought begin to come, just as he was sure the piece was about to click, there was a muffled shout from back behind him. Skelter's taut nerves jerked. He crept back a few paces and listened. He thought he heard a voice, and running footsteps, and a word that sounded like 'tent!'. Then his guts lurched as he heard the thump of gunfire.

IT HADN'T BEEN a very good ambush. Kamusz had been scanning a pile of tarpaulins when he noticed a shadow that hadn't been there before. He was too old a hand to raise a shout straight away. He let them think he hadn't seen them, wandered back into the space between two trailers and ran like hell. Zian and Travis came at a quick whistled signal and they started back as a flash of light came from the perimeter. Kamusz roared and unslung his shotgun. Ten, twelve more paces and he was in cover behind a giant steel track as masked figures broke from the nearest pits and buttresses. Damn damn damn!

Zian was squinting into a darkvisor. 'Nine, ten... no, just nine. Hey, Kamusz, this is a pretty spineless effort for a mob that knew we'd be on guard. There's gotta be more than this.'

Kamusz's mind worked faster than Skelter's had. His eyes widened. The tent! The tent! Back to-'

Then the darkness was alive with running, shouting figures and a shot spanged over Kamusz's head. He snarled and dropped back behind his cover as his gun came alive in his hands.

Behind them in the tent, a roar began to rise.

'Jago!' Skelter croaked, and then found his voice and strode into the tent, bellowing, 'Get out of my tent, Jago! Take all your Sump-damned bloody undercover foot-soldiers with you! No Cawdors! Out! GET OUT!'

Skelter whipped his head from left to right. He thought of shutters closing over windows, or a shroud of fog descending on the silt wastes. Suddenly all across the stands there were no eyes to meet, no expressions to watch - just rows of featureless masks. There were no eyes visible, just dark holes, but he could still feel their stares burning into him. His hand squirmed by his side where his holster normally was.

There was a rush of words from the befuddled, unmasked faces left sitting -less than a third of the crowd now

'Hey what-'

'But why are they all-'

'Is this part of the-'

'Get your guns, this is-'

Skelter ground his teeth, and then Tara punched his arm and yelled 'Run!'. As gunmetal glinted all around the ring, they sprinted for the entrance and the curses, battle-cries and prayers of the Cawdor mob rose to a roar.

REALISATION SCREAMED in like a dislocated joint sliding back into place. For the first time that night,

Skelter's head felt clear. He stared into the tent with his mouth open. For a moment he simply couldn't believe they would - had - tried it. But the fidgeting, the solemn faces, the watchfulness, and those little folded bundles in their laps. They were waiting for the signal. To put on their masks.

Skelter's searching eyes settled on one of the biggest men in the crowd, sitting at the most visible point, high in the central stands. Arrogant set to

his wide shoulders, rich black hair, thick arms folded - and a stickpatch on the left side of his throat. THEY PELTED OUT OF the tent and scattered into the dark. Around the rim of the camp they could hear gunshots and shouts. A flash and a shower of sparks from inside had them moving again, racing for weapons. People were at the trailer ahead of them. Starkey was scrabbling at the gun locker, half-sobbing to himself. Skelter grabbed him and spun him around. His hair was sweat-slick and his eyes stared. 'What's happening? What's happening?' Tara pushed past them. "They went after the kids. They started shooting at the south side when Kamusz found them over to the west. They fired past us at where the kids were. This isn't a terror raid, Skel, they mean business!'

Skelter felt his stomach churn. 'Alright, we're going to fix this. Take an autogun and get back out. You and Genca cover the sideshow enclosures, where you were.' Starkey took a breath and nodded. Tara stood up, pulling a drab grey coverall on over the sparkling suit she had worn in the ring.

'Who's hurt, Starkey, who'd they get?' 'Gia got burnt when one of them fired a hotshot shell and it splashed, uh, they were, oh Emperor's name, they were throwing grenades, Kantor, you know, my son, they shot my son, he was screaming-' 'Who's dead?' Skelter fought the urge to shake him.

Starkey shook his head and wiped sweat from his face. 'Nobody so far, I don't think, people were hurt, the kids were hurt and we had to carry them to the wagons...' Tara turned around with a shotgun in her hand and revenge written in her face. He heard a scrape and clack as Eva locked a live clip into each of her pistols. 'Genca, you apd Starkey get going. Eva, cover the tent entrance as long as you can!' The fat man nodded and led the way off through the camp, and Eva ducked back the way they'd come.

A fresh burst of gunfire made Skelter and Tara spin around. The Cawdors were trying to storm out of the tent, but the mass of regular punters had its own ideas. There were just enough bystanders to clog the narrow aisles and create knots of shouting, brawling people at each tent-flap. Skelter grinned despite the sick anger building up in his gut - the advantage was to the bystanders, and the Cawdors couldn't fire in the swirling mob without hitting one another. The erstwhile show-goers were punching, stabbing and pistol-whipping with impunity, and the stands were rocking and threatening to give way. There was a crunch and a chorus of screams from inside, and Skelter realised that Cheev had used the controls

in the master booth to drop the target gantry for Eva's act onto the rioters below. He let out a hiss of triumph and grabbed two autopistols from a rack, just as Cheev himself came scampering out of the tent with three Cawdors on his heels.

Tara dropped to one knee and put a man-stopper shell through the first, and Skelter cut down the second with a quick double-burst. The third dropped his chainsword and sprinted for the gates. Cheev gave them a grin, white teeth flashing, then reached for his pursuers' weapons.

'They were shooting at the kids!' Tara yelled. 'We need to get to the main trailer and make it safe.' Skelter bit back a foul taste in his mouth and ran after her as she flitted through the dark maze between metal wagon-walls.

'Tara, this is my fault! Emperor's eyes, Tara, I played stupid games with that Cawdor bastard, I pushed him too hard, they came back and they-' 'Not your fault and you know it! Shut up and- DOWN!'

Tarn dropped and Skelter followed her. A smear of plasma hissed overhead, splashing the wagon behind them. A grinning, dwarfish Cawdor took aim again as, behind him, a hulk of a man in nothing but leggings and mask hefted a grenade launcher. Skelter tried to move even as he thought won't make it before it recharges but then something thrummed by his ear. There was a solid CHANK and both Cawdors seemed to loll oddly in the dim light until Skelter realised they had both been speared into the metal wall behind them. He looked around.

Behind him, Issig had already put the butt of his harpoon gun on the ground and had pulled another shaft, solid steel and wrist-thick, out of his quiver. His arms bulged as he forced it down, then the spring clicked into place and he pulled the weapon up under his arm, disappearing into the twilight again. They clambered up and Tara pointed ahead: the main trailer lay just across from them. 'I thought you'd made Issig get rid of that thing.'

'I thought he had! I vote he keeps it after this.'

They scurried across the open ground. Skelter, moving backwards with pistols hunting the air, thought he saw gun-muzzles in every shadow and hunched over. Behind him, Tara hauled a door half-open and he heard children's cries. 'Kray!' Tara called. 'Who's in there with you?'

Kray was supporting a baby in one arm and cradling a tri-barrelled laspistol in the other. The bandage around the baby's chest was spotted

with stains that looked black in the dim light. 'We got the kids away, they'd all been playing out by the fire. They ran right up there-'

'We've got that area covered. I think they're gone again. Who's in there?'

'All Starkey's kids, not badly hurt, just shaken up. Gia, and Eva's baby niece and

Cheev's little brother, and Jayden's little girl. An-wei and her three are down the back there. Jayden's in here with the medical stuff, she's working on the hurt ones.' Skelter could see Tara's eyes narrowing, and he knew his own looked the same.

Kray looked stricken. T couldn't see Lee or Canda. They went running off to find you,

Skelter, and the masked men were shooting-'

Tara slammed the door and spun around, grabbed shells from the pack at her hip. Her voice was clipped and level. 'We go to the hotspots first, then? Once we know they aren't there, we double back toward the tent and start looking.' Skelter nodded and

they were running again.

KAMUSZ STEPPED over a dead Cawdor, his shotgun on his back, stub-gun in one hand, power-maul in the other.

Around him, the mutant cages howled and rattled under their armour-cloth tarps - no chance of letting the animals out into the teeth of a firefight, not like this morning. Two gangers were crouching by the corner of the wagon, intent on priming the bombs they carried as shells ricocheted around them. Kamusz began the maul on its arc even as he glided forward and the first dropped in a shower of sparks. The other spun around and Kamusz drove the stubber into his gut. His body silenced the shots, then he dropped and Kamusz stepped out of the alley.

This was where they had had their campfire. Three Cawdors were here still, their backs to him as they shot at shapes lurking among the wagons. The troupe's fire stopped when Kamusz appeared and the-Cawdors stood up to give chase, thinking their enemy routed. Kamusz dropped two of them with quick head-shots and clouted the third with the maul: he had thumbed the setting up and the flash of power took the man's face along with his mask. Issig and the others ran forward from their positions and

then stopped. The massive figure slowly pointed over Kamusz's shoulder. Kamusz didn't need to ask why. He could tell what the looks on their faces meant. He was lowering his weapons even as the voice from behind him boomed: 'You move and he dies.'

TARA AND SKELTER had split up at the mech-shop wagon and now she headed for the perimeter. The shooting was tailing off and there were no fires. A shape appeared balanced on a shoulder-high trailer coupling.

'Repent and Redeem!' the Cawdor howled as he raised an autogun, but Tara didn't slow: she swerved in, pulled her knees up and ran two paces up the side of the trailer, kicked out and backflipped. The burst ricocheted off the metal behind her and she hit ground, rolled and fired a hotshot shell that toppled the Cawdor down next to her. He screamed and kicked in the flames, but weakly, and she took the time to spit an old Ratskin curse her grandmother had taught her. The man let out another cry, and she crushed his knee with the stock and left him to burn. She rounded the corner and hurdled a dead, masked body, but the scene by the remains of the campfire turned her limbs to lead. The shotgun sagged in her grasp and she stopped. SKELTER FIRED A long burst from each pistol, and the masked woman with the grenades staggered back and fell.

He took two steps forward and looked at the little crowd beyond her: all hooded and armed, but stymied and uncertain. Amateurs playing at gangers, he thought, who don't know that in real life people shoot back. One began to raise a gun. Skelter saw the little girl with bloodied bandages around her in his mind. My. fault. He raised the gun before they could fire and began long, sweeping bursts that scattered them and felled them and chased the rest of them, yipping and wailing, off into the dark. His pistols juddered and jammed, and he let them drop to his sides. He felt exhausted, and turned toward the camp... and heard Jago's voice roaring out his name. ' SKELTER! SHOW YOURSELF!' Jago held the boy in one elbow, the muzzle of his plasma pistol grinding back and forth against Lee's temple. One of Jago's boots pinned Canda's hand to the ground; she whimpered but would not cry. ' SKELTER! I know these are your children! Let me see you NOW!' 'No need to shout, Jago. Just turn around. Look, no pistols this time, no needier in the sleeve.' Skelter walked slowly into the firelight,

hands spread by his sides. Jago lifted his foot, and Canda withdrew her hand. He kicked her hard as she got up to run: she cried out but moved fast. The Cawdor dragged Lee back until the two of them stood by at the very edge of the camp, his back to the side of their one, prized power-wagon. 'There you are, vermin, you see? The little bitch back as a token of faith, although Emperor knows the only faith she'll know is that of the scum who spawned her. What faith do you know, any of you? What? WHAT FAITH?'

Holy Emperor and all the Saints and Primarcbs, Skelter thought, if you can hear me, help me now. This man has a gun to my son's head, and I am watching as he goes mad before my eyes. Please, help me now...

'Your filth may have broken my dearest brothers and sisters, but you will be the ones to weep and cry when the Emperor gathers us up! He will say to us "How have you proven your rotted souls that I might deliver you from the fire and agony", and we will point to where you wallow in your, your decay and your corruption and the, the spittle and vomit in which you have coated your souls, and we will say to our Emperor: We have lived by your Word, we have spread fire and anger and blood everywhere we looked, and when they came to spoil us with laughter and wine and lust and mutants and... and... We are Cawdor. We are CAWDOR!' The hand holding the pistol was starting to shake, and Jago's voice was growing jagged.

'There's a latch by your shoulder, Jago.' Tara's voice seemed to jolt the man out of a daze. He looked at her and Skelter thought he saw his arm loosen. He prayed Lee would run when he had the chance. 'Open the flap there. Are we really going to be able to pull anything before you can fire?' She glanced at Kamusz as she spoke, a look that said 'Try nothing'. Kamusz nodded. Moving like a sleepwalker, Jago tapped the cover up and looked at the brass scrollwork.

'It opens the hatch next to you. Lee knows how to work it, and if you let him, he will. We'll all move back while you get in. You can walk down through the wagon to the cab. It'll take you out of town and away from the Watch. And then you can sell it or burn it or whatever you want. And you'll be away.'

Skelter looked from Jago to Tara. Her eyes were wide and dark and watchful. What the hell is she doing?

Tee, it's alright, trust me. You can open it. I know you're normally not allowed to, but it's alright.' Jago's arm loosened, and the boy wriggled free. Lee's little hand went out, twisted the switch. There was a clunk and the hatch jolted as it unlocked. The window in its top reflected firelight. Tara started to say something, and then Jago gave Lee a gentle little push. The boy took an uncertain step, shot a look over his shoulder, and ran.

And behind him Jago raised the pistol. And as a reward, child, I am going to send you to the Emperor and save you from these-'

They never found out what he was going to call them. Skelter ran forward but Tara was quicker. His feet seemed to slow and there seemed to be time to look around and see everything happening around him with stately, dreamlike pace. Tara dived and grabbed, spun to protect Lee with her back. Next to Skelter, Eva's arm dipped and her laspistol was in her hand and a single silent trail of light drilled through Jago's elbow and sent his own shot into the girders high over their heads. The man had time for one scream before he staggered backward and heaved the hatch open, scrabbling for the machete at his belt.

By the time Skelter's roared curses could pass his lips, Jago was backing through the hatch, craning around as though he'd heard something move behind him... And Issig scooped up his empty speargun, eyeing the distance as he did so, and threw it underarm in a lazy, end-over-end arc that knocked Jago sprawling into the wagon. Light flooded out as the movement triggered interior lamps, and the hatch thumped shut again. Skelter took his first breath in what seemed like hours, ran to his son and rounded on the rest of them.

'What are you waiting for? Get to the cab and get him!'

Still no one moved. Tara raised an eyebrow.

'You never do remember where anything's parked, do you?'

Skelter stared at her.

'That's the Ripperjack wagon.'

As he turned, despite himself, to stare, the shouts of the Watch and the Arbites klaxons sounded from the surrounding tunnels. Something appeared at the little window in the wagon hatch. Something red and tattered that screamed and beat at the glass until it collapsed against the window, leaving a scarlet stain as it was dragged out of sight.

IT WAS WARM when they rode out for Ashclam. Skelter and Tara sat together on the steering platform of the lead tractor, the wagons and trailers spread out behind them and the buggies with their rattling little methane engines scooting past to take point. Issig had been allowed out when they were out of sight of the settlement and had dozed off on the roof of his trailer, a half-gnawed bone in his hand. Skelter had wondered if it really had been a Cawdor icon he'd seen dangling on a bracelet around that bone that morning, but he'd let it slide.

Tara yawned. 'What's Ashclam like? I only want quiet places for a while after this. At least with one thing and another no one thought to stir up trouble about Issig the way they normally do. But we were lucky to get out of it as well as we did, you know' 'I know' Skelter's face was set.

'I didn't mean it that way. It wasn't your fault, Skel. Jago was a freak, something was wrong with him. He'd have come out shooting, no matter what we did.' He nodded, and they rode in silence for a while.

'We'll be fine. We're doing well. We're making money, got our permits. One day soon we'll get a Hive City gig, just like you said. And from there, it's just up and up.' Skelter nodded again. They could just see the distant dot of light that was the giant road-pipe leading uphive to the Ashclam trail, and around them the dome walls curved up into dimness. After a while, Tara put her head on Skelter's shoulder. The lights of the buggies crisscrossed in the middle distance. And above their heads, the bloodstained Cawdor mask hanging from the roll bar swung and twisted on its thong. Skelter always had been a sucker for souvenirs.

MARK OF A WARRIOR
BY RICHARD WILLIAMS

I COULD SEE THEM both from where I sat, the two dark figures crouching in the shadows. They had stalked one another for an hour now, round and round the mining settlement, sneaking quietly between buildings, senses alert, each waiting for a stray sound or smell to betray the position of the other. Now, it seemed, the end was at hand. One of them was huddled down on the ground, peering between two battered yellow cargo containers. He was scanning the open space barely visible through the crack, hoping to catch a glimpse of his quarry, but there was nothing. I saw him shift his weight and edge sideways a fraction, so he could scope the rest of the buildings. As he did a stud on his belt grazed the hard metal surface of the crate, and his enemy, a few paces behind him, took the opportunity to ease himself a little farther around the corner. The huddled one looked down at the stud. A wire-thin strip of yellow paint twirled away from its point. The silver line of fresh metal glinted back in the darkness. Then he realised, I don't know how, the danger he was in. I saw his body Bench as he strained his ears for the softest brush of skin on cloth, of someone else's breathing suppressed to almost nothing. His eyes slid sideways in their sockets and he gripped his gun tighter. There it was, the swipe of skin on skin, of an arm bringing a gun up to firing position. All pretence aside, he dropped forwards, boots kicking up dust, and rolled to his back. He whipped his arm around until he was staring down the barrel straight into his enemy's eyes.

Their gazes flashed across one another for an instant before they both inhaled savagely, gasping for every last bit of air, 'BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!'

The pieces of piping jerked in their hands as the vocal bullets spat forth. Once again, their chests heaved as they cried in perfect unison, 'GOT YOU

FIRST!' Another game of 'Outlaws and Watchmen' ends, the same way they always do. The kid standing had dived at the one on his back and they were wrestling on the ground. Their 'guns', pieces of scrap, had been forgotten, as the two settled their argument in a far more physical manner. When I looked back at them, one nearly had the other pinned, who, in turn, grabbed the tuft of hair on the other kid's head and slammed it down. Young skull met hard dirt with a thud and the struggle continued, 'You're DEAD!' 'You MISSED!' 'Did NOT!' 'GET OFF!"

I didn't know their names, but I knew who they were. I'd been the same a few years ago; creeping through settlements, hunting my friends. We thought we were just like the gangers who came through town everyday, either trading at the post or lounging in the bar, and every single one with a gun strapped to their hip or slung over their back.

The mark of a warrior, that set them above all the rest of us.

They all knew that no one makes it in the Underhive without one thing.

Respect.

To get respect, you have to fight. To fight, you need a gun.

Even we Goliaths know that. The biggest, the strongest of us would never go into a fight without packing something. It was kind of comforting to me when I was a kid, my little rebellious thought whenever some seven-foot, man-mountain of a ganger ordered me to fetch this or carry that. You may be larger than me, you may be louder, but without that piece of metal stuck in your belt, that piece of metal that looks so ridiculous when your oversized fingers are crammed around it, you would be nothing. I remember the feel of having a gun in my hand, even a make-believe one. To only have to point, to kill as if I were the Emperor himself. Now it was going to happen. Today was the beginning. I ran a hand over my shaven head. Already I could feel stubble, the tops of stiff hairs poking through the skin. I wanted to look my best, nose stud polished up, my thin strip of hair freshly dyed. Trying to look like the warrior that I would become, if the gang judged me worthy. There was only one thing missing: on my belt hung a knife and a holster, an empty holster. I tried to relax, tried to calm down, waiting for them to get started with whatever. After all, I couldn't look too wired, they might think I was scared. I dropped my head back on the pile of iron slag I lay against, staring up at the far away ceiling. Then again, it would be worse if I looked like I was snoozing or daydreaming. I

shifted onto my side and propped myself up on my elbow. I squirmed to try and find a comfortable position among those sharp little rocks. A flash of pain stabbed through my side. I looked down. My braces had got twisted, the studs that lined them were digging into my flesh. Clambering to my knees I began adjusting the few clothes I was wearing, making sure everything sharp pointed outwards and looked keen, rather than pointing inwards and being ... inconvenient. Distracted, I didn't notice the shadow fall across me. I sure noticed the meaty hand dropped on my shoulder, though.

I didn't shoot up, that would have been the worse thing to do. I knew who it was. The harsh metallic grating of respirated breathing and the edge of Second Best mingled with stale sweat in the air left me in no doubt. It was the ganger sent to test me. First impressions matter. He'd caught me off guard and if he saw me jump out of my skin he'd know I wasn't up to it, might even refuse to let me try. I didn't know whether he could do that or not, but I wasn't taking any chances. So, instead, I let him wait a second, like I knew he was there all along, and then I turned my head, slowly. His hand gave him away; he was old. It's always the hands that show it most. He must have been nearly forty. Long past his best, still just a ganger with no hope of ever becoming anything more. He had become everything a young man dreaded. No wonder he reeked of cheap Second Best. I got up off my knees and his hoary limb fell away. I swung around to him. His head was shaven and the respirator covered most of his face. No, his head wasn't bare by choice, he didn't have any hair at all. I tried to stop staring at his gleaming dome. He didn't flinch. His scarred and hairy body still looked powerful, the two pistols hung at his belt and the studs and spikes and the ammo chains on his clothes would have made him an impressive figure indeed. As it was, though, I couldn't help but feel embarrassed to see such a man. His hands rose to his face and his thick fingers undid the straps on his respirator with practised ease. He pulled it to the side of his face, revealing a gold ring through his nose and an old, faded tattoo on his cheek. His lips twisted and words emerged in his low, damaged voice: 'You ready?'

WE HADN'T WALKED far from the mining town before he stopped in front of me. 'This is it.'

What was it? The place was deserted, nothing apart from a pile of planks dumped nearby. What was the test supposed to be, single combat? Fine by me, I guess, I would just have to be careful not to kill the old man. He glanced back at me and must have mistaken my confusion for fear.

'You better not be wasting my time, juve. You still wanna do this?'

'Yes, sir,' I snapped back instinctively and hated myself for giving him the respect he didn't deserve.

'Cos it's easy by me if you wanna quit. Save me waiting around for you.' I held my mouth in check. I didn't trust what would come out. He finally turned away and padded over to the planks. He crouched down and fumbled for his respirator. After a drag he took a hold on the top piece and heaved. Nothing moved. I couldn't believe it, even a piece of recyc-plastic was too much for this guy. No one could be that puny, yet there he was, he wasn't grunting or anything but I could see the strain through his body, his muscles rippling along his back and the trembling of his head. Suddenly an almighty crack resounded around the plain and the old man shot up. He stood back and I peered at what he had left behind. The plastic plank had snapped in two, and this wasn't cheap package plastic either, but the reinforced kind. It had been bolted to the stone in the floor. I was stunned. Looking back on it, he could have weakened it before he collected me, or maybe it had already been damaged. But that didn't stop me reconsidering my opinion of him. He took another breath through his respirator, then let it hang to the side as he wiped away a bead of sweat that had formed on his brow. If he noticed the change in my expression, he didn't show it. 'This,' he announced, pointing at the planks, 'is what you're gonna do.' Suddenly, for the first time, I wasn't sure whether I would make it, whether I could match such a feat.

'This leads straight into one of the mine shafts.'

Now the broken plank had shifted I could see that it had covered a small hole beneath.

It looked like it dropped straight down but in this light, I couldn't see more than a few feet.

'This shaft used to be worked, along with the others. But it got infested and the rock-worms inside started to come out for dinner. The main

entrance was buried by the locals, and when they found that some of the nasties had burrowed out through this hole, they boarded it up and hoped nature would take its course, that everything inside would eat each other. If you want in, you go down there, you scrag one of the worms and you drag yourself back here with proof, something it couldn't live without. Get it?' 'Yes, sir.'

My mind raced, digesting the information. A mine infested with milliasaurs, kill one and bring back a trophy. Simple and straightforward, just like us Goliaths, but was I only going to have my knife? In answer to my unspoken question the ganger pulled one of the pistols, a stub gun, from his belt and offered it to me. My breath caught with anticipation.

'Here. Take this.'

I did so, with a careful reverence.

'But remember, we do not need such things. We are Goliath. Where others are weak, we are strong. Where others rely, we merely use.'

His grotesque voice carried on with its dogma. I'd heard it often enough. I concentrated instead on the magnificent object I held in my hand. A G40K revolver-style stub gun, a standard product of the Goliath heavy industries. Cheap, hard to break, easy to repair, there were thousand of weapons identical to this one in Hive Primus alone and countless millions of variants on the design across the planet. But as my fingers curled around the moulded plastic grip and brushed against the trigger I knew this one was unique, because it was the only one of that multitude that was in my hand. I hefted it and felt its comforting weight. I slid it into my holster and it fit perfectly. I let my hand rest on my hip, tensed in anticipation of the quick draw. My hand leapt forward, the pistol in its grasp nothing more than a streak of silver. I aimed it, clenched one eye and looked straight down the barrel. I felt the power, the power of life and death for whoever crossed those sights.

A red shape blocked my vision. Suddenly I was hauled from the ground. I dangled from my bracers which were sandwiched between the gnarled fists of the ganger. His eyes displayed his lack of amusement. 'Get it?' he demanded

'Yes. Yes, sir,' I stammered in response, my feet struggling in the air.

He snorted and released his grip. I felt the drop jar all the way up my body and collapsed to my knees in front of him, coughing in the dirt.

'You will.'

I FELL THE LAST few feet or, at least, I would have done if my belt hadn't caught on a small metal spur poking out of the tunnel wall. The moment I spent hanging in mid-air, suspended by my trousers, screwed up my timing and so, when the inevitable happened, I clattered to the ground, landing one limb at a time. I'd shot to my feet, whipped the pistol from its holster and was scanning my surroundings for danger before my brain kicked in. I have to admit, after the wave of adrenaline had broken over me and my pulse settled down, that I felt pretty smug about that recovery. Yeah, I'd looked a fool but that happens sometimes and all the smooth moves after, pure instinct. After years of playing, it felt so natural to be doing the real thing.

A spark flashed across my eyes, jolting me from my self-congratulation and illuminating the dimly lit area. The sharp odour of ozone briefly overwhelmed the underlying smell of dank stone and rusting metal. It was a storage room, if the crates and barrels were anything to go by. The main support column in the centre of the room had collapsed, more than that, it had been virtually felled by the explosion that had destroyed the tunnel entrance. As a result most of the other end had caved in. The sparks flared again. Something had been ripped off the wall, leaving circuitry exposed.

There was only one way out, apart from the hole above my head of course, and as I put my gloved hand on the frame to look through, I discovered what this exit had been, a window. It crunched and I felt, not pain exactly, just the threat of imminent pain if I gripped any tighter. Ever so gently I peeled my hand away and brushed off the pieces of glass embedded in my glove. Keeping well dear of the jagged edges, I leaned forward and peered down. It was quite a drop but, luckily for me, there were stacks of containers that would make the descent easier. I eased myself through the gap and moved onto the topmost box. It moved with me. With ponderous inevitability the stack gently began to topple away from the wall. Quickly I jammed my other foot back to steady the pile and rocked it back. Regaining my balance, I grudgingly tucked the pistol back into its holster and used both hands to lower myself cautiously down. Damn, I assumed the crates would be full, it never occurred that the

miners would have emptied everything before they left, just as they had stripped whatever had been of use from the last room. Feet now firmly on the floor, pistol and knife in hand, my eyes searched. Nothing. Nothing but the piles of boxes and a big hole in the ground in front of me. A ladder was attached to the lip, leading down into the darkness. I slowly edged round the circumference of the opening, stub gun trained on the shadows. Nothing again, except this time there was the faint whiff of an effluent stream. Once I'd got down there I had to follow the smell to find the source. Buried in the shadows in the corner there was a tiny crawlspace. As I leaned down into it I was hit by the reek of the sewage. It was dark, damp and a perfect place for milliasaurs. Now, you couldn't survive in the Underhive if you were claustrophobic. Everyone has his limits; and having to squeeze through a passage only big enough for a child, full of the stench of liquid garbage, to hunt monstrous worms who'd paralyse you and then drag you home for a slow digestion, is getting close to mine. Still I had no choice, and I had my gun. That was enough.

I dropped to my hands and knees, then to my belly. I coughed with the extra weight on my lungs. There would be barely be enough room for me to lift my head to see where I was going. I pushed my knife-sheath and holster around my belt until they were beside my hips, I couldn't have them dig into my waist as I pushed myself along. Steeling myself, I entered, nudging my pistol and knife in front of me. With my shoulders pressed against the sides, I put arm in front of arm, then swung a hip forwards and dragged my legs along behind me.

I struggled onwards. My chest scraped along the bottom, my hair was flattened against the top and it brushed dust down into my eyes, making me blink. When I finally had the full length of my body inside, I realised exactly how narrow the shaft was. My only way out would be to push myself backwards, completely blind. If something got behind me there was no room to turn around. Nothing I could do. What use would even a meltagun be if something bit me in the leg? And if it was a milliasaur, one bite would be all it needed for its poison to cripple me. My breathing quickened, I couldn't fill my lungs and I was gasping for air. My body heat reflected off the surfaces that covered me; it was hot, and the smell, I might as well have been drowning it in. I knew I was panicking, and that made it worse. My head was beginning to feel light. Deep breath, the

thought sprung suddenly into my mind, that's what I need, a good deep breath. I stopped gasping for a second, dosed my eyes and gripped the butt of my gun. Whoosh; the dust-laden, stink-ridden air was blown into my lungs until my chest had expanded so much that my back was driven into the roof of the tunnel. Then I let it flow out, until I felt quite deflated. I felt at peace for only a moment, then my nose began to itch, my head sprung back and a sneeze exploded from my face. My forehead bounced off the floor and the back of my head ricocheted into the top of the shaft. My hair softened the impact but my temple throbbed. After taking a moment to recover I wiped my nose on my hand and dragged myself on.

THE POOL OF filth gurgled and lapped against its metal banks in a hideous mockery of water. Pressed to the ground as I was, my nose was unpleasantly dose to it. There was no way across so I spun round on my belly and made my way back. The tunnel had opened out into the crawlspace proper. In fact the ceiling in the corner had fallen in so I clambered out, up into the room above. Another storage room. A column had collapsed across it, or it could have been a beam which had fallen from the roof; whatever, it had smashed the stairs, forcing me to climb along its length until I could drop off onto the floor above. I was confronted with a lift, twisted at an angle that gave no doubt as to its state of repair. I carried on, this time through a hole in the wall which led onto the rock face. Pleased as I was that I hadn't encountered anything down in that crawlspace, I couldn't kick the feeling of... having been cheated. There should have been something there, even if not a milliasaur, there should have been at least rats or spiders - or even a face-eater. I shuddered at the thought of bumbling across such a monster unexpectedly. Still, it was odd I hadn't seen signs of any activity at all. Perhaps, after the mine was collapsed, the milliasaurs had retreated deeper. Maybe the locals had been right and the creatures had turned on each other once their ready supply of food had been cut off. Maybe there'd never been anything and the gang had put me down here because they'd already rejected me, to go and scrag something that didn't exist. No, they wouldn't have spared the effort to tell me to get lost. I'd show them. I'd show them I was worthy of their gang,

hell, I could lead their gang, given a chance. Even as I ventured on in my hunt, my mind was miles above as I sketched out my glorious career.

It wouldn't take much. After I'd passed this stupid initiation and shoved a half dozen rock-worm trophies down the old man's throat, we'd be hired to guard a Guilder trade caravan. The gang leader would have set the route, I'd have warned him that it took us too dose to a fortified tower in Scavvy territory but none of them would've listened to me because I was so new. I would be ready when the first shots of the ambush rang out and would have sprung forwards, rushing the Scavvy raiders. I jumped up on top of a crate to simulate climbing the tower. They'd be surprised by how quickly I reacted and I would slaughter their leader's mutant bodyguards and put a gun to his head, demanding the rest of his ramshackle band give themselves up. As soon as they had, I would kick him off the top level - I booted the air for emphasis -and the rest of my gang would slaughter the rest of the degenerates. Our only casualty would be our foolish leader, cut down in the first few seconds. The Guilders would shower me with goods and cash and I would become the new gang boss.

Getting down from the crate, I continued on.

Would I be content then? With a female in one hand and a bottle of Wild Snake in the other? Hardly. I would purchase from the Van Saar techs two of their finest bolt pistols, for an exorbitant fee. They'd try to double-cross me, of course. Insist I come alone and then try to leave with both their weapons and my corpse. I would be too quick for them.

Two imaginary pistols leapt into my outstretched hands.

The Van Saars in the room would fall in seconds, before any of them had time to draw. The rest of the gang would burst in and meet the same fate.

I crouched behind a barrel, picking off phantom enemies with my stub gun. Another victory, and then on and up, until I rested on a throne in the Hive City itself.

Spectral smoke coiled up from the barrel. I drew it up to my lips and gently blew it away.

High above me, a shape detached itself from the darkness and dropped. It dubbed me over the back of the head. My jaw smashed into the muzzle. My teeth howled in pain and blood spurted into my mouth. I was knocked down, hard. The stub gun tumbled away.

I was stunned for a critical second, not knowing what had happened. I thought the roof was caving in. Then I looked over my shoulder into the gaping mouth of the milliasaur, and I moved. Its first poisonous bite went wild as I spun onto my back It shot back as fast as a snake, rearing to strike again. Its tiny legs stood out like horns running down the side of its rocky carapace. I saw the next strike coming and flattened myself against the ground as its incredibly powerful muscles rocketed it through the air.

It didn't even bother to draw back before it struck again. It lunged forwards clumsily but there was no more ground I could give. The fangs bore down and I threw my other arm up for what little protection it could provide. The monster, seeing something shoot into its mouth, crunched down early. The knife I'd held was shattered between its teeth and it flinched away. I struggled up and scrambled into the corner, scooped up the pistol and whirled around. I planted my back foot, one arm steadying the other, looking straight down the sights. A stance perfect for the first time I would feel the power the first time I would unleash the cold fury of this most deadly, most beautiful of weapons.

The milliasaur sprang. This was it. Point-blank. Point. Kill.

Click.

Misfire.

That was the last thought to scurry through my brain before the monster punched into my shoulder and slammed me back against a wall. I went down. Its writhing body fell on top. I had no escape. Its spasms pummelled me, its rock-shard hide crushed my body and pierced my skin and its steaming hiss assaulted my ears. I protected myself as best I could. Screwed into a ball, battered by its throes, I cowered. Then, an unseen lightning-fast blow, my face exploded. My head bounced off a stone and I was plunged into oblivion.

I LAY THERE. The weight of the milliasaur's corpse pressed down on me. I don't know how long it was, I'd lost track of time. To begin with I didn't even know it was dead, that my broken knife blade had torn open its throat as it had tried to swallow the pieces. I was just grateful that it had stopped, I didn't care why. I was lucky it hadn't collapsed on my chest or I wouldn't have been able to breathe. Instead it had finished up lying over my entire

right side, literally pinning me to the ground with the sharp edges of its hide. I was bleeding underneath it, but the weight of the creature cut off my blood supply, like a tourniquet. First I felt the warm fluid cooling, then, as the minutes crawled by, it began to scrape away in dots on my fingers. The gritty residue got under my nails. I had to move. Even if I wasn't too badly hurt, I needed a drink. My raging thirst had been made worse by the add taste of the blood I'd swallowed. An image resurfaced in my mind, of me, with a beautiful woman in one arm and a bottle of Wild Snake in the other. Well, there was no booze and the only thing in my arms was... well. My halfhearted laugh turned into a splutter, which devolved into a coughing fit, a painful coughing fit as every movement pulled at my limbs and dug the milliasaur's hide in a little more. I had to move. I figured what with a worm being basically one big cylinder it would be easiest to roll it off. Slowly I brought my free left leg up and around to get my foot against the corpse's side and squirmed my body to brace my shoulder against the wall, then I tried to move it. It was easier than I thought it would be. It had been its speed and power that had done the damage, not its weight. There wasn't much pain to begin with; everything was too numb. But when it rolled off my shoulder and thigh and flattened my hand I screamed myself hoarse as the rocks on its hide dug into healthy flesh. A swift kick fuelled by agony drove it off me completely as I yanked my injured hand clear. The limp tube flopped away.

You can't cut off the circulation to a limb without expecting some payback. I knew what was coming. With the arteries clear, the blood flooded back through my system. I rolled in torment on the rocky floor. I felt angry, angry that I had won. I had won, and all I got was pain and more pain. I knew this would pass, though. My real fear was that the scabs over my wounds would burst under the pressure and I'd start bleeding again. When it finally passed I struggled up against the wall, the wall that had kept me trapped against the dying milliasaur, so I was sitting upright. My arm was a mess; the dried blood had been scraped off in some places, leaving streaks of brown, alternating with skin either rubbed raw or bruised blue. My shoulder and elbow were sore, but I flexed my fingers fine. I couldn't see my leg through my trousers, but I guessed it looked pretty much the same.

Gingerly, I tried to get to my feet. I took it slow. I drew my left leg under me, then the right. I gasped; there was something wrong with that knee. Pushing myself up onto my hands, I tried to keep as much weight as possible off it. Then, leaning into the wall to balance myself, I got my left foot on the ground and stretched out that leg. My head swam and I fumbled for a firmer grip on the rock. Only then did I gently lower my battered right leg. It was stiff, and the knee hurt, but I figured that if I kept it straight I could make it.

I limped over to the body of the milliasaur. I needed proof that I had killed it and as sure as hell I wasn't going to drag the entire thing out of here. Something it couldn't live without, the old man had said. Now I'm no great student of worms, and I've heard stories of how you can cut them in half and make two of the monsters, but I know that in the vast majority of cases taking off the head is a pretty safe bet. It sounded simple when I thought of it. Later I realised how difficult it was to carve through a neck made of rock with a few shards of a broken knife. But that thought would wait, because I'd just seen my gun.

It was hiding underneath the body, it must have been dragged down there by the worm when I kicked it off me. I felt sick, betrayed. A misfire. I didn't want to pick it up, but I had to, if for no other reason than that it had been entrusted to me and it had to be returned. I eased myself down and grasped it with my bloody fingers. Maybe I could fix it, for the journey back. I flipped the barrel open and six empty chambers stared back at me.

When I finally heaved myself out of the pit, the breeze cooled the sweat on my body. He was standing there looking for all the world as if he hadn't moved an inch. I thought I noticed something in his eyes when he saw me, a... softening, only for a second and then it vanished.

Bruised, battered, blooded, with the face of a milliasaur strapped on to my belt. I must have been quite a sight. I limped towards him, my broken knife in one hand, the pistol in the other. Every single step back out I'd been thinking of what I would do. Should I get mad? Should I thank him? Or maybe act like I'd never noticed? I'd done what he asked, I'd got my trophy, I should just say what I was supposed to say, what he wanted me to say, and then I'd be in. I'd be one of the gang. But part of me wanted more, wanted to demand an answer, wanted to rip his head off. It drove me mad. The choices whirled round and round in my mind until I said to myself; no

more, when I got there, when I could look in his eyes I would know what to do. Now that time had come. I let the gun slip from my grasp, it thudded in the dirt. I wrenched the dripping trophy from my belt and dropped it on top. There. My victory, my knowledge, my question were plain for him to see. I waited for a flicker of response. There was none. His aged, bloodshot eyes returned my gaze impassively. 'Get it now?'

The hard, metallic words whispered from his respirator. No praise. No apology. What little blood remained in me boiled. The fist came out of nowhere, I didn't even see it until his head slammed to the side. I couldn't believe what I'd done. I stared at my hand as if it were another's. I was shocked, but I felt good. He turned back to me, his respirator hung uselessly off the side of his face but his expression was the same. My pleasure turned to ashes. Had he even felt it? But then, there it was, a tiny drop of crimson emerged from the shadow of his nostril. It edged its way past his nose-ring and began the long journey down to his cracked lips. I smiled. I soared. He didn't even bother to wipe it off before he picked me up and drove me into the ground. Then he hauled me on to his shoulder and started back. His laughing made it a bumpy ride, and he didn't stop for long damn time.

THE DEMON BOTTLE
BY ALEX HAMMOND

0700 HRS ' ...And there will be fire from the heavens and righteous bolt guns will quicken and purge even the deepest crevices of the underhive. All that is foul and pestilent will be washed away! For this is the teaching of House Cawdor of the Redemption.'

First there was a sound. Like a burst of fire that stirred the dim mutterings of my mind to action. Somewhere in the back of my head, a woman from my dream, beautiful body scarless and soft, still danced in the upper hive. 'Look upon this scum. The deepest slag pits could not outmatch his sins in their filth and perversion.' Thoughts swelled. My dancing girl disappeared. 'Sec - though he wakes from his slumber, he does not release the bottle from his hand.'

The voice was closer than I remembered in my sleep. Louder too. Enraged. I opened my eyes.

Legs. Lots of legs, some bound in cloth, others wearing heavy boots, stretched out before me. I followed them upwards and discovered the hard, ash-worn faces of a crowd of settlers. Their attention flitted between my recumbent form and someone behind me. A preacher? I began to stand, bowlegged, still recovering from a bottle of WildSnake. On your feet and face the prophet of universal destruction!' A solid boot in my back sent me floundering forward into the reeking mud. The crowd cheered. I rolled over onto my back, elbows deep in the sludge. Through mud-splattered eyes I made out the robed preacher - thick burgundy cloth ran in torn strips from ground to neck. A leather mask covered all but a pair of rabid eyes and a mouth spitting blood. A House of Redemption preacher had come to town. 'Vermin man! Stand and answer to the House Cawdor, the true prophets of the flames of salvation.' Through the black leather face mask

one eye caught my attention. Bloodshot streams ran their course to a pupil as dark as pitch. Another boot struck me full in the face.

'Look,' my voice cracked, from behind the haze of last night's drinking, I'd be able to stand if you'd stop practising ratball with my face, old man.'

Stunned silence behind me. The preacher staggered and began to shake violently on the spot. Theatrical performance or the jiggling of a religious psychopath, 1 wasn't going to hang around to find out. Slowly I stood. The Cawdor preacher stopped moving. The crowd clustered well back.

'Oh bugger,' I muttered as a leathered fist pulled out a hand flamer.

'Talk back will you, rat man? Mock those that herald cleansing flame?' A white tongue slid in and out of the priest's mouth. 'Seek ye retribution?'

'Look, I'm happy to go sleep in some other part of town.'

The preacher pointed his flamer in my direction. The crowed scrambled wide. 'This town is in no need of Ratskin scum. Go converse with your blasphemous hive spirits!' 'That's half-Ratskin, slimehole!' I rushed for the crowd hoping the distance and their bodies would afford me protection from the flames. *Click*

Aaaaagh!' I threw myself into a pile of scrap. *Plop*

No wash of flame. I turned to look over my shoulder.

The zealot stood there. The antiquated weapon still levelled in my direction had failed to discharge its round. An empty fuel canister came to rest in the mud beside me.

The old man began to reach for a reload amongst his tattered robes.

A lead pipe, thick bolt rusted to one end, felt good in my hand. I wrenched it from the mess of ancient metal about me and whirled it about my head.

The priest, rustling about his drapery, produced another canister.

Aaaaargh!' I screamed in terrified panic. Aaaaargh!' The Redemptionist thrust his hands together, loading the weapon.

A warm trickle of liquid down my leg. My only source of comfort. I swung towards to the preacher and reconsidered my options... ...this man had friends...

...too late. The pipe sunk deep into the leather mask. Somewhere in his head something cracked. A muddy thud later, the preacher lay on the ground. I grabbed his flamer and spun to face the rabble. Only a silver snowfall of effluent ash from somewhere overhead - not a settler in sight.

The silver ash fall began to thicken. Somewhere in the hive city, miles above me, ancient machines were grinding over, pulling on pistons, driving cogs and starting the thousand year-old machines of Hive Primus.

0800 HRS The ash fall had worsened. I watched from inside Karag's Saloon as desperate underhivers ran for cover, trying to keep their particle intake to a minimum. Push your annual quota too high and you'd reduce your life span by as many rads as you'd inhaled. Inside the bar, smoke hung momentarily before air filters dragged it into the bowels of Downtown's evaporation tanks. I had used the old zealot's money to purchase a fresh bottle of WildSnake and a few pills from a fixer I knew. I began to think things over. Life was getting bad for settlement-dwelling Ratskins - so bad, it appeared, that even half-castes like myself were now the targets for retribution. I should move uphive, work in an Orlock factory till I had enough creels to pay for some NuFlesh and a day on a serum drip. (I had no need of a lung pump: the respirators I'd scavenged when I was young had kept me free from noxious air.) Once I'd had a wet overhaul, I'd have a better chance of getting employed by one of the spire noble families.

Karag's extraction fan above the bar spluttered, gave a grinding death rattle and stopped. Almost immediately all eyes turned to me. Karag - big man, lots of teeth -stretched out his hand towards me. His two real fingers held out a stack of guilder credits.

'Sarak, we'd all appreciate it if you'd go in there and fish out whatever's got caught in the fan.'

I've quit cleaning ducts.'

'Even for your friends?' Karag flipped out a couple of extra coins.

'You try wrestling a Catchacan face-eater one day and then see if you're keen on going back into an air duct.'

'There's another bottle of WildSnake on me if you'll do it.' 0850 HRS Somewhere in the duct something was half-alive. Its squeals echoed down through the steel lung that fed air into the bar below me. The humid conditions of the air ducts of the underhive were home to creatures that just could not bear to live anywhere else: albino Millasaurs, phosphorescent Lashworms and all manner of tropical spores and bugs. A

few tiny carapaces cracked beneath my hands as I inched further towards the bar's extraction fan. The squealing stopped. It had heard me. I struggled with a flashlight and shone it forward onto the mechanism. *EEEEEEEEE* Like a leathery bolt something rushed forward, needle teeth snapping at my face. 'Wha-' I slipped forwards.

The flashlight spun out of my hand sending spiralling patterns about the air vent. It came to rest dead on the creature. Four eyes perched in a row across its brow stared into mine, unblinking. A multitude of legs, wing flaps strung between them dipped - the thing sprung again.

'Aaagh!'

*Snap*Snap*

Its teeth were just inches from my face. But no further.

Looking over the thing's back, I followed its tail, like a large welt of flesh, to the extraction fan. It was caught.

'Karag!' I called down to the mumbling bar through the vent.

'Quiet!' Karag poked at the air duct from below with a broom. 'Zat you, Sarak?'

'Karag, notch your fan up a few dots.' 'You sure about that?'

'Karag, this thing is going to eat my nose if you take any longer!' Hurried footsteps somewhere below.

The fan ground a full revolution, pulling the creature eight inches towards the rough blades.

Again!' I called.

The creature squealed and lost its footing, scrabbling on the metal. The fan, now free, whirred up to full speed, sucking the thing backwards into its blades. It ground the thing up like a paste, spitting its entrails, many legs and bright yellow ichor into the vents, all over me and down into the bar. It's dead!' Karag's voice observed astutely from below.

1000 HRS A fresh bottle of WildSnake in hand, a few off-cuts of giant rat skin tucked around my feet, I settled down in an alleyway behind a tanner's shop. I opened the stopper on the bottle and let its pungent odour hit me full in the face, had done well: the distiller had let part of the brewed snake slip into this bottle. Looked like a rib. I took a swig and swallowed one of the pills I'd acquired earlier. Somewhere in the distance,

gunfire rattled out a staccato beat - the gangers were waking. Leaning back I looked skyward. The thousand walkways of the underhive disappeared up into the darkness like a thousand steel-black arteries feeding the life blood to the Hive City's dark heart. I could make out underhivers moving along the lower levels. Little people moving. Little people with more scar tissue than sense. This place swarmed with the very worst humanity had to offer. Here I was, knee high in effluent with only a bottle of WildSnake, a dust-respirator, a dead man's weapon and a rad-counter to my name. 1 had to move uphive. I'd almost lost my life twice today and wasn't going to settle for a third. In the hive spire they don't have bugs. No bugs, no wounds either.

The tiny lights of the hive city above me looked like a galaxy of stars, a glimpse of greater things. A gentle breeze washed over my face and... and I knew I was in. The soft sound of music, light as though touched by the fingers of air - a small coloured bird in a cage - a clear night sky free from poisonous cloud cover - star freighters, bright blue thrusters propelling them deepspace - the woman, injury free and white skin dancing, turning around and around, calling out my name, soft melodious voice -no rattle of gunfire - just the soft wind, the dancer and the smell of real plants. 1200 HRS I woke for the second time that day. With the visions of the hive spire still playing through in my mind, I walked out of the alley way into the city streets, holding the fur off-cuts tight around my shoulders. For the first time in years, I smiled at a woman and child as they passed me by, fresh rats hung off their belts. I knew where to go and how to do it. I was going uphive. 1230 HRS When you've got little that you own and are still getting over the euphoric effects of a drug cocktail everything seems a lot easier. Perhaps if I had been straight I would have gone about my exodus a little differently. Perhaps I wouldn't have gone to the front gate.

'You Ratman Sarak?' Masked man. Three others with him

'Huh?' I stared through the two ancient pillars that denoted DownTown's front gate - it was five metres away. The drugs in my system tripled that distance. 'Ratman Sarak your name, half-breed?' The man was dressed in robes, a pair of ape like lips jutted out of a leather mask. Ah, yeah?'

'Someone paid a lot of money so that they could have a problem with you instead of us.' One of the other men, cradling an auto pistol in his hands, spoke tightlipped through a similar mask to his friend. 'Oh?'

'Enough of this.' The big man was giving the orders. 'Pack him up and let's make that delivery' I couldn't remember where I'd tucked the flamer. One of the men stuck me with a syringe filled with black liquid. My body sagged- and then I realised what I'd done.

1400 HRS 'Hullo, my sweet.' The dancing woman? I'd be able to open my eyes if I could stop my head from rotating. There were others in the room. I caught hold of my head and snapped my eyes open.

'Oh?' A bloated neck lead in rolls of flesh up to the back of a shaven head. 'He's awake.' The figure turned around to face me. A pair of bespectacled eyes starred down on me from within a wealth of flesh. A large guilder badge predominated a costume of rich cloth and precious metals. 'Greetings, Mr Gunta,' I slurred.

'Oh Sarak, there's no need for formalities. No, debts as steep as yours make us business partners. Call me Otto, do.'

Otto Gunta, the Black Tongued Guilder Prince of the Underhive. First time we'd met, although I knew his agents well. A guilder with as many kills to his name as he had guild bonds.

'OK, Otto.' I attempted to reach out a hand but found it tightly constrained by an iron brace.

'Silly boy. You're in no state to move. There's enough Spore venom in your blood to have you flapping about like a fish on the floor if we don't keep you restrained.' His pitch-black tongue licked his lips. 'Which spore?'

'Lugtekk, what colour was it?' Otto turned back over his shoulder.

'Yellow.' A metallic voice in the shadows, the only other thing in the big, empty warehouse.

'Now, Sarak. I have the antidote to this poison if you'd just pay up your debts.' 'Nothing.'

'That used respirator, rad counter and that hand flamer you so cleverly hid on your belt make up at least, say, thirty credits? Now if you could make up the other one sixty?' 'I don't have any money.'

'Oh yes? Well this is no good. Discovered any archaotech recently?' The guilder's pudgy fingers danced at the mention of ancient technology.

'No.'

'Some green hivers I could extort?' 'No.'

'Well I guess I'm going to have to sell your carcass to a body bank-'

'Wait... I could offer you my services.' Perhaps I didn't sound desperate enough. I'm afraid you're a little under-skilled. You're the town drunk and a chemhead to boot.

You're worth about ten credits to a generous body harvester.'

'Seriously, I take care of infestations.'

Infestations?'

'Pests.'

'Pests? ... Alright Sarak. You've got yourself a job. You take care of an infestation and we'll wipe the slate clean. I might even see about that dancing girl.'

'What?' Otto's nasty little mouth broke into a smile. 'You dare touch my mind with an sanctioned psyker and I'll-' I don't deal with psykers, Sarak. You spilled your guts to us when you were under - once metaphorically and the second time, well...'

I'm not laughing, fat man,' I slurred. 'You're in no position to laugh, you mincing turd!' Otto's .spittle sprayed my face. 'Lugtekk, give him the antidote and get his sorry behind rigged up to infiltrate those Scavvies.'

'What?'

'Your chosen vocation is pest exterminator? Well I'm up to my armpits in mutant scum from the bottom of the hive and they're costing me profit.' Otto spat out the words, slapping the guilder badge on his chest. 'What did you think I'd do, send you into my warehouses with a stick and a rat quota?' 'Yes.'

'Baha!' Otto wobbled as he broke out into a high shriek. 'Let's get this show on the road.' The warehouse suddenly came to life, lights cast the shadows aside and the ground shook and began a steady rumble.

'Where are we going?' I stumbled over the words, my fear obvious. We're taking this rig deeper into the hive.' Otto smiled. 1500 HRS 'What Mr Gunta wants is simple. And when Mr Gunta wants something simple done, for a lot of money, we do it. Right?' A strap was pulled tighter across my chest.

'Look - Lugtekk?' The man comprising more machine parts than real flesh stared across at me. 'You don't want to be leading an assault against these depraved cannibals - just like I don't want to be sneaking into their

hide out and poisoning them.' 'Not all of'em. Just the leader. Without him they're toasted rat.'

'That's a moot point. I'll be dead before I get close to any of them.'

'Not with this you won't.' Lugtekk fastened another strap across my chest and placed

an electrode on my head.

'What is it?'

A holo-sult. Mr Gunta was planning on selling 'em to the Talloran rebels,' Lugtekk's metal fingers pressed another electrode roughly to my head, 'but an Imperial Patrol clamped down on his spaceport and the stock ain't moved since.' 'What's it do?'

'Rerouted to make you look more like a Skawy. Here.' Lugtekk flashed a piece of mirrored glass in my face.

Woah. Welts and a third eye adorned my head.

'Come on, Lugtekk. You know I would look more realistic with sludge meal smeared on my face.'

'It's still configuring to your dimensions.'

'You really want to go into battle? Come on, we could ditch this caravan and head uphive together.'

'Sorry, little man. When exactly did you become a friend of mine?' 'Bu-'

'See these?' Lugtekk flashed out a series of pictures.

Aw, no, frag-' Skinned like sludge rats. 'These are the faces of gangers Mr Gunta had me ride out of town. These holos are all that's left. Right now they're eel food. I'm not in the business of being pleasant. I'm a hired gun, little man. Now get ready to go.' I didn't speak to Lugtekk again. Otto, seated behind a control panel in his head caravan, issued orders to a band of mercenaries and hired scum, a posse he'd pulled together from the toughest bars in the underhive.

I pondered my predicament. In my sweat-drenched palms I held five melting capsules. Poison, Lugtekk had said, but I had my own suspicions. Through the shimmering light of the holo suit I pulled on the fuel canister Otto had reimbursed me as part of the hand flamer. It was fresh. Brand new

Otto finished his commands. 'Now Sarak.' Ah-huh?'

We're going to equip you with that flamer to give you a little confidence. Pep you up some. Nothing is going to go wrong.'

Ah-hah?'

'We've been planing this for weeks. So all you have to do is mosey on up to them with that carcass and its juicy piece of bait in your hands, pop those pills in their leader's food and, hullo hullo, come home to mummy.'

2100 HRS The grinding of the machines above had always been of comfort to me. But down here at hive bottom I could not hear them, only the soft squelch of the mould carpet underneath me. Huge pillars bored into the ground, like the trunks of a steel forest. Fluorescent bugs scuttled up and down them like blood in the veins of an ancient giant.

In the darkness I regarded the dead ganger I had dragged all this way. His eyes were bloodied, a pock mark of jagged flesh torn through his jaw. His death had been slow. Into his belt was tucked a map and a guilder schedule, pretty good ones - even I couldn't tell they were fakes. I hoped the smell of blood hadn't attracted the nasty things from their recesses.

'Skav you're?' A voice in the darkness. A stunted figure.

'Un,' I replied trying to give as little indication of my uphive origin.

'Big Eat on. Hoegas kin?'

I didn't understand a word. 'Un.' I stuck to what worked.

'Sludge meal and manflesh to eat.'

'Oh, splendid,' I muttered under my breath.

The dark figure led on, stumbling towards a dim glow in the distance. We approached the Skavvies' stronghold, twenty figures gathered about a large fire in the middle of a shanty town. I nearly retched when I saw the faces of these depraved souls, the garish light the fire threw up highlighted their pustulent limbs, encrusted skulls and infested wounds.

Upon the fire was a giant, spent ammunition shell, used as a cooking pot. A stray limb fell out as a bloated Skavvy stirred. Not even the visions of my worst drug-induced stupor with its skinless apes and pit-eyed marionettes compared to this spectacle.

'More for pot?' A plastic-wrapped man, jagged smile and pointed teeth, stepped out of the mass of cannibals. 'You bring good eatin'?'

'Un,' I muttered, sticking with the routine.

'Me Hoegas, I lead.' The half man reached out a wrapped hand.

I passed him the body.

'You kill him?' His eyes shifted.

'Uh-ha. Look like guilder.'

Hoegas looked down. His smile dropped. For a second the holo suit shimmered. 'What?' The Skavvy leader reached towards the body and removed its torn flack jacket. 'He got words!' The Skavvies left the pot. They huddled close, small luminous worms digging about their flesh. I closed my eyes. 'Words tell of more guilder kin, travel slow through old walls. Got good stuff Hoegas translated. 'Good stuff!' The Skavvies cheered, moaned and shrieked in near unison like a demonic chorus. 'Bring new Skav down front. Let 'im eat sum.' Hoegas flapped a claw at me. I would have been happier if I had been buried alive in a mass grave. These fiends gorged themselves for an hour on the half-decayed carcasses of former companions and the fresh kill I had delivered to them. The leader sipped periodically from a private keg of WildSnake by his side. His plastic squeaked and rustled as he stood to fetch another bowl of flesh gruel from the pot. I stumbled towards it through the crowd of Skavvies, half-rotten hands slapping me on the back as I moved. I reached for the keg. Its neck in my grasp, all sound and movement stopped. All eyes were on me. Hoegas spun about. His eyes met mine. Thin wisps of psyker-electricity played across his fingers. I had to think quick. I unplugged the lid of the keg and, dropping to one knee, offered it to him.

'Hail Hoegas, witchman king!' I was fast running short of ideas.

'Hail!' chorused the Skavvies. Hoegas grinned a Jagged toothed smile at his monstrous comrades. In the moment his head turned I crushed Otto's pills through the gaps in my clenched hand. 'Hail Hoegas!' Hoegas chuckled and reached towards the keg of

WildSnake. A shot rang out. The Skavvies fell to the ground, drawing out ancient blades and muskets. Hoegas fell to the ground -clutching at his chest.

A large scaled Skavvy stood up, smoking pistol still in his hands. 'No hail Hoegas.

Hail Biotta, hail all Skays!'

Oh great. I was in the middle of a Skavvy revolution. A cannibal collective. Hoegas

gurgled, shimmering blue light dancing about his chest wound.

'Biotta!' Hoegas cried, then erupted in a rush of blue flame and sparks. The cannibal pot spilled its gore into the sludge. I slipped on a rotten intestine.

'Biotta good Skav, let other Skavs drink!' Biotta - three arms, one eye - snatched the

WildSnake from my hands and took a deep swig. I scuttled back from him, eyes roaming the Skavvy crowd for an escape route. Biotta grinned across both his mouths.

'Good drink!' His eye caught mine, 'New Skav drink up. All Skavs drink!'

I shook my head. Biotta wasn't showing any signs of being poisoned yet; perhaps it took a little time to wear in.

'Drink!' Biotta waved his gun at me.

The other Skavvies fell silent. I fingered the trigger of the hand flamer tucked inside my shirt. An arching spray would hit most of them - what was I saying? I'd never shot a gun, let alone a highly volatile antique.

Click-chink 'Drink!' Biotta cocked and thrust his pistol at my head.

They must have been getting suspicious. I reached forward, taking as long as

I could to reach the bottle. Still no sign from Biotta. Slowly I grasped its neck, and held it to my lips. A small clock was ticking down the time in my head, I tried to move its hands. I let only the smallest amount of the WildSnake touch my lips and trickle down my dry throat.

'More!' Biotta grabbed my hand and upended more of the drink into my mouth. I spluttered backwards onto the ground to a burst of laughter. I lay there while the Skavvies drank themselves silly on the WildSnake. I was poisoned. I tried forcing my fingers back into my throat but nothing happened.

'New Skay. Come slay guilder kin!' It was Biotta. Looked like Hoegas' old plan still stood.

I staggered to my feet. Perhaps Otto had an antidote. All I had to do was circumvent the holo-suit and get up to his caravan. Half a chance was better than none. The

Skavvies armed themselves with stolen weapons and rust-encrusted blades. As they busied themselves I struggled with Hoegas' body, trying to find some evidence of his death. In the end I cut a ring from his finger.

'New Skav?' Biotta and his mutant comrades were ready.

'Un.'

NOW (0000 HRS) Glad to be running. Good to be running. Perhaps we'll make up time. But what if there is no antidote? No means of stopping the poison that runs through me. I'm not feeling ill but it could be one of Otto's nastier concoctions, something seeping into my system and eating away at me from inside. Otto must have planned for the poison to kick in when the Skavvies arrived in his trap. Why didn't he tell me about it? How could he know they'd come straight away? What if-We arrive. An old dome town, the metal braces that held its roof still remain like an old iron skeleton. The perfect place for a trap. A guilder caravan sits in the centre of the dome. The Skavvies cheer as they see it below Guns blazing, they rush at it. I follow, keeping my distance, trying to catch sight of Otto.

Nothing... and then it starts. Before the Skavvies even reach the caravan one falls to the ground. It clutches its head and thrashes about on the ash floor. Dust kicks up at its feet and thin wisps of light crackle about its head. One last kick and it lies still, electricity tracing along its lifeless body. Biotta begins to scream, firing shots wildly into the air. One gets lucky and hits one of Otto's mercenaries hidden in the iron braces.

A volley of gunfire, heavy weapons and red hot lasers rains down on the Skavvies. A few shots are good but the mutants seem to have an uncanny speed. Biotta still screams and then begins to slowly rise from the ground. A wyrd? Spiralling upwards, his shotgun buckles as forces beyond his control wrack his body. Other Skavvies, hidden amidst the old machines and broken concrete slabs, begin to cast fire from their fingers, bum white hot and float.

'Gunta!' I yell over the sound of the screaming Skavvies and the gunfire. A red dot traces its way across the ground towards me. I struggle with the electrodes stuck to my head. I start running. Bullets pepper the ground behind me, throwing up ash and ricochets from scrap metal. I duck into an old doorway and slump to the ground.

A Skavvy's hiding here too. It draws out an old musket.

I wave my flamer at it.

'Skav?' It moans. 'Others think in my head.'

'What?'

'Big man laughing, metal man shoot metal from above. Skays think of dead.' It slaps its brow. All in my head. All in my head.'

Suddenly I work it out. Spook. The street name for what wannabe Psychers hit up on in order to get some psychic action. It was banned throughout the underhive, but some still couldn't refuse the chance of wielding a bit of nether-forces. Otto must have wanted to fry the Skavvy boss' mind, make him overload on psychic juices or something. But now it was messing with everyone's head.

'You think man-thoughts. You not Skay. You friend of laughing man!' The Skavvy levels its musket at me.

I let my finger run the flamer's trigger as far as it will go. *Flaaaash* The flamer begins spewing blazing napalm across the Skavvy and throughout the burnt-out room we were in. I leap from the flames. A bullet grazes my head from above. The sniper must have been waiting. I start running again, panting and desperate. One of my legs catches alight from a lick of flame that comes rushing down from above.

The scene outside is rife with destruction and carnage. Skavvy turns on Skavvy hallucinating wildly as the mercenaries gradually tighten their stranglehold. Bullets fall in waves about the dome. I drop to the ground and beat at the flames on my legs. I rip the electrodes from my head and hit the holo-suit's release button. Blood trickles down across my eyes. 'Gunta! You slimehole!' I scream. Don't worry. He'll get his. A voice in my head.

'What?' I groan, flat on my back, the ancient dome above me. My head spins. Some thing is inside my head. Hive spirit? Not exactly.

'What're you doing in my head?' You eat those pills?

What? Uphive. Dreams of uphive. Think... Focus!

I pull myself across the ground. Skavvies lie twisted and contorted in the shapes of painful death. Many are alight. You're the last one alive.

'How do you know?' Voices in the distance. Outside my head. Trust me. I was there when each of them died.

Otto Gunta the Black Tongued Guilder Prince strolls about the corpses, surrounded by men, marking each dead Skavvy off on a clipboard.

'We've done well, Lugtekk.' Otto addresses the mechanoid man beside him. 'Quite well.'

'Gunta!' 1 call out. He can't bear you. It's true - he doesn't react.

'Gunta!' 1 scream so loud I think my lungs will burst. I won't let him bear you. Not until we've bad our chat.

'Who are you?' Sharp pain shoots throughout my body. 'Get out of my head.' I roll over, face-first in the ash. She dances pretty well

'What?' Ash tastes like burnt bones. The girl in your bead. 'Leave her alone.'

Ob-bo, silly boy! The Spire looks nothing like ibis. No no. Scrap the coloured birds and the warm breezes. They're all hooked up on life support systems up there. Air's too thin to breathe. The voice is jagged with cynicism. 'Liar!'

How'd you know? Like a pain in the back of my head. Pont cry now. 'Damn you!'

That's better, use those emotions all up. I feel my body being lifted. Now let's get us moving eh?

I stand to my feet, legs propelled by forces other than my own. The men move with suspicion. Otto is undeterred.

'Well done, Sarak.' Otto approaches. 'Why'd you use Spook?' My voice rings loud like a roll of thunder.

'Oh no. I don't deal in illegal substances.' * Crack*

A pain through my chest. 'That's your payment done.' The obese guilder slides his pistol back into its holster. Did that hurt? It bad to hurt.

'You're dead!' I stagger forwards, thrusting the flamer at Otto.

'Wa-?' Otto turns, my sudden actions making the fat man dance on his feet. 'Kill him!' A hail of gunfire jousts with the wave of flame that I launch from the weapon in my hand. I'm struck all over, hot metal boring into my flesh. The bullets feel warm inside my cold body. Not too much pain. That's the spirit!

I burst alight, the flamer dropping at my feet. Otto's men roll and writhe on the ground slapping at the flames. Let's dance.

The few remaining mercenaries rush at me, controlled bursts breaking into wild fire as I fail to fall to the ground in a bloody heap.

'What are you doing to me" I scream as I am flung about like a puppet on a string. You're possessed from the warp, boyo. It's a lesson in messing with psychic drugs. Claws I never knew I had begin to cut the fighting men to ribbons. Only Lugtekk fights on. Blood and oil streams from his body,

his machine limbs clogged with his own life fluid. All too soon he falls to a burning heap on the ground. This is it, I think, I'm going to die. But I have one last trick to play. What trick?

'Never you mind,' I say aloud.

I take a few deep breaths and rush Otto. He screeches and tries to run, but I do not let him.

'Take my credit badge! Sarak, I can fix it! I have friends in the spire. I can get you work there!' Otto weeps like a child.

'No,' I reply calmly. I feel pain. 'No, Otto. We're both going to die.' The hurt runs in waves across my body.

What are you doing to me? The voice is fading.

'I have a present for you, Otto.' I release hold of all that I care for; let my emotions slip into nothing. Slumping forward, I fall on top of Otto, crushing his body to the ground. Otto shrieks. Already a death spasm grips my body. You're dying.

'I know' I thrust a bloodied arm down the screaming guilder's throat. And let go of the dancing girl.

My eyes are glazing over. Consciousness slips away with the last drops of blood. A final image burns into my retina - the screaming guilder, possessed to die and burn for eternity.

RITES OF PASSAGE
BY GORDON RENNIE

HEREK ROSE PAINFULLY to his feet, trying to rub some sensation into the stump of his left arm. The wound had

healed long ago but down here, in the dank air of the deepest tunnels of the Underhive. it continued to trouble him, reminding him painfully of the place where, years ago, a rusted Scavvie blade brought his career as leader of the Orlock-affiliated Steel Skull gang to an end. It was time once more to deliver The Speech. He cast a shrewd eye over the fearful young faces looking at him in the dim light of the tunnel. Generations of Underhive dwellers had left their marks here, and the walls were covered in ganger graffiti: arcane symbols, faded boasts of warriors now long dead and dire warnings of what lay beyond the ancient blast-doors at the end of the tunnel. 'From here on in, you go alone,' Herek told them sternly. 'Anyone who wants to back out better speak up now There's no shame in it. You won't be the first, and I don't expect you'll be the last...'

As he had expected, Dorn, the largest and strongest of the pack, was the first to step forward, eagerly seeking his mentor's approval. Dorn was a born warrior, his face already marked with his first battle scars, proudly won in teenage rumbles against fellow gang members in the gang's fortified settlement, a kilometre or so above this desolate place.

'We will not disappoint you, Herek,' Dorn declared loudly, not waiting for the others. 'In two-cycles time, we will return to you not as children, but as warriors! This I swear to you, on the honour of House °dock!'

To his right, Mikhal, already as tall as his father and potentially as good a fighter, with just a little more experience under his belt, nodded his assent. Alongside him, Lan, as wiry and intense as a sump rat, did likewise. Both were keen and brave enough, Herek knew, but in all matters they followed Dorn, tying their fortunes to his. As he rose through the

ranks of the gangs - as he surely would, if he survived the coming ordeal - he would take them with him as able lieutenants. Herek smiled to himself fondly remembering other, similarly commanding warriors from previous years who had gone on to earn greater glories for the gang. Herek turned towards the two remaining youths. And you, young Jaal, are you and your brother ready for what waits for you on the other side of those blast doors?' Jaal Rinn shifted uneasily, barely raising his eyes from his new, ill-fitting boots. As ever, it was his brother, Mallin, who answered for him. 'Aye, Master Herek. Show us our enemies, and we will prove our worthiness to our clan.'

Herek nodded, looking at the pair appraisingly. Such a different pair, not even truly brothers! Mallin was strong and capable, and wise beyond his young years. The other, Jaal, was small and pale-skinned, and bore none of the inherited traits of strength and hardiness normally associated with the House of Iron. The boy's parents had died when he was but an infant, killed in a raid upon the Skull's settlement by Cawdor gangers, and he had been taken in by Mallin's family and raised as their own. Quick and agile as he was, Jaal had never been the equal of his more confident brother and Herek suspected that it was only with Mallin's help that Jaal had made it this far through the training.

'Let the runt speak for himself?' Dorn sneered, his hands clenching into fists. 'Must he always hide in the shadow of his brother?'

Jaal blushed in anger - the runt of the litter, they called him! - and spoke out, his voice shaking with emotion. 'My clan has raised me and protected me. All I ask is a chance to serve it in return and reclaim the blood debt owed to me by the murderers of my parents.'

Herek smiled in satisfaction, quietly impressed by the young ganger's resolve. He would need it where he was going. 'Brave words, young Jaal. Now let us see if you can make good on them. The enemies you go to face do indeed cany the colours of House Cawdor. Let your hatred give you strength, but never forget that we have more need of live warriors than dead heroes.' At Herek's signal, the two gangers who had accompanied them down to the entrance to Hive Bottom - seasoned veterans who had once fought under Herek's leadership - moved to haul open the immense blast-doors at the bottom of the shaft. Beyond these doors, their outer surfaces scarred and pitted by the centuries of ferocious assaults from the

things that dwelled on the other side of them, lay a world of darkness and danger.

The young initiates crowded around the open doorway, eager to see what lay beyond. Hive Bottom. A place that, until now, they had only heard tell of in childhood stories tailored to frighten them into obedience. A fearful place populated by mutants and witches, and where deadly traps - toxic waste pools, poisonous mists and grotesque mutant creatures - were always waiting to ensnare the unwary. Back when he was leader of the Steel Skull, leading raids on Goliath merchant convoys and Cawdor settlements under the flag of House Orlock, Herek had braved the dangers of Hive Bottom many times. Even now, though, he still remembered his very first sight and smell of it during his own rite of manhood, and understood exactly the fear and apprehension his young charges must be feeling now

The two gangers silently scanned the darkness around the doorway, their weapons primed and at the ready for any sign of danger. Satisfied, one of them waved the young bloods forward with a sharp gesture. Dorn looked around at his fellows with a wide, brave grin and strode into the darkness; the others followed with more nervous steps.

'Go easy on 'em, Dorn,' one of the veterans said, slapping the lad on the shoulders as he passed.

'Nab, give those Cawdor scum hell, Dorn,' the other grinned. 'Get yourself back in one piece and I'll give you some of my winnings!'

Herek watched the slight figures disappear from view, knowing that there was no more advice he could give them. For two day-cycles he would remain here, waiting to see which, if any, of the young juves returned.

'Good hunting - all of you!' called Herek into the gloom, stepping back and signalling for the two gangers to close the doors. He offered up a silent prayer, calling on the Emperor to watch over the young warriors. He had tried to teach them everything he knew. From now on they were on their own.

THE HUNTER MOVED easily through the crumbling ruins, more at home here than it had ever been in the palaces and landscaped parks of the Upper

Hive. If it had ever had a name, it had long ago forgotten it. It paused, checking the information relayed to it through its armoured body and savouring the thrill of the replay images being fed directly into its mind from the suit's memory systems. Steel claws punching through flesh. The feel of laser bolts and bullets ricocheting harmlessly off armoured skin. The screams of its victims and the images of their faces as they died in agony.

It had been too long - scarce two hours -since its last kill. It felt its body's auto-systems activate into life at the joyous replay of those few bloody seconds. Fibre-bundle muscles twitched with life, armoured plates clicked and flexed together and its claws slowly unsheathed themselves as memory circuits sent an electronic thrill of pleasure through its body. Sensor systems flared into life, invisibly scanning the area and locking on to a distant group of targets moving through the darkness. The prey was still far off, but coming closer. The Hunter turned and moved silently towards it.

LAN, GO AHEAD and check the way in front of us. Make sure your laspistol is armed and charged,' Dorn insisted. The juve gang crouched near a barely lit glow-globe, taking cover amongst the twisted girders of a long-ago collapsed structure. Dom barked orders as if it were his given right; he had already assumed natural command of the group. 'Mikhal, stay beside me. Mallin, cover our rear - and see that the runt doesn't get lost in the dark.'

Their destination was the ritual duelling area out in the wastes of Hive Bottom - the ruins of a one-time settlement long abandoned to bands of mutants and outlaw gangs. It was here they would meet their chosen opponents, but this coming battle was but a small part of the test. Any journey through Hive Bottom was hazardous, and the young warriors were only too well aware that anything could be waiting for them in the velvet darkness.

At the rear of the band, Mallin sensed his brother's uneasiness, and laid a reassuring hand on Jaal's shoulder. 'Ignore him,' he said levelly. 'Stay by me, and we'll both survive this together. Remember what Merck taught us.

Fear is the greatest killer of all, more deadly than any weapon. Conquer fear, and you will be ready to call yourself a true warrior.'

Jaal nodded, realising the worth of his brother's words. He was afraid, but not of the coming battle. He was afraid of this place and the things that roamed its shadows. He pulled' nervously at his bandanna. A strange uneasiness filled him -a gut instinct that he had come to recognise as a warning of imminent danger. Such instincts had saved him from a knife in the back more than once, back when he was running with the younger juves of the Steel Skull's settlement, learning how to stalk and fight in the relative safety of the tunnels around the compound.

Now he felt that same familiar sensation of lurking danger again, coming from out there in the surrounding darkness. Somehow he just knew that something dark and deadly was out there - and it was coming closer.

THE HUNTER CROUCHED in the shadows atop a ruined metal shack, watching its prey. The chameleon scales on the surface of its body-suit shifted to blend in perfectly with its surroundings. Thermally sealed inside its body-suit, it was invisible even to infra-red detection. Its armoured suit had been crafted in the finest artificier workshops of a far distant world, and the suit's enhanced adaptation systems meant that it now possessed extra-evolved abilities that not even its creators could have predicted.

The Hunter activated its own infra-red systems, watching the heat patterns of its prey dance through the darkness. Five of them. Five lost children, all alone down here in the dark. It paused to consider its options, strategy simulations composed from the stored memories of previous hunts flickering through its hard-wired consciousness. The Hunter ignored them. Memories of old kills no longer satisfied it. The prey was so close. It hungered for the thrill of fresh combat.

It leapt from its perch like a jaguar, sensor systems allowing it to track its prey's position effortlessly through the landscape of ruins. So confidently they moved, so unaware of the potential terrors that surrounded them down here! Inside the skin of its suit, the Hunter smiled. They were sent down here to learn, and so it would teach them a lesson in terror. But first, in order for the lesson to begin, they must discover the surprise that lay in wait for them at their destination. After all, thought the

Hunter, it had gone to such lengths to prepare the scene, and it did not intend for such effort go to waste...

DEAD! THEY'RE ALL dead!' At Lan's shout, the rest of the gang came running with their weapons drawn.

They found their terrified comrade standing in the centre of the abandoned settlement. Its crumbling walls and burned-out dwelling holes were a testament to the destruction that had long ago been visited upon it by the marauding mutie gangs that roamed the wastes of Hive Bottom.

'Dead! They're all dead!' Lan repeated over and over, gesturing at the scene of bloody carnage around him. 'Look at them, Dom! What kind of thing could have done this to them!'

Dorn looked, stunned by what he saw. He had been prepared for some kind of ambush - the rules of the ritual allowed for almost anything, and victory often went to the first gang to reach the duelling arena and set a trap for their opponents. But this... This was something he could never have foreseen.

So far he had counted five dead Cawdor gangers, although so many body parts were spread across the ground that it was difficult to tell exactly how many of them there may have originally been. One of them hung high above their heads, impaled on a steel beam jutting out of a shredded walkway. They had all been killed at close range - that much, he was certain of-ripped apart and their remains left for the scavengers. But killed by what? he asked himself fearfully.

Dorn glanced around him, checking the positions of the rest of the gang,. Mallin and his runt brother were searching amongst the bodies, but he became uncomfortably aware that Lan and Mikhal were looking to him for some sign of reassurance. As the appointed leader of the hunt, he knew it fell to him to assert his authority over the situation. An ambush,' he said, not feeling as confident as he tried to sound. 'Something was waiting for them before they arrived here. Scavvies, most likely. No ganger would kill like this, not even Cawdor scum. Whoever they were, they are long gone from here...'

'No. This was no ambush. Look at the evidence, Dorn. It is lying all around your feet.' Dorn turned at the sound of Mallin's voice, seeing his

rival bending down over the butchered bodies of the dead gangers. 'There was a full-scale battle here. These Cawdor gangers died bravely as a warrior should, fighting to the last with a weapon in their hands.'

Mallin stood up, holding up the fused remains of a laspistol marked with House Cawdor battle emblems. He held it our for them all to see, a grim look on his young face. 'The power-pack on this laspistol has been burned out. Whoever was carrying it kept on firing until he'd exhausted its power-charge.

And those two juves-' He gestured with his arm at a pair of sprawling bodies. 'The ground around them is littered with spent cartridges from their stub pistols. Jaal and I count at least ten cartridges apiece for each weapon. That means they had time to reload and fire again before they died.' Mallin paused, looking directly into Dorn's eyes. 'No, Dorn, this was no ambush. These warriors all died fighting an enemy they knew was coming at them.' Behind Dom, Mikhal and Lan exchanged nervous glances and raised their weapons. From his position behind Mallin, Jaal surreptitiously released the safety catch on his own laspistol, hearing the reassuring hum that told him it was fully charged. Dorn stepped forward, locking eyes with his challenger, but none of them could have failed to notice the new note of uncertainty in his voice. 'Not an ambush, then. But I still say this was nothing more than the work of mutie scavengers.' He continued to glare at Mallin. 'Either way, we have nothing to worry about. Everyone knows Scavvie packs never stick around after a raid. Even now, they'll be far away in their lair licking their wounds and counting their plunder.' All eyes were on Mallin as he crushed Dorn's words with the cold logic of his argument. 'Then where are the bodies?' he retorted. All these shots fired, and not one dead attacker? Everyone knows Scavvies leave their dead and even their injured behind them.'

Mallin paused, pointing towards the dead bodies around them. 'And, if it really was Scavvies that did this, why haven't the bodies been stripped of their weapons and equipment? Jaal and I have checked the area for tracks. All we can find are those of the Cawdor gangers.' Mallin stood defiant, awaiting Dom's answer. 'Then what are you saying?' sneered Dorn, running his hand over his close-cropped hair. 'That a ghost, a ghost that can walk through bullets and las-blasts, came here and killed them all?'

It was Jaal who answered, stepping forward to name the unspoken terror word on all their minds. 'No, not a ghost.' he stuttered hesitantly. Everyone turned to stare at him. Mallin nodding reassuringly at him to continue. 'It's a Spyrer. A single Spyrer did this. We are being hunted, Dom. All of us. It killed every single one of these Cawdor juves, and now it's coming after us.'

THE HUNTER WAS CLOSE, closer than any of them dared imagine. From its position high above, perched on the underside of an overhanging walkway, it could look down directly upon them to study its prey. Watching them, selecting which one would be the first of its victims. Its sensors tuned into the sound of their voices, storing them in memory. The words were unimportant - it had been years since the Hunter spoke or listened to the voice of another human being, save the sound of its victims' screams. It listened only to the tone of their voices, realising after a moment that two of them, the two biggest, were arguing. Let them argue, it thought. As if the question of which of them led the others would make any difference to the final outcome! The Hunter chose its target, sensors zeroing in on it to study and record. This one was stronger than the others, and the rest would look to it for leadership. The other one talked bravely, but the Hunter's sensors detected the nervous beat of its heart and the frightened tone in its voice which betrayed its words.

Let these striplings follow their new leader, it thought. It would soon show them just how vulnerable they were, when he would be the first to die.

The Hunter uncoiled itself from its hiding place, scuttling along the underside of the walkway as it moved silently towards its first chosen victim.

SPYRER! EVERYONE GLANCED fearfully at each other as Jaal dared to mention that dreaded name. Spyrers: cruel hunters from the Upper Hive, descending down into the depths of the Underhive in packs to hunt their prey, seeking enough kills to return back up the Spyre to be recognised by their kind as rightful members of the Hive's aristocratic elite. All of the young Steel Skull gangers had heard fearful tales of the exploits of these

most hated of killers, knowing that even the most battle-hardened veterans of their settlement were afraid of such enemies. But, it was whispered, there was one sort of Spyrer even other Spyre Hunters feared. The lone renegades. Those who had developed too much of a taste for death and never returned back to the Upper Hive. Instead, these lone killers remained in the Underhive, adapting to the environment of their new home and mercilessly hunting down all that crossed their path. When such a renegade was discovered, even the most bitter enemies amongst the gangs would join forces to destroy it.

'He's right, Dorn,' said Lan, panic breaking his voice. 'This is the work of a Spyrer!' Mallin nodded in agreement. 'We have no other choice. We must abandon the ritual and return to Herek. He will know what to do. We have to warn our people that there is a Spyrer on the loose!'

'No!' Dorn snarled, gesturing wildly with his laspistol. 'The test is not yet over! To return now, without any kills, would bring shame upon us all.' He paused, staring hard at the other juves and daring any of them to contradict him. 'Our enemies are dead, but we have been offered a far worthier opponent to face. The test goes on, and when we return it will be in triumph to present Herek with the head of a Spyrer!' 'This is madness, Dorn!' Mikhal interjected, trying to reason with his leader. 'Even the bravest gangers would not choose to fight such an enemy. I say Mallin is right. We should-' Mikhal's voice tailed off as Dorn silenced him with a single threatening glance. 'I am the leader here - and I say the test goes on. I thought you were loyal to me, Mikhal. Are you siding with this coward and his runt brother?' Mikhal stepped back a pace as if he had been physically struck, staring shamefacedly at the ground and unable to meet Dom's eyes.

Unnoticed, at the back of the group, Jaal's head buzzed with sudden pain. That feeling again, a sense of utter dread, only stronger now than he had ever felt before. And, with it, something else: strange alien thoughts - violent and predatory - crowding into his mind from elsewhere. Jaal's vision blurred and the ground span beneath him. Suddenly he was no longer standing with the others. He was hanging in the darkness high above, looking down on them all. His body was not his own. Instead, he felt himself sheathed in a cold metallic shell, powerful fibre-bundle muscles responding to his every move. He could hear Dom's challenge to

Mikhal. See Mallin backing off his hand moving towards his pistol holster, unaware of this new danger above him. There was a rush of air. Jaal felt himself falling, no, leaping.

He snapped back into his own body. Numbed, he tried to shout out a warning as the thing descended down from the darkness towards its target. 'Main! Above you! Look-'

Too late, Mallin looked up to see the Spyrer dropping down towards him. Jaal caught a glimpse of a dark spider-like shape, its outline blurred as though it was a living part of the darkness from where it came, and then it was upon his brother. Mallin raised his weapon to fire. Something impossibly fast and terrifyingly sharp flashed through the air. Mallin screamed, the las-blast from his weapon discharging harmlessly into the air. Jaal fumbled for his own weapon. In the split-second it took to draw it, Main was gone. More laser blasts lanced through the darkness - Dorn, Lan and Mikhal firing upwards, their shots ricocheting off stonework and girders and illuminating the hellish scene in bright flashes. Jaal caught strobing glimpses of the Spyrer carrying the screaming figure of MAUI with it back up into the darkness. At first Jaal thought the Spyrer was actually floating through the air but, looking closer, he saw the gleam of something thin and silvery reflected in the light of the las-blasts: a metallic web-line anchored to some point in the darkness above and spun out from the Spyrer's wrists, strong enough for it to carry both it and its prey out of range of its enemies' weapons. Mallin. It had taken Mallin!

Jaal sank to the ground, knowing that the others were wasting their shots and that his brother was already lost to them. With a sickening lurch, Jaal saw the object lying on the ground where, only seconds ago, his brother had stood. Mallin's severed hand, still clutching the useless laspistol in its lifeless grasp.

Jaal doubled over and retched violently, this final horror too much for his shocked senses. He had known that the Spyrer was out there. He had seen it in his mind, known it was coming after them. He should have said something earlier, tried to warn them what was about to happen. If he had, Mallin would still be alive... Dorn's boot crashed into his ribs, sending Jaal sprawling across the ground. With a shock, Jaal realised that he had been babbling to himself speaking his thoughts out aloud. 'Traitor!' screamed Dom. 'What do you mean, you knew what was going to happen?

Dorn turned towards Lan and pointing in fury at the figure of Jaal lying at his feet. 'You heard him! You heard him say he knew it was out there. He knew, and he led it straight to us! He's one of them. A witchling! He's been in league with this thing all along!'

Witchling. Jaal knew the word. Psykers, some called them. To be so named was a death sentence, the Redemptionists ruthlessly hunting down anyone suspected of possessing such feared powers.

'Then we should take him back, Dom,' stammered Mikhal, staring at Jaal as if the youth could strike him dead at any moment. The elders should judge him. It is not for us to decide...'

'No!' Dorn raged, aiming his laspistol directly into Jaal's face. 'He has betrayed us all and led his own brother to his death! He is a traitor, and I shall judge him where he stands!'

Terrified, Jaal closed his eyes, fearing he was only seconds away from execution at the hands of the wild-eyed Dom. But the expected shot never came. Instead, he heard the sound of an echoing voice calling out from the darkness around them.

'Help me, Dorn. Help me, Jaal. Help me...' It was Mania. Mallin was still alive! Weak and in pain, judging by the agonised pleading of his voice, but still alive.

How could that be? thought Jaal. Spyrers never spare their victims. Perhaps Mallin had escaped Perhaps-

'On your feet, traitor,' said Dorn, dragging him to his feet by his clothes. 'It seems your Spyrer master still values the life of its servant.' Dorn jammed the barrel of his laspistol painfully against the back of Jaal's head and hissed into his ear in a voice full of anger and loathing. 'It has spared the life of your brother. Maybe it wants to trade his life for yours.'

HELP ME, DORN. Help me, Jaal. Help me...' The Hunter looped the recording through its suit's vocal systems, mimicking the voice of its victim. An old trick, but one that had often served it well in the past. The trap was set. Now it would wait and see if the prey took the bait.

THE YOUNG STEEL SKULL gangers moved warily through the ruins, following the distant sound of their comrade's pleading voice.

Mikhal and Lan took the lead, cautiously scanning the overhead ledges and structures for signs of their enemy. It had taken them by surprise once already. They were determined it would not do so again. Dom brought up the rear, roughly pushing Jaal in front of him, his laspistol trained on his captive's back.

Jaal stumbled, risking another blow from his ill-tempered captor. 'Dorn,' he dared to stammer, 'you're making a mistake. You're leading us into a trap. I don't know how, but that can't be the voice of Malkin out there...'

Dorn silenced Jaal with a painful prod from the barrel of the laspistol. 'Shut up, runt. Try and warn your ally that we're coming, and I'll blow you in half 'Help me, Dorn. Help me, Jaal. Help

Dorn signalled for silence, trying to get a fix on the location of the voice. There, up ahead. Through the ruins of a tumbled archway they saw a walkway across a bubbling pool of toxic sludge, its acrid vapours giving off a noxious stench. Through the poisonous mists they could see something waiting for them on the other side of the walkway.

They shuffled closer, covering their mouths to avoid breathing in too much of the fetid air. A couple of paces ahead of his fellows Lan was the first to see it. He stopped dead, barely able to believe the sight that awaited them. It was the body of MOM, hanging puppet-like from a metal web of razor-edged wire that cut through his body in a dozen places, Mallin's head lay on the ground in front of him, that same mocking voice sounding as if it was coming directly from his lifeless lips. 'Help me, Dom. Help me, Jaal. Help me...'

The Spyrer exploded out of waste pool. It landed nimbly on the walkway in front of Lan and Mikhal, its armoured body streaming with burning pollutants and corrosive acids. Jaal howled in terror as it reared up before its prey. Its sinuous body was composed of black armoured plating which flexed and locked together as it moved. Jaal was reminded horribly of the stories he had heard of the monstrous spider-things that inhabited the deepest reaches of the Underhive. Cruel diamond-edged claws extended from each of its wrists, their blades glistening with lubricants and deadly venom. Its horn-crested head swivelled round towards them and, with a sudden lurch of fear, Jaal realised that it had no face. Its human features were hidden behind the blank shell of its armour, guided by electronic senses the extent of which Jaal could only guess at. It came at them at an

impossible speed before any of them had time to react. With one sweep of its claws, it cut through Lan's throat. The ganger was dead before he even had time to scream, his body hitting the walkway and his blood jetting out of him in one long spray.

Mikhal spun to bring his laspistol to bear, but the Spyrer was faster, thrusting the wrist-blade of its other hand deep into the juve's stomach. Servo-mechanisms tensed as the Spyrer lifted its still-living victim off his feet, raising him high above its head in a superhuman show of strength. Mikhal did scream, a long agonised howl from the very depths of his soul, as the Spyrer released the blade's venom cells into his body. With a dismissive gesture, the Spyrer hurled its victim over its head, ripping the blades out from the juve's body. Mikhal landed on the walkway behind, his body already starting to convulse and contort into agonising shapes as the deadly venom coursed through his veins. Then the Spyrer turned to face its two remaining victims. 'You bastard!' Dorn hurled Jaal aside and charged the Spyrer, blasts from his laspistol ricocheting harmlessly off its armour. At the last moment, Dorn dropped the pistol and drew his knife, throwing himself at the Spyrer with a roar of defiance. The ganger crashed into the Spyrer, catching it off-balance and sending both him and his enemy backwards into the waste pool. Jaal turned and ran, knowing that Dorn's attack had been a brave but hopeless gesture. Behind him, he could hear Dorn screaming in rage and agony as he tried to pull the Spyrer down with him into the corrosive depths of the waste pool. Jaal knew the Spyrer would survive - nothing could kill it - and it would be coming after him next. He snatched up Lan's laspistol, realising the futility of the gesture but wanting to at least die fighting with a weapon in his hand. THE HUNTER PULLED itself out of the waste pool, leaving the burning and dissolved remains of Dorn behind it. Neural links ran a damage check on its suit systems.

Its armour was corroded in several places and the burning acids had destroyed its chameleon camouflage system. In time, the suit would repair itself, but the Hunter, driven by the need to kill, was oblivious of all thoughts of rest or repair.

Even now, its last victim was escaping, and the Hunter was determined to finish its game.

JAAL RAN THROUGH the maze of ruins, knowing that the Spyrer was close behind him. He could feel its thoughts buzzing in his head; whispering horrors that he barely recognised as coming from anything human. Occasionally, he would feel his mind spiral out from under him. Then he would be inside the mind of his enemy, seeing and experiencing everything around it as it moved across the top levels of the ruins, leaping from structure to structure and scuttling, insect-like, up the sheer sides of walls and shafts. He found himself running towards a rusting metal walkway, maybe a metre wide, spanning a chasm from some long-past hivequake, its sheer sides dropping away into nothingness. The Spyrer was hunting him, he knew, probably herding him into another of its traps. If only he could control this new ability; focus these visions that flashed through his mind...

His boots made the precarious walkway echo beneath his pounding feet. A voice in jaal's head suddenly screamed a warning, telling him to stop. Jaal threw himself onto the reverberating walkway, seeing in an instant the deadly trap he had almost run into strands of the Spyrer's metallic web-line, strung out across the walkway. If Jaal had kept on running he would surely have been sliced apart.

A wave of terror washed through the young ganger. The Spyrer was just playing with him, toying with him like a cat until it closed in for the final kill. What chance did he, Jaal the runt, the weakling of the litter, stand against such an enemy? A dark shape swooped low over his head and Jaal felt a vibration as it landed on the walkway behind him. He hauled himself up and span around to face the Spyrer, steadying his stance on the walkway and gripping the laspistol in both hands. The nightmare stalked slowly towards him, venom-dripping weapon claws slowly extending from their armoured casings. Jaal knew he had nowhere to run. Before him was the Spyrer. Behind him, the barrier of razor-wire web. Below the walkway, on either side, a long fall into oblivion. The final trap had been sprung and the game had reached its end. A terrible sliver of ice ran the full length of his spine. 'Fear is the greatest killer of all,' the Spyrer said mockingly, perfectly imitating the voice of his dead brother. 'Conquer fear and you will be ready to call yourself a true warrior.'

At the sound of Mallin's voice, something convulsed inside Jaal's head. Fear gave way to fiery rage and hatred as he heard this creature, this foul

thing, speak with the voice and words of his dead brother. His fury opened up something within him, blossoming like a match igniting kerosene. Something that had been there all along, waiting to be set free. Power - pure, unfocussed power now channelled and released by his rage. Jaal was thrown backwards onto the hard, cold metal, as he felt some uncontrollable energy erupt from his body, a wave of enormous concussive force spreading out from him in all directions. The walkway beneath his feet buckled as the aged metal was rent by the supernatural force Jaal had somehow released. With a scream he realised he was sliding down towards the Spyrer's web of razor-wire.

Jaal scrabbled up the slope of the collapsing walkway, grabbing hold of a bent support beam. Turning he saw the Spyrer leap from the shifting platform as it gave way under its feet.

A thin web-line shot out from its outstretched wrist, seeking a secure anchor to the structure at the other end of the vanished bridge. 'No. Not this time,' swore Jaal, determined that the Spyrer would not escape him. 'This time the hunt ends here.' Unthinking, Jaal raised the laspistol in his free hand, aiming not at the Spyrer but at the web-line supporting it. He reached out with his mind, focusing his expanded senses on the thin strand of metal glittering in the darkness, and pulled the trigger. A searing bolt of laser energy leapt from his gun, his mind flying out with it, leading it, taking it to its target. The shot hit true, vaporising one segment of the web-line in a flash of white-hot energy.

Caught in mid-swing, the Spyrer tumbled down into the darkness, diamond-edged claws throwing off sparks as it tore at the sheer wall of the chasm, vainly striking out to find a desperate handhold.

'Nooooo! Mallin's dead voice cried as the creature fell. 'Jaaaaaaal!'

And then it was gone, its death-scream amplified by its suit systems, an electronic screech that seemed to echo forever across the Hive Bottom long after the Spyrer itself had been swallowed by the chasm.

HEREK? FACE IT. If Dorn ain't coming back, none of them are.' The Steel

Skull gangers waiting by the open blast-doors looked more worried about losing their wagers than any real sorrow The old man sighed to himself, and turned back toward the light. 'Very well. Seal the doors,' he

ordered. 'They've had an extra day-cycle. We've put ourselves at too much risk already by waiting here so long.' Herek watched as his two lieutenants carried out his orders, and silently swore under his breath. He had lost whole parties of juves to the ritual before, but he'd had high hopes for at least some of this group. But, at the last, there would be other tests and other initiates, all of them eager to prove their manhood amidst the dangers that lay in wait on the other side of those doors.

From his hiding place, Jaal watched the gangers haul the blast doors closed. He wanted so much to shout, to run towards them, to tell Herek and the others that he was still alive, that it was over - that he was safe and just wanted to go home. But he knew that would be madness.

Everything had changed. Now that he knew what he was - a Psyker, a witchling -he knew he could never return home. Not that his step-family would mourn him, not when they had lost a real son. He was orphaned again. He was an outcast, a renegade, doomed to dwell in the darkest places with the others of his kind - the freaks, monsters and mutants of Hive Bottom.

After a long moment, Jaal turned and walked away. He did not look back at the final clank of the bolts when Herek's men sealed the doors shut behind him. Silently, he slipped off into the shadows, already welcoming the protection and anonymity they offered.

THE LAKE
BY TULLY R. SUMMERS

LORD ORL LOOKED down at the viscous purple slime lapping at the side of the skiff in the light from the sputtering flares. He spat in disgust, thinking of the sorry chain of events which had brought him to such a humiliating endeavour.

He had started his gang, the Brassers, with the grand intent of becoming the first Orlock Slag Lord of the Underhive. Centuries of mineral-laden chemwaste and solidified sludge lay hidden in the bowels of the Hive, just waiting for a man of will and vision to take it and turn it into the foundations of an empire. The House of Iron would echo with the name of Lord Orl. The fat, preening Metal Barons of Upperhive would bow and scrape before him, once he had completed his conquest. A fine vision, though easier said than done.

True, his band of highly disciplined men had taken their first slag pile with ease. Red's Tower, a huge stalagmite of compacted ore, had been wrested from a barbarian Goliath gang, the Black Hand. The yellow metal mined from the Tower had proved perfect for making clothing, gear and equipment, thus giving name to his crew: the Brassers.

But Black Hand's retaliation had been brutal. Months of bitter fighting had reduced the Brassers to a handful, and left Orl with a pitiful stash of credits. Then the blasted Hive decided to settle, one of the ancient subterranean domes crumbling under the weight of nine miles of vertical Spire. The resulting quake dislodged house-sized chunks of concrete onto the Brassers' water still, crushing the gang's only means of survival. Without water for his gang, and without enough credits to buy a new still, Orl's dreams had been flattened like the sails of the vapour collector.

Then came the Guilder.

Rorget Ahn was a devious but powerful merchant lord, known widely for hiring the many gangs of the Underhive levels to carry out his dubious business transactions. Lord Orl had long before vowed that the Brassers would never deal with such a sump-snake, but desperation now demanded he break his word.

Rorget Ahn had found a new dome. The very same Hive quake that had brought ruin to the Brassers had opened a tunnel to a deeper part of the ancient city that had been closed for untold centuries. A dome, completely filled with liquid, a virtual lake. A lake filled with mulk spiders.

Rorget's plan was simple: the Brassers would go spider hunting. They would harvest the gem-like eyes from the mutant arachnids and bring them back to the Guilder. The fortune gained by fencing the jewels through Rorget's uphive contacts would be split with the Brassers. Orl could buy his new water still and have plenty of creds left to revive his atrophied gang. It wasn't much, but it was a plan.

SO HERE HE WAS - Lord Orl, future Slag Lord of the Underhive, bobbing across the surface of a stinking slime lake like some sump-sucking algae farmer. He turned to regard Kar, in the rear of the fungus-wood boat. Kar, one of Rorget's hired guns, had been sent along to make sure all harvested spider eyes were accounted for. The grizzled, white-haired warrior at the rudder coughed and sputtered, choking on noxious green smoke as the little outboard motor burnt its fermented algae fuel. Orl almost laughed aloud as Kar activated the mechanical counter on his wrist.

'I'm not the only one Rorget's demeaned, bean-counter,' Orl sneered, pulling his patched mesh-link overcoat around him.

Kar glared back in silent resentment, eyes dark and murderous, and Orl turned his gaze back to the lake-filled dome around him. Behind him, lurching through the purple ooze were the other two boats. R'daff, his trusted second-in-command, Husker, Ferren and Hack were all straining sweatily at their oars. Orl hadn't had enough money to buy more than one motor. He spat again into the lake. That was the worst part. Rorget had made them pay, actually pay for these rickety fungus-wood rowing boats, barely big enough for two men. The conniving Guilder had taken him for every one of his last measly credits.

Still, better these bath tubs than trying to swim in this filth, Orl thought sourly, regarding the stinking substance filling the dome.

It was unlike any effluent he had ever seen, even down here in the depths of Underhive. Its purple surface rippled constantly in strange oily patterns, as if the liquid had a life of its own. The dome itself was relatively small, less than half a mile across. The intricate metalwork traceries that covered its looming walls were incredibly ancient. He had seen their like before, these vast metallic webs built from what looked like the skeletons of millions of extinct metal insects, shattered remnants of the myth-shrouded founders of the Hive. The technology to make such walls and machinery had all but vanished along with the memory of their makers.

Orl found himself wondering what lay beneath the purple surface of the lake. Up ahead, the end of some vast machine jutted from the ooze. Solidified chemical deposits encrusted what seemed to be the top of an enormous tube-covered tank, creating a small island in the centre of the lake, possibly the source of the flood that had filled the dome.

'Spider sign!' R'daff's shouted warning came from behind. Twenty feet away from Orl's flimsy boat, the surface of the lake was boiling in the flickering flare-light. Kar veered the skiff toward the disturbance as Lord Orl knelt up in the prow, pumping a shell into the chamber of his shotgun with shaking fingers.

The bubbling surface parted, almost like an eye opening. Glistening purple chitin emerged amidst flailing, many-jointed legs, and the air filled with an eerie wailing like a dying infant. Flat, paddle-like limbs slapped the water as they propelled the nightmare creature swiftly towards the skiff, razor sharp mouth parts clicking hungrily. A virulent purple spray fountained beside the creature as Orl's first shot went wide. The shotgun's recoil rocked the skiff dangerously. Kar fought with the rudder, struggling to control the craft as Lord Orl chambered another shell. Before he could slam it home, the immense, reeking monster was upon them, crawling up the side of the boat, blade-tipped legs clawing into the wood.

Orl jammed the barrel of his shotgun into the slavering jaws and pulled the trigger. Chitin flew apart in a rain of blue-black blood as the creature blew inside out and fell back into the slime.

Orl stared at the floating carcass. A spider maybe, but not any kind of mulk spider he'd ever seen, and he had seen many. Its body was strangely

asymmetrical. External gills fanned out along the sides of its ragged abdomen, along with a number of other unidentifiable fleshy appendages. But the eyes were there, five glistening black jewels staring from its dead thorax.

As Orl cut the diamond- hard gems from the spider with the curved knife he had brought along for just such a purpose, Kar's mechanical counter ticked five times. Behind them more strange wailing echoed it across the darkness. Three more of the creatures came to the surface, buoyed by the air trapped in their external gills. Orl saw that the same weird asymmetry had warped these in other ways. Though presumably of the same strain, each animal was drastically different from its fellow. Autogun fire mixed with searing laser blasts as R'daff and Ferren entered the hunt, their partners rowing wildly.

Another spider flew apart in a black splash as Ferren's laspistol hit home. Ooze kicked up around R'daff's spider as it scuttled towards them in a hail of lead. An orifice under its belly suddenly jetted a stream of liquid in a convulsive spasm that sent the creature hurtling inside their boat. R'daff tumbled to the deck, a tangle of slashing legs on top of him. Dropping his oars, Husker fumbled the stub pistol from his holster. R'daff screams mixed with that of the spider's as bone scythes sliced into his flesh. Husker's stub shells smashed into the creature, hurling it overboard.

R'daff, blood flowing from many cuts, rose shakily to his feet. A severed chitinous leg hung from his shoulder, its bone hook still embedded in flesh. R'daff gritted his teeth and wrenched the still twitching member out, tossing it overboard in disgust. It sank into the mire.

All three spiders lay dead, the Brassers bringing the boats along side to carve their booty from their hides. Kar's counter dutifully clicked away.

'Head on back and get those taken care of. We'll finish up here,' Orl commanded, waving at R'daff's seeping wounds.

'What? These scratches?' R'daff panted back, smiling through bloody lips.

Orl shouted back fondly, admiring the warrior's bravado: 'Row his rump home, Husker, before he catches spore-' Orl screamed wildly as his shoulder exploded, spattering Kar with blood and gristle.

'Hey, lads! Looks like them sissy Orlocks are tryin' to jump our claim!'

Lord Orl spun to the hated voice, clutching his ruined arm, face white. 'Krug!' he roared, his voice breaking with pain and rage, 'You Helmawr-damned sump-slug, this is our claim! Guilder sanctioned! Show him, Ka-'

He stopped his bellow in mid sentence, gawking in disbelief at the sight of the leader of the Black Hand gang standing on the prow of a large, algae-powered garbage scow - the very same garbage scow Rorget had tried to sell him two days earlier. Lord Orl had opted for the three fungus-wood skiffs instead, fearing the seaworthiness of the pressed bonemeal hull of the scow.

'That double-crossing bastard...' Orl muttered darkly, as the firefight blew apart the semi-darkness of the flooded dome.

Lasers, bolts and bullets churned the lake into purple froth as both gangs fought for ownership of the hunting grounds. The Brassers' three skiffs made difficult targets, positioned behind the centre islet for cover. The whole Black Hand gang seemed to have come on the garbage scow through the sludge-filled canal at the far end of the dome. Though they made a relatively easy target, massed on the deck, their numbers were prevailing, a new gun replacing every one that the Brassers downed.

Autopistol slugs tore into Ferren's thigh, almost pitching him overboard. Chips of fungus-wood flew as the Goliath's fire slowly ate the Brassers' skiffs from under them. Then the withering rain stopped, replaced by alarmed shouts.

Lord Orl raised his head from the deck. The garbage scow was melting. The bonemeal hull was slowly dissolving in the viscous purple slime, affirming Orl's choice of boat purchase. The Black Hand frantically scurried about the softening craft, jamming its motors into reverse and desperately trying to keep it afloat. Lord Orl breathed a sigh of relief as the scow turned back and disappeared into the canal from which it had come, the Black Hand making a last ditch effort to reach dry land before they sank.

A scream from the back of the skiff cut Orl's reverie short. Another mutant spider had leapt out of the lake onto Kar, attaching itself to his flesh with its bone hooks. Orl watched in horror as saw-like mouth parts chewed through Kar's face. Kar's gun went off in his convulsing fingers, the plasma beam hitting the fuel tank of the outboard. The vast, flaming green explosion obliterated the skiff.

ORL SWAM DESPERATELY for the surface with awkward strokes, crimson clouds trailing from his limp left arm. Somewhere below him, his shotgun sank down into the viscous darkness. The mysterious liquid was like hot needles on his skin, fire in his mouth, and razors in the wound of his shoulder.

His head broke the surface. Kar's body bobbed beside him amidst pieces of the skiff. Ten feet away, through stinging, slime-clogged eyes, Ori could make out the misshapen hump of the island.

Something jerked Kar's body beneath the purple murk. One moment it was there, the next it was gone. Orl began swimming toward the island, pumping his three good limbs with all his might. A fountain of bloody bubbles erupted where Kar's body had been and Orl redoubled his efforts.

Orl heaved his body onto the island's sedimentary shore, thanking all the gods he could think of that his skin was still there. The purple liquid, though stinging painfully, was not terribly corrosive; there were parts of the sump that would have eaten the flesh off his bones.

'Orl! Behind you!!' R'daff screamed in panic from across the semi-darkness. Lord

Orl quickly rolled onto his back to find himself facing the huge lake spider that was looming over him. Its sickening mouth parts descending toward his face, clicking like knives being sharpened. Orl's numb fingers scrabbling at his belt, desperately seeking the hilt of his knife.

Lead slugs from R'daff's autogun slammed into the creature as Orl's blade repeatedly crunched into its chitinous belly. The spider collapsed bodily on top of Orl, drenching him with its hot, black blood.

Husker rowed the skiff to the shore, R'daff leaping over the side to aid his leader. Heaving the spider's corpse off Orl, the ganger helped him gingerly to his feet. Ferren and Hack, in the other skiff, anxiously scanned the lake. The malevolent surface was calm, for now.

LORD ORL FINISHED prying the dead spider's eyes into the cupped hands of R'daff, grimly noting the absence of Kar's beeping motion detector device.

'Let's get the sump out of here,' Orl snarled, his men eagerly nodding in agreement. Both men boarded Husker's skiff, bringing the gunwale

dangerously low. The Brassers worked the two gun-battered boats toward the half-submerged gantry from which they had entered.

Five feet from the make-shift dock, the shimmering purple surface of the lake erupted one final time, the dark blur of a spider leaping from the slime behind R'daff. In a lightning fast strike the creature's bladed leg hooked through R'daff's cheek, emerging again under his chin. Before the gang could even raise their weapons, R'daff was dragged into the ooze, vanishing with his attacker beneath the oily waves.

The rest of the gang flew to the gunwales, helplessly aiming their weapons at the slime, shouting R'daff's name until it echoed around the ancient cavern. Three minutes later they stopped. Nothing. No spider, no R'daff. Not even bubbles.

Pulling the skiffs from the hated lake, the remnants of the gang began the long trek home in mournful silence.

DOKKER FINISHED cleaning the end of the brachial vessel and placed the severed arm in the cryo pod at his feet. It had been eleven months since he had 'jumped the wall', fleeing the glittering halls of the Spire after that fatal surgery. Yes, eleven months and no sign of the dead Noble's vengeful family, their lust for his head obviously overcome by their aversion to the teeming filth of the Underhive levels. All told, his new practice, cleverly located in an abandoned gantry crane, was doing quite nicely down here, with the ceaseless gang warfare providing him with a never-ending supply of patients and body parts for transplants. He had even come to grudgingly accept the moniker the gangers had slapped him with: Dokker Hack'n'Slash.

A loud metal clanging roused Dokker from his thoughts. He went over to the balcony of the crane, and peered over the railing. Four storeys down, he could make out the copper form of a Brasser, the yellow metal mesh of his garments glinting dully in the chemlight of the dome.

'Hack, my friend!' Dokker cheerily greeted the familiar ganger. 'More spare parts for me?' he asked eyeing the body Hack carried.

'No Dokker, it's Lord Orl. Something's wrong with him!' Hack shouted back in a worried voice. 'Let me up!'

Dokker hit the large red button beside him, lowering the ancient, winch-driven access platform to the ground below.

LORD ORL FORCED his eyelids open. The familiar plates of the ceiling came into focus.

'Awake at last, I see,' Dokker Hack'n'Slash's reedy voice piped from nearby.

'How long have I been out this time?' Orl croaked through split lips. His throat felt like he had drunk acid.

'Three days now, if the glowglobes are to be trusted.'

Orl turned weakly in the sick bed. His body felt like an aching lump of lead, and there was a searing pain in his left shoulder. He slowly moved his undamaged arm to clutch the throbbing wound. His fingers sank into the sickly white flesh like wet clay. He let go with a start, and was horrified to see the skin refuse to spring back, leaving deep trenches where his fingers were.

'What the hell's happening to me!'

'I don't know.' Dokker leaned over him, shining a light in his eyes. If his expression was anything to go by, he seemed almost amused. 'It seems to be some sort of extreme cellular deterioration. At first I thought you had advanced stages of spore rot, but you failed to respond to the anti-fungal treatments, worse luck, and I can find no traces of fungal spores in your bloodstream.'

'Damn it all!' Orl groaned. Dokker prattled on, but the room began to swim before Orl's eyes, and purple-drowned darkness engulfed him once more.

'LORD ORL. Can you hear me? Lord Lori?' Orl's eyes fluttered open to the concerned visage of Ferren. 'That rat-faced Guilder, Rorget Ann, has been asking for you, lord. What should we do?'

It took Orl some time to untangle his muddled thoughts. The lake... spiders... eyes... Rorget Ahn!

The back-stabbing sump-slug had sold them out, purposely pitting the Brassers and Black Hand against each other. Profit, nothing but profit for the Guilder, selling his gear to the gangs so they could destroy each other. The weaker the gangs, the easier for the Guilder to control them. All this,

plus the promise of impossibly rare spider eyes brought back by the survivors...

'Don't give him the eyes, Ferren, what ever you do, don't give him the fragging eyes!' Ori wheezed through cracked lips.

Ferren's face became more troubled. 'They're... they're gone, lord.'

'What?' Orl rasped forcing himself up into a sitting position. The way Ferren started back in revulsion did nothing to ease his consternation.

'They're gone, sir. They melted. The day after we got back from the lake. Melted away like ice.'

Orl shook his head in disbelief, pressing his good hand to his forehead. 'What the hell kind of spiders were those? What the hell was in that lake?' he asked himself, staring at the pus on his palm that had oozed out of the corners of his eyes. 'The lake...' Orl looked up at Ferren, 'I'm dying. Whatever's in that Helmawr-damned lake poisoned me, Ferren, and now I'm dying.'

Ferren fidgeted uncomfortably. 'Word has spread about... what happened. The Ratskins are in an uproar. Seems they've known about the dome for generations. It's taboo. They say it's evil... '

'You don't fragging say?' Orl snarled contemptuously, then paused. A tooth had dislodged from his gums. He spat it onto the bed sheets in a gob of bloody pus.

'They say the ancients practised evil sorcery there. Sorcery brought from, from off-world.' Ferren breathed the word like it was sacred. 'They say they made things there. Wrong things. Things contrary to the sacred Spirit of the Hive.'

'Enough, Ferren! Enough fairy tales! I'm dying. Let me rot in peace.'

Ferren slowly walked to the door. There he paused as if to say something.

'What?' Lord Orl demanded.

Ferren sadly shook his head and stepped out of the door.

ORL AWOKE ONCE again, but he was not in bed. He was crouching in the corner above an open cryo pod. He suddenly realised what he was doing and dropped the cold, dead hand that he had raised to his mouth. Waves of

nausea shook him as he staggered back from his gruesome meal. He began to sob.

Dokker's cheery voice came from the back room 'Lord Orl? Is that you? Are you all right?"

Orl could hear the surgeon's footsteps coming closer, and his mouth began to salivate. 'No! No stay back!' he screamed and lunged out through the door.

He shivered as he lowered himself down on the access platform. On his way out he had seen his reflection in a polished metal wall plate. Huge misshapen lumps covered his body, pestilent fluid running from where the skin had stretched and split.

Dokker called after him from the balcony as he ran into the maze of tangled masonry, fleeing on cracking painful joints. He ran through the Hive's artificial night, the dimmed chemlights concealing his decaying form.

HIS HEADLONG FLIGHT ended hours later on the metal dock. The dreadful purple lake lay quietly before him, as if it was waiting for him. The skin of Orl's knees had sloughed off in the many stumbling falls he had taken on his journey. It hung in bloody tatters around his shins. The exposed bone of his knee caps seemed to have turned a sickly mauve.

His gaze fell on the dark island jutting in the centre of the lake. What's done is done, Orl thought, and leapt into the oily slime. Strangely, the liquid did not burn, but felt oddly comforting, filling the gaping wounds of his body with soft warmth.

Driven by some inexplicable intuition, Orl swam to the protruding machinery of the island. He crawled onto the shore, violet liquid streaming from the mesh of his overcoat. Making his way to the jumble of pipes and steel before him, he began clawing away the solidified deposits on the face of the tank. Flesh flaying off his fingers he finally managed to break a large sheet of encrusted filth from the tank's surface. He stared numbly at what lay beneath.

Black arcs and crescents crossed on a yellow field. As Orl's ruined fingers brushed over the insignia it burst into life, flaring with ancient energy. His mind was hit with a jolt of terrible knowledge. Words and

images he could barely comprehend flooded his brain as the ancient device pumped the memories of lost gods through his tortured nerves.

They had called themselves Gene Lords, and had plundered the known galaxy from frontier to frontier, collecting not ore, not gems, but the life-blood of every living horror they found haunting the abyss. There was something in this blood they needed, something for which Orl had no words. An infinitely small spiral, a twisted double chain they needed for some vast secret experiment that was far beyond his understanding.

That was it then, this lake around him, this stuff coursing through his poisoned veins. It was a vast alien soup, stolen from creatures beyond imagination, brewing for centuries inside this infernal vat, finally bursting forth to flood this age-old dome.

Turning from his mind shattering discovery. Lord Orl realised he was not alone. Dozens of the spider-things clustered on the shore in a rough semi-circle around him. They did not attack, but stood motionless, staring with their black jewelled eyes.

Orl took in their warped and varied forms, each so different from the other. This one with countless extra limbs, that one covered with dripping blue mouths that sucked hungrily at the fetid air, this one sprouting tufts of black hair and trailing a giant, ratlike tail.

Understanding did not come to Orl until the spider wearing R'daff's face stepped out in front of the others - or was it R'daff with a spider's body? They were all something else, all these spider-things, all originally some other creature that had happened across the lake. This alien soup had taken them, and absorbed them, just as Orl himself was being absorbed.

He was not dying, he was changing. He could feel it. The substance in his veins churning, shifting organs, changing bone to chitin, inexorably marching toward its alien purpose. No, the spider things would not attack him, he was one of them. Orl could feel their silent, beckoning call: Come down with us, down into the sweet depths, down with us, where you belong.

Yes, my new brothers, but not yet, Orl thought back. Fighting the desperate, all but overwhelming urge to follow the spider-things, Orl withdrew something from the inner pocket of his overcoat.

'Not yet,' he repeated aloud. '1 have something to do.'

RORGET AHN'S SUAVE, aristocratic features were knitted in concentration as he pored over the curling Guilder contracts laid out before him on his antique writing desk. The silken flap of his caravan tent blew silently open as if blown by a subterranean breeze.

Rorget was on his feet in an instant, shouting in alarm: 'Guards! Guards! Intruder!'

'Scream all you want, Rorget. Your guards won't hear you.' The voice of the dark figure standing in the door flap was strange, as if something was obstructing its vocal chords. The dim light glinted off the torn links of the figure's overcoat.

Fear flooded into Rorget's handsome face along with recognition. 'You can't kill me, Orl,' Rorget reasoned, pleading, sliding an ancient, offworld bolt pistol from his silken robes. 'You know the consequences of killing a sanctioned Guilder.'

'I'm not going to kill you, Rorget.' Orl charged across the tent on three insectoid legs, crashing through Rorget's portable desk and pinning the terrified Guilder to the floor. A scythe-like bone hook lanced through Rorget's wrist, sending the bolt pistol skittering across the floor.

'I'm not going to kill you, Rorget,' Lord Orl hissed again, forcing the Guilder's head back and withdrawing a small object from his overcoat. 'I have something to give you.'

Ori poured the contents of the glass vial into the Guilder's choking mouth. 'Welcome... brother!' he spat, as the viscous purple liquid slid down Rorget's throat.

SISTERS
BY NEIL RUTLEDGE

BLADES STARED DULLY at the beaker in front of her. Why was she drinking this filth? She knew only too well but pushed the thought away from her along with the empty cup.

Another one, princess?' Licksy, attentive to a fault, called softly from behind the bar. His scarred, crumpled face pressed against the grille looked like some penned animal, huge, dark eyes filled with the sadness of resignation.

Staring at him, her own eyes tormented, dark-ringed with more than paint, she felt her heart constrict. A sob choked her throat but, knuckles white against the pitted plastic of the table edge, she fought it down. Not trusting her own voice she simply nodded. He turned, hunched over the battered flasks and she dragged herself up from her stool and over to the bar. There were no worms in, word must have got round fast, and Licksy didn't have the cage door shut, but affection for the old man and a wish to save his twisted feet got her up. As he passed her another full beaker through the slot, his thick fingers gently touched hers. His face looked even more yellow and riven than normal and his mute anxiety jerked back her memory. Ages back he had looked at her just like that as she was about to leave on some juve foray, but back then she wouldn't have been alone at the bar. She quickly sat down and took a long slug. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the movement as Sasha glanced over at her, but by the time Blades looked up the big woman's head was back down. Without war paint, Sasha's jowly face looked oddly babyish as, apparently rapt with concentration, she studied the stripped-down stubber laid out in front of her. But Blades hadn't missed the glance up. What was it? Concern, warning, disapproval? Was she sizing her up, thinking she could take her, thinking it was time Blades's Gang needed a new leader? She knew she

shouldn't have any more Wild Snake. The Ratskin could be back at any time with news of the zombie but, sump it! She felt wretched and needed fire from somewhere. The cloying smell of the slug oil Sasha was using carried over the bar, even over the acrid stink of WildSnake. Again Blades felt her stomach contract. Why did the stupid bitch have to slip? This time she could not fight the memory away. The numbness was wearing off. The armour of habit that had seen her through the aftermath of the fight and brought her back to Licksy's place had flaked away. The jagged blade of memory slashed across her eyes, even as she screwed them tight shut against it. The vision of Katz dancing nimbly across the gantry, bullets skipping around, was seared into her eyelids. Oh, Katz had got the Orlock all right, burnt him clean in the forehead, the last one of the schlokkbaggers. Then her sister was traipsing back gleefully when she slipped.

Spire! She could still see the expression on Katz's face. Just a startled smile, not even a yell before she hit the chem sink and was gone. Why, damn it? Blades's stomach heaved again and she staggered upright. It took all of her willpower to make herself walk to the midden and she only just made it before throwing up. Her body shook as, white-knuckled, she steadied herself against the cold, corrugated iron wall. Weakly she punched the tap, vainly trying to get enough water to clean her face and rinse away the smell and the memories. She straightened up and started as she caught sight of herself in the grimy mirror. Spire! She looked dreadful! Her eyes stared wild from dark pits and her paint had run in purple smears where she had tried to wipe away the vomit. Get a grip! This was life, not a dream tab. Blades realised she hadn't cleaned up since she had got back. Her hair, once extravagantly plumed, now stuck in a dank, clotted mass to the side of her head, green dye mixed with blood from the last juve she'd scragged. With a sudden stab of bleak humour, she thought she would have no problem surprising the zombie - the chugger would take her for one of its own! She felt a little better at that and, smiling grimly, she set about battering the tap into supplying enough for a more thorough clean up.

Blades managed her face well enough and got painted up again, although her hand refused to stop quivering when she was applying the stick. Not an ace job, but better than before. Her hair would have to wait for the full treatment but she cleaned it as best she could and pulled it back in a tight

snake, binding it with a spare plasticuff Moving to the door, Blades took a few deep breaths and walked back into the bar. Again she sensed quickly averted gazes but she walked calmly back over to the cage. If there was to be action it was better not to face it on an empty stomach. ' Some of your best stew and a couple of slormcrusts, Licksy,' she asked softly and smiled at the old ex-ganger.

'Coming right up, princess,' he grinned back, obviously reassured. Of course, she could always send some of the girls to hunt down the zombie. The worms, as the citizens of Ashcliff were known, looked to Blades and her gang for protection but that didn't mean that Blades herself had to deal with every rogue slime gator or crazed mutant personally. The odd wandering zombie wasn't extraordinary.

Sometimes they just stumbled vaguely about and were easily torched. Sometimes a meaner one would show and scrag a careless worm or two, but they were still no big deal. Normally, in fact, she would have sent someone else, maybe even a couple of juves eager to notch their sluggers. Today, though, despite the sick feeling still lurking in the pit of her stomach, or perhaps even because of it, she knew she would go after the chugger herself. She flexed her fingers. They felt barely able to lift a spoon, never mind a shotgun, but maybe the action would help her get a grip on herself Maybe? It had to.

Blades turned and looked down the bar hall. The bright, comforting light glared back off the pitted metal tables and the lurid murals. Angie and Torsh, their faces bleached spirit-pale by the light of their booth, were close as always. Their hands flickered over one of their interminable games of thornback, played, as usual, in silence save for the gentle rustle of cards and the soft scrape of counters being exchanged. Faye looked as if she was dozing at the vid desk but Blades knew better. Yooshie, she assumed, would be running the surprise box, out of sight, ready for gatecrashers, just in case. The rest of the girls were keeping out of her way. They were all behaving normally enough but, Blades wondered, was she imagining the tension in the air? The covert glances? Lips pursed with worry, or disapproval? Yes, this time she'd better go after the zombie; show she was still in control. Or some girl might just reckon she could take Blades's gang off her. 'Here y'are.' Licksy passed the stew and crusts through the hole in the security -grille. Blades took them, smiled her

thanks and sat back down by herself again. The stew at Licksy's was near legendary in quality and for a while Blades lost herself in enjoyment of the spicy stodge. She was assiduously mopping up the last juice with a hunk of slormcrust when Faye called, Ratty's back.' Blades stuffed down the crust and quickly took the bowl back to the cage before seating herself again.

The flickering green light showed Yooshie was ready in the box. One of Faye's hands hovered over the pit flick while she pushed the door button with the other and then grabbed up her stub gun. The double pairs of security doors clanked and wheezed through their cycle and eventually the Ratskin padded in. Angie left her game and followed him as Blades beckoned him over.

The Ratskin stood across the table from her, silent as the darkness. Like most of his kind he was short and slightly built, but Blades knew the appearance was deceptive. The Ratskin might look scrawny but he was tougher than boiled Milliasaur, with sinews like cured slime stringers and the reactions of a rubble snake. But now he just stood and stared, the blank eyes looking through her.

'Well?' the gang leader snapped. The Ratskins always quaked her a bit. There was no getting used to their silent, staring ways. She even preferred a rowdy ratty, tanked up on Second Best, to this sort of sober spook. The scout fingered some sort of amulet at his neck and for a moment his eyes seemed to focus on her. 'Found empty one,' he stated plainly, using the Ratskin word for a zombie.

'Where?' Blades was still sharp.

'In the pipes-that-echo by Joe's Crack.' 'Take me there.'

The Ratskin shrugged. 'It got foolish lone worm,' he added, unconcerned. There was a metallic rattle as Sasha finished re-assembling her stubber. 'Want me, Chief?' she asked with a smile that Blades could not read.

'No.' The gang leader rose. 'It's only a chugging zombie. Ratty and I'll manage.' The Ratskin shrugged again.

'I'll take your night-sight, though,' Blades said to Sasha again. 'Save me a walk to the glory hole.' The big girl thought for a moment, then nodded and passed over the visor.

'Scrag it, Chief!' Sasha encouraged and watched approvingly as with ease, almost graceful, her leader checked over her gear and lifted the faithful shotgun she'd carried ever since her first juve outings. Then with

only a soft, 'See you ladies,' Blades followed the Ratskin through the asthmatic security doors and out into the Necromundan gloom.

THE GLOW GLOBES had never been great around Ashcliff and recently they seemed to have become even dimmer.

Blades shivered as she followed the silent Ratskin away from the last of the sheds and along the rough pack trail that wound through the slag dumps towards Raggy Gap. It was completely quiet. Sleep time and fear of the zombie had kept all indoors. Well, fear of the zombie and perhaps fear of her, Blades reflected. She smiled darkly - and just then heard the moaning.

It was an eerie whining, rising and falling, just audible; felt more on the neck than heard with the ears. Blades tightened her grip on the shotgun and paused. A few paces ahead the scout had stopped too. He turned, and with the skin over his head silhouetted against the sickly radiance that came from the ailing skylights it seemed as if some giant rodent had thrust its shoulders up through the clinker. 'The worm,' the Ratskin hissed.

'Why isn't he dead?' Blades demanded angrily. 'If the zombie wounded him then he should be scragged. Can't take chances with the plague! Blasted worms! You'd think living here they'd be tougher.' She thought the Ratskin shrugged but couldn't be sure in the gloom. He had turned again and was making off down the side track that led to Joe's Place.

JOE WAS LONG DEAD but the ash-brick and rubble hovels that he had built were still there, inhabited now by the extended family of his grandson. As they crested a low ash ridge Blades could see a few lights glowing ahead. The crack that Joe had given his name to and had made his livelihood from was still there too. It was a jagged scar between fifteen and thirty feet deep, narrow, sheer-sided and twisting through the ash for almost half a mile. Joe had discovered that various hapless creatures - snakes, rats, ashworms, and so on - would often fall in it and be unable to get out. With care and the aid of a rope hoist, he made a good living out of the unfortunates. Well, until he was scragged by a huge slime gator that had fallen in while wandering from pool to pool. Jake, his son, climbed down and got the gator; he made so much money from it that it went to his

head and he'd run off further down-hive with one of the duster girls from Peeky's Palace. Hanko, Jake's abandoned wife, was a tough old tunnel chicken and she and the kids had kept the place going. Jakey, the eldest, pretty much handled things now He was all right, Blades recalled. None too sharp but he kept out of trouble and paid his dues. Almost bumping into the Ratskin's back jerked her out of her reverie. Careless, she bitterly admonished herself. Blades girl, what is wrong with you? she continued her mental self-castigation. But she knew what was wrong and again had to fight back unpleasant thoughts. The Ratskin was saying something.

'Tracked from here. Not big. Staggering.' He was whispering. Just ahead, Blades could see the overturned hopper of the bagger, its noxious cargo split across the path. Something was skittering among the rubble behind the hopper. The scout muttered a salutation in his own tongue and, fastidiously stepping around the spilled garbage, headed on up the path.

They soon reached the steading and were waved into a small rubble shed where a disturbing sight met their eyes. Lying on a trestle table was the injured bagger. He was still moaning but only quietly now, and he seemed only semiconscious. The unfortunate victim had been stripped to the waist and Blades could see a long wound running down from his head, across his shoulder and over his ribs. His right ear and part of his cheek had been sliced away and the white of bone showed through the gash in several places. The table was slick with his blood and it had pooled beneath it too, but the worst of the bleeding had been stopped. Presumably this was thanks to the woman bending over the prostrate man and attending to the wound. 'Spire!' Blades swore, recognising the distinctive, bitter smell of stinger mould paste even over the sooty stench of the slug oil lamps. 'What are you doing?' the gang leader snapped at the woman. 'He should have been scragged and torched. You know the law!'

The woman did not look up but replied in a quiet voice. 'It's just a cut. The zombie only slashed him. The wound's clean and there are no bite marks.'

Jakey, the big prospector who had waved them in, whispered from behind Blades, 'It's

Uncle Zot, Ma's brother.' Blades swallowed, 'You know the rules, Hanko. He's been got by a dead one, a zombie. The plague's too much of a risk. He's got to go.'

The woman turned. She had a slight, pinched face. It had been beautiful once but time and the Hive had taken its toll. The once-delicate features were now harsh and lined.

Grey hair flopped listlessly from under a grubby red scarf. 'We can watch him.' Her voice was clipped into a challenge.

'Ma...' Jakey's voice tailed off.

'The rules are to protect all of us, Hanko,' Blades said firmly, gripping her shotgun. T can't allow this. What in Spire's name possessed him to be out with the zombie about anyway?'

'Four hungry girls.' Hanko's voice was bitter.

There was silence for a moment. One of the lamps spluttered and the distorted shadows flickered on the rubble wall. 'You'd better leave, Hanko,' Blades spoke softly now but still firmly.

'I'm not going,' the older woman turned and started dabbing at the wound again. 'Ma...' Jakey mumbled once more, then shuffled outside. 'You too, out!' Blades waved her gun at the Ratskin. He shrugged, his perennial gesture, and left.

'Hanko-' the younger woman began. 'I'm not leaving.'

Blades moved around the table opposite Hanko, who was now deftly stitching the widest gash.

The bagger lay quiet, now quite unconscious. Blades bent over him. The lamp smoke and the stinger mould brought back an echo of her former nausea. Even so, her stiletto had pierced the man's heart and had been withdrawn before Hanko even noticed. The bagger gave one twitch and his sister looked over at the gang leader in silence.

Her face was blank and her voice flat as she asked, 'What about the youngsters?' 'We'll take any fit girl juves.' Blades voice was strained. 'If you can't take the others, Peeky probably will. It sucks as an arrangement, but better than starving.' The ganger turned and went out, wiped the stiletto on a patch of basket fungus and sheathed it. 'C'mon, Ratty,' she instructed, 'let's get the chugger.' Jakey stared after them. They could hear his shaking voice. 'Ma...'

PIPES THIS WAY,' hissed the Ratskin. Blades knew without having to be told. The pipes had been considered a good play area. Close enough to hab

zone so that it was unlikely that you would find anything really nasty holed up there but often housing snakes, rats and spiders. A good place for a sub-juve to cut her teeth. Then she and her sister, Katz, had often explored the pipes, after letting Joe know they were there. Blades's memory flashed to the feeling of pride when they had sold their first four-footer to Hairy Mary. How the old hag had given each of them four shots of Second Best, 'One for each foot, my dears,' in a bottle of algae juice and they'd been ill all night. They were there... They had sold... They'd been ill...

The sob caught her unawares and escaped before she could choke it back. The Ratskin turned.

'Just ash in the throat,' Blades mumbled and quickly pulled the visor over her eyes. Detail sharpened immediately. No wonder she preferred not to wear the chugging things.

BLADES WAS GLAD to have to concentrate on her footing as she climbed the treacherous slag slope up to where the pipe holes stared out, two black pits. She had a fleeting image of Hanko's eyes but quickly turned her thoughts to trying to remember the pipe layout. No one knew what the pipes originally were. Nearly a mile of man-sized tubes running in and out of each other. The pipes echoed alarmingly and to the uninitiated seemed a maze. The appearance was deceptive, though, and they actually followed a fairly regular grid pattern. Even now, years after, Blades could remember it. There had been five entrances. Three had been down the other side of the hill, near the pack trail. They had been buried in the avalanche which renegades had triggered during a daring ambush of a guilder caravan a couple of strokes back. Now there were only two holes and they connected pretty soon. The climb had been a steep one and the ganger was panting slightly as she gave her orders to the scout. 'You take this pipe, Ratty. After a bit there's a junction. The left fork only runs about ten paces and then stops but check it. Then go right. After a while it runs into the other tube. I'll meet you at the entrance and we can clear the rest together.' The Ratskin shrugged, half-cocked his musket, and disappeared into the pipe. Blades had no doubt he could handle the zombie if he met it.

She laughed mirthlessly as she reflected that, in fact, he could probably sense better and move far more quietly than she could.

She toiled on up and to the right where the other pipe opened. She felt better now The adrenaline was beginning to flow. Blades felt her lips tighten and the familiar prickle of thrill in the pit of her stomach. She checked the magazine of the shotgun again, man-stopper and incendiary mix. The chugger was going to pay for having picked her patch. She adjusted the fit of the borrowed night-sight visor and stepped cautiously into the pipe.

Using all her skill, the ganger moved stealthily into the hill. There was a fresh looking patch of gunk on the pipe, just inside the entrance. Could be the zombie, she mused. Could be just about anything. Not far into the hill, thought she heard a noise. Blades pulled up, raising the shotgun. Creeping slowly forward towards a twist in the passage she became positive. Something was around the corner. Could it be the zombie already? Shotgun cocked and moving with extreme caution lest she start the pipes reverberating, Blades crept around the corner.

A short way up the pipe, a large rat was nosing at something. Alone, it would probably be no problem. Blades stepped out. The rat froze, then turned and sniffed towards her. She took a step forward. The rat skittered off into the gloom at the edge of her visor's range. Still very cautious, Blades moved on. There was another splash of gunk on the pipe. It must have been what the rat was investigating. Blades stooped over it. In the eerie green universe of her passive visor it was hard to tell -anything about such goo; it was just that, a splash of gunk. She daren't poke at it and so, straightening, she moved on.

Blades was amazed at how the old habits came back: The strange shuffle that that kept one to the bottom of the pipe and avoided the echoes. The careful sweeping ahead of the shotgun to check for webs that were almost impossible to see even with the visor. There were other memories of those juve days too but she pushed then firmly out of her mind. She must be near the intersection now

'These pipes clear.' The sudden hiss caught her completely off-guard. It was the Ratskin warning her in advance before she stumbled into him. Stepping closer she could just make out his watery, green form in the blank hole that was the mouth of the connecting pipe. Right at the limit of

the visor's range. How in spire's name had he detected her? Blades again reflected how the Ratskins quaked her. How did he see anything in here? They were spooks all right, but you had to be impressed. The ganger controlled her voice carefully. 'Clear down here too. Follow me.' She was tempted to send the Ratskin in front but it smacked of weakness. And she was not weak, she wasn't. She was the leader, it was her gang, damn them! She couldn't help feeling a prickle of unease with him behind, though. Blades couldn't even hear a rustle from him, yet every slight noise she made roared in her ears. She had to fight the impulse to look round and check he was actually there. Perhaps it was this preoccupation that made her miss the web and only the discipline of years stopped her crying out as it slapped into her face. She stopped and checked carefully. No spiders. It must just have been a remnant. She shuddered slightly as she pulled the thick, sticky threads from her skin and hair. She had just cleared the last one when she thought she heard a noise. A light tap on her shoulder made her start but showed the Ratskin had heard it too.

It came again, a lisping, sucking, breathy noise half way between a whisper and a gurgle. Her heart pumped harder. Odd, zombies were normally quiet. Very slowly, shotgun at the ready, Blades shuffled forward. The noise was coming from a pipe intersection further up on the right. Tightening her grip on the shotgun, Blades slid round the corner.

There was a clatter as the shotgun fell and the echoes rebounded along the pipe. Blades stood frozen, jaw slack and speechless, her hands held feebly out in front of her. Only when the figure in the pipe began limping towards her, stiletto raised in its one good hand, did the scream burst from Blade's throat, rising from her belly, rising from the past, drowning her as she slumped against the pipe wall. She was only dimly conscious of the flash and thunderous crash of a musket firing.

WHEN BLADES CAME TO, she tried to scream again but all that came out was a groan. Not a zombie at all!

The full horror swamped her. She knocked the visor aside and pressed her fists into her eyes trying to blot out the image of the ruined face that was burnt into her brain. The relentless, undying image of that chem-

burned wreck dragging itself towards her. No recognition in its blank eyes, only mindless death.

Spire knew what agonies the chem sink must have inflicted to turn her into that wandering killer. Was she dimly still fighting that last gang fight? Was she in some insane hell dimly trying to battle her way home? Had some twisted memories from childhood drawn her back to those pipes?

Flushed, chest heaving, the ganger fought to stop the shaking that convulsed her.

Gradually she controlled herself and lowered her hands, opened her eyes.

The Ratskin was sitting opposite her, re-priming his musket, face a blank, unreadable mask.

'You killed her?' Blades asked weakly. 'It dead,' the scout replied.

'Let's get out,' Blades panted, struggling to her feet and straining to lift the shotgun.

The Ratskin started off and she followed shakily, the visor making the world dreamlike once more

The effort of walking concentrated her thoughts. Blades's mind raced and her body physically reeled as she thought about what the scout had witnessed, and not just here in the pipes. He'd been there when she'd scragged the garbage-bagger! Because of the risk of plague. Spire! Spire! Chugging Spire!

Her brain was racing; before she was aware of it she stumbled. The scout turned. Through the visor his eyes were just black pits. Like Hanko's! Seeming to her to accuse and condemn in a look... Spire! This would not do!

"Right, girl?' the Ratskin asked softly. 'Oh yes, Ratty! I'm all right,' the ganger replied, and there was steel in her voice. The scout turned without another word and continued up the pipe. Smoothly Blades raised her shotgun and put a man-stopper into the back of his head. He went down like a scragged zombie.

She leaned against the pipe wall until the echoes had subsided. 'Not much chugging use, your lucky amulet!' she muttered viciously at the lifeless body. Then the ganger forced herself to turn back and head down the pipe again. She only threw up once before she'd pumped three incendiaries into the already half-charred body, barely daring to look

where she was aiming, not daring to miss and let it lie around for anyone to find. In the ghastly glow and stench of the flames, she made her way back to the dead Ratskin.

'Thanks, Ratty,' the ganger spat as she fired more incendiaries into the scout's body.

EVENTUALLY BLADES dragged herself to the pipe entrance

Bright through the visor she could see a figure at the bottom of the hill: Jakey. The gang leader forced herself stiffly upright and made herself walk calmly down to where he was waiting.

'Get it?' the prospector asked nervously, fingering his own shotgun.

Blades did not raise the visor. 'Yeah,' she replied, her voice hollow 'It scragged the

Ratskin, but I got it.'

Jakey shuffled. 'Ma said to say thanks,' he mumbled, unused, perhaps, to talking so much. 'Says she's sorry she was weak. Knows you can't take any chances with that zombie plague.'

Blades stumbled slightly and sat down hard on a flat rock. 'You all right?' Jakey said with obvious concern.

'Yeah... fine, fine. Go back to Licksy's and tell Sasha to bring some meltas and kraks. I'm sealing those pipes for good.' Jakey headed off into the glow globe twilight without a word, and the tears started. 'Oh, Katz,' she sobbed. 'Oh my sister!'

RAT IN THE WALLS
BY ALEX HAMMOND

'I'M GONNA DIE,' Knife Edge Liz moaned, staring at her distorted reflection in the blood pooled at her side. 'I'm gonna die in this stinking hole.'

Her face was pale, the scar tissue of countless wounds now unnoticeable in its fading pallor. Her hair was matted with blood and her dark eyes glazed, irises unable to maintain their focus on even the closest objects. The ancient, rusted air duct around her was moaning and sighed like the lungs of some great beast, like she was trapped within the pumping vessels of a giant. A rush of chill air welled up through another tunnel behind her, thrusting siphoned air all about her, cooling her fever, then rushing away on its journey through other parts of Hive Primus.

Liz gazed down at herself, at the wrecked combat suit which she had pulled down to hang lifelessly around her waist. She wore her gang colours underneath. They clung to her with a combination of sweat and blood - life's vital ingredients, like the filtered air that swirled around the I live, slipping away with pulsing regularity.

Liz rolled over and pulled herself forwards again to the edge of the mesh grille set in the floor. The sirens had stopped howling some hours ago. The Uphive security systems had plainly got over their initial surprise at her arrival. A tangle of wires trailing from the combat suit caught on a jagged metal edge, somewhere in the dim-blue darkness behind her.

'Damn it...' Liz sighed. She pulled roughly at the cables. They tore suddenly and starting spurting a thin chemical mist around the tunnel. Pneumatic coolant turned part of the wall to ice, the frozen nitrogen-spewing pipe spinning perilously close to her left leg. Before she had a chance to try and grapple with the cable, the arcane suit's dying

mechanisms stepped in. The cable self-repaired and the gas stopped hissing. As the static-white haze settled, Liz returned her gaze to the grille.

Below her, a vaulting fresco-covered corridor revealed the hourly happenings of the uphive denizens. These were nothing like the people Liz had grown up with in the Underhive. She lay mere yards above a breed of people intent on her destruction, who thought her to be no more than a base animal. These nobles and their ladies wore soft cloth, not the scavenged pieces of armour and mesh that could be scrounged to afford some protection. A gentleman in a brightly coloured silken robe strode past. His hand rested gingerly on a small, leathery ape-like creature, naked except for a steel face mask which guarded passers by from its vicious jaws. A woman in a translucent dress with a trail twice her length passed next. A huge, studded mail collar led up to her neck, where it was incorporated into an enormous lacquered hair escutcheon.

Liz marvelled at all she saw. The people moved and gestured with wide flamboyant strokes, they let their eyes wander to observe strangers, they congregated in open places, they spoke loudly rather than whispered in hushed tones. They did things that could bring about their death in the Underhive. Men and women paraded their affections in public. Much of their clothing revealed vital body parts that would, were this Deep Town or the Sump Hole, beckon assailants and encourage their blades and gunfire.

Liz rolled onto her back. These people are insane... and I'm dying among them,' she whispered and fell unconscious.

LIZ DRAGGED herself awake. She could feel her arms and legs but could not make them move. She attempted to focus on something in the duct, latch onto something to steady her spinning head. Like a whirling vortex, like the gaping maw of Chaos, the roof above her twisted and spiralled, snickered and creaked. The weight of the hive was too much. It would collapse, crush her and all those below, everyone the entire ten miles down.

'No,' Liz moaned to herself. She knew these were just delusions, fears unchecked, but they would not stop.

Something sighed in the clammy darkness around her. The soft glow of the stolen combat suit's power cells ebbed; flickered; waned some more.

Liz reached wearily for the small medi-pack lying at her side. She'd torn it open when she first staggered into the duct, blood flooding from an open wound. The hypos helped to coagulate, the pills reduced the pain and the staples did their best to keep her innards where they belonged. Fever or no fever, these things were running thin. The bag was empty; the life support in the suit almost flat. To sleep was to die. But it would be painful, slow.

Let death take as long as it must, Liz thought, but damn the pain.

'I need some drugs,' she said aloud, her voice a croak.

Liz wound the suit's coils around her waist. Their small warmth was some help against death's cold. The rubber hissed as it pressed against her bleeding side. The shreds wrapped around her, Liz crawled slowly, like a cat bloated on sump rats. Her legs and arms shook with every move. Sweat ran from her body.

Dehydration. She wiped her hand across her face as she crawled, and tasted the salt and iron. Vital fluids. The dawning pain was intensifying, like a thousand steel spines protruded from her bones every time she placed a limb on the ground. Was she sweating blood now? Had the fever penetrated so deep that her heart was seeping life now? The noise in her fog-bound head intensified. The rush of static, buzzing as though every synapse was burning out, flaring like match heads, popping like overloaded transformers.

The dim light flickered, reflected from a slowly rotating fan set in the roof of the tunnel. Ancient dust hung in dirty stalactites. The floor was suddenly cold and jagged under her hands: another grate. Liz peered down. Quarters. Rich tapestries, colours so bright they burnt her retinas. A vast, solid table, dark as midnight. The vaulted ceiling; a thirty foot drop. Too far.

The pain kicked up another notch and Liz screamed. She wept. The drugs would run out, and she would die. Perhaps the fall was worth it? Perhaps it would end the pain quickly?

She struggled with her combat knife. The shakes intensified. She gripped the blade handle tighter, hoping her remaining strength would be enough to wrest control of the quivering knife tip as she tried to place it close to the grate's screws. Her hand slipped and the blade scored a jagged scar out of the ancient metal with a screech like a sump-rat thrown onto a campfire.

Liz jerked her body, rammed the blade under the mesh and kicked at it with her foot. The blade snapped backwards, part embedding itself in her boot. The grate flipped open. Liz pulled at the knife. She was uncertain if it had sunk into her flesh. The combat suit's boots were light, designed for speed, so they afforded little protection. Liz had no time to investigate. She leaned forwards, her plan knitting together, despite the fever.

The slowly rotating extraction fan above her head paced its circles. Liz jammed it still with the knife. Uncoiling the combat suit's life wires, Liz lashed them to the stilled blades of the fan above her. Slowly, she leant forwards over the drop to the room below, the ebony table below her. No one was visible in the room; no obvious security system was in place.

With a sudden motion, Liz dropped forwards, then jerked to a halt like a marionette, her strings - the cables from the combat suit - pulling taught behind her to break her fall. She swayed six feet from the table, the last of her blood rushing to her head.

Liz wriggled from those parts of the suit that held her, slick, dripping, until she lay on the table. Her cocoon swayed slowly from the hole above her. She lay there for a moment, red and green with the liquids from her body and the suit. She left hand and foot prints on the table as she crawled to the edge and fell further. The room's floor was like ice beneath her feet - its cross-hatched steel bit into her bare feet. In the Underhive, you never removed your boots; it was a cardinal sin. Underhivers who wanted to live slept with their boots on.

The wall to her left was free of tapestries, and covered instead with antique weapons. Liz removed a three-pointed blade, and staggered forwards to the nearest door.

Sleeping quarters. A lush bed with dark red cloth hanging about it covered most of the floor space. A giant insect, the size of a man's hand, hummed softly in a large gilded cage in the far comer of the room. Its multi-faceted eyes reflected her bloodied, near naked form back at her a hundred times as she staggered across the floor. An adjoining room, white with backlit tiles, stretched out in front of her. It was small, near empty except for a steel hose and a wall mirror that opened to a reveal a series of pneumatic drawers. Liz flicked at each of these, letting the cool air of their opening hisses wash over her face. It did little to help. The pain was

intensifying. Her legs turned to rubber and gave way. Liz grabbed hold of the nearest open drawer as she went down.

Pills and hypo sprays covered her prone form in a rain of brightly coloured pebbles. She turned her head to one side, fighting all the way. It was as though her spine was soldered to the floor. She tried to reach for one of the pills, it didn't matter which, but she fell short, her arms weak. Powerless, she saw the bright lights above her head intensify. And fell into blackness.

A light buzzed above her, hygiene white. This was not the afterlife. The light was the length of her body, long and sharp-cornered. Liz could only part-open her eyes; whatever was in her system was making even the slightest movement an effort. She became aware of a gas mask pulled across her face, its copper base hard against her flesh. The air being filtered in was sweet, perfumed. When she breathed, her side no longer ached. Someone had been in there, fixed the ribs. She lay on a bed, her bloodied gang colours replaced by a blinding white robe. A series of hypo sprays and operating equipment were set out by the bed.

Liz could not move her head. Braced or drugged, she was not capable of scanning the room. But she knew without looking there was someone in the room with her. They were good, but the near-silent movements of their clothing betrayed their presence. Someone was observing her, watching her, concealed by her incapacity and the regular grinding from the medical equipment about her. She felt naked without a piece in her hand. The figure stirred and moved about the recesses of her vision in the corner of the room. Something warm pinched into her arm and spread about her body, dragging her eyes shut.

The medi-crib droned its incessant rhythm, its pulsing bladders and hissing pistons like the staccato of an autogun peppering the walls of an Underhive bar. The Underhive wound around Liz, twisting and arching, pulling her back.

Liz stood knee-deep in sump waters, the warm oily liquid spreading throughout her body, the brief pinch of the hypo spray at her side.

'You'll need to overhaul those lungs if she's going to survive beyond the week.' A voice echoing at the side of her head, like steel ringing against a structural support.

Liz was not standing but floating in the sump, bobbing lethargically.

'Some butcher has been at her. Most of this scarring is from poor sutures. I don't know how they could still use those medi-staples. We have fibre tape ten years old that'd do a better job,' another voice bubbled up from the sump.

'Who's there?' Liz asked.

'She's stirring, Althar. Give her another hypo of anaesthetic,' the steel voice replied.

The machine drummed out a heartbeat. The water beneath her stirred and Liz sunk beneath it.

'HOW YOU GOING, boss?' Liz was sitting around a camp-fire lit in a burnt out artillery shell, deep in the Underhive. 'Boss?'

The smell of fire-seared concrete filled the air. Dark shadows were cast from broken buttresses and twisted supports. Liz looked up from the warm flames to the face of a woman she hardly recognised. Thick purple dreads, rich brown muscles like iron, arms as thick as a structural girder. It was Bekka.

You're dead-' Liz said.

'Don't think so,' Bekka smiled.

'-or I'm dreaming.'

'What do you mean? Dead?' Bekka scratched at the ground in front of her with a foot long, stainless-steel combat knife. She traced a skull and crossbones.

'We were ambushed. Everyone killed,' Liz said, feeling awkward in the light medical shift she wore. She pulled its edges to cover her bare feet.

'You?'

'No.' Liz could smell harsh disinfectants and sweet anaesthetics. 'I'm dying now, though. Uphive.'

'You gone Uphive? You're up there with the rat nobles?' Bekka flicked the knife into the ground, between the skull's cross-hatched eyes.

'I went there to kill the men who set us up.'

'You get 'em?'

'Yes. Aldus Harkon.'

'Harkon? Never liked him. Glad you got him Liz.' Bekka stood and stretched her back. She began to walk away from the fire. 'Even if you

don't get the others, you've done a good job, girl. Sounds like you've revenged us pretty good.'

'Yeah, I guess so,' Liz said, watching her friend disappear into the darkness.

'YOU GUESS WHAT, my dear?' Liz opened her eyes. A tall, lean man, with brutal but charming features, leaned over her. He was scar-free, with eyes older than his skin suggested. She now lay in the four poster bed, its soft mattress cradling her. Liz dragged an arm down the white gown and pulled a sheet up over her.

'I wouldn't concern yourself with all that fuss,' the man said turning away from her to examine a holo-projector, I've seen your insides.'

Liz could only make out small details in the room around her. To gaze too long was a strain. A dull pain behind her eyes forced her to take it slowly. The rise and fall of the machine beside her occasionally jostled the fluids and sedatives suspended from a wire frame. Their shiny brass exteriors rattled, sending small tremors down the metal cords bolted to the body plugs in her arm.

The man examined the readings and flicked through a pad of reports, written on real paper. 'Says here that you're doing well. That's hardly surprising: my doctor is a genius when it comes to rejuvenation.'

'Rejuvenation?' Liz murmured.

'Yes. A complete overhaul.'

Liz touched her face, gingerly at first. 'My scars-'

'Scars, lungs, blood, liver - the whole system. You've brushed up quite nicely for such a ragged piece-of-work.'

Liz brought her hand round to her neck. The mark from the near-fatal blow Alquath the Viper had dealt her in a duel remained.

'Couldn't leave you without one reminder of where you came from. It has a certain rugged appeal to it, I think,' the man said without turning around.

'You know who I am?' Liz said, examining the hard copper-coloured wires that ran from the heavy medical systems to a socket set in her arm.

'Oh yes,' the man replied his back still turned to her. 'I know you. The terrorist from the deeps, who's been picking off the Emperor's good

children from air ducts. Yes, I know who you are.'

'You didn't kill me.' Liz returned her attention to the man. He was dressed in an elegant suit, made from a material that changed from a deep purple to a rose colour as he shifted. A robe set over it trailed to the ground around him billowing on the floor.

'No.' The man turned to face her. 'No. I didn't kill you. I must say, it is not every day that one finds a half-naked woman lying bloodied in their en suite. At first I thought you were a threat by some enemy. I thought you were Ursula, truth be told. You're about her height and build.'

'That counts for an explanation in these parts?' Liz said quietly.

'Explanations later,' the man stood and walked towards her. He adjusted the brace behind Liz's head. 'Rest now.' 'You gonna give me your name?' Liz sneered. 'Kassat. My name's Kassat Ran Lo.' 'My name is-'

'Liz. I know who you are,' Kassat said, leaving the room.

LIZ WOKE LATER to find the pipes hanging loosely next to her, gone from her arms, the socket removed and only a faint red circle remaining. Beside her rested a mesh platter with welded plates that bore strange, unfamiliar foodstuffs. In the centre of the tray a translucent, plastene card was inscribed with some words: Eat well. Get your strength up. XXX. Kassat.

Liz picked up a moist plant. It was brightly coloured with soft leaves and a sweet smell. Its touch was like the soft skin of those Uphiver brats she killed. Liz grabbed it and stuffed it into her mouth. It tasted good. The other food was less delicate. Some of it she recognised from stories she had heard. There was a bug-like creature, its hind shell cracked open to allow access to pulpy flesh that trickled down her throat. Small ovoid bones which, when bitten through, revealed a twin coloured marrow, white and yellow. Liz devoured these morsels and sat with the tray for some time. Later, Kassat arrived.

'Awake?' he said by way of greeting. 'Eaten everything. Flower included.'

'What?' Liz looked up at him, still chewing her food.

'A flower, from Catachan.' Kassat produced another of the fragile, sweet tasting plants. A deathworld with the most exquisite flowers. They're not

traditionally eaten, but savoured for their beauty.' Kassat placed it behind Liz's ear, stroking her face as he did so.

Liz considered smashing the mesh tray across his face but stopped herself. "What does "ex-ex-ex" mean?' she said, waving the card at Kassat.

'It's an expression of affection,' Kassat purred, brushing dust from a lapel.

'Where I come from they're kill markings.'

'How very ominous.'

'Why would you express an affection for me?' Liz pushed the grate onto the floor. It crashed loudly to the steel ground.

'It is my way. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. It's a philosophy I have long followed.'

'Don't make sense to me.' Liz crossed her arms.

'Oh dear. Call it a clash of cultures.'

Liz spat on the too-clean floor. What do you want from me, Kassat Ran Lo?'

'You'll need to learn the art of conversation,' Kassat said, wiping the spittle from the tiles with a handkerchief.

'I don't need to learn anything.'

'Oh, you will. You owe me your life. You owe me a favour, and in order to perform it with any grace you will need to be prepared.'

'I'm no mistress. I'm a killer,' Liz said removing the flower from behind her ear. She crushed it. 'I know what you are and what you do.' 'I won't do anything for you.'

'Then you will die,' Kassat said coldly. He spun on his heels and left the room.

Liz stared at the modular, steel plates that made up the ceiling. She had counted the rivets in a brief moment of lucidity some days earlier, at one of the cold points in her fever. She reached out and took the tray, sliding it under the covers with her, keeping it close. After a moment, she also tugged free one of the tubes that had been in her arm, and secreted it in the same place.

Kassat strode back into the room. In his hands he held a locked, iron-bound casket. This is what I need from you, sump rat.' His manner was rougher now.

Kassat leant forward and slipped his fingers into the case lock, a pair of hollow eyes on an embossed skull. Liz flicked the tray from beneath the bed and swung it at Kassat. It caught him in the face and the noble staggered backwards, crashing through a rack of medical equipment and falling to the floor. Liz struggled forwards, tripping onto the floor beside him. Kassat slammed the casket down towards her and caught her in the chest. Liz screamed as something snapped. Her arms couldn't co-ordinate. She rolled across the floor towards him. Liz grabbed both ends of the tube and slipped it around Kassat's throat. The noble struggled and managed to stand. Liz gripped him around the waist with her legs, driving her heels into his kidneys.

Kassat started to laugh.

Liz pulled harder on the makeshift garrotte.

Kassat just laughed louder.

'Harder! You're going to have to pull harder than that!' he shouted, spinning violently around, driving Liz into the bed.

Pain coursed though her back and she released the tube. Kassat grabbed her arms and held her to the bed.

'Drugs, my girl. The harder you struggle, the more you fight them, the worse they get. Right now you couldn't even raise a lasgun if I put one in your hand. You're mine,' Kassat Ran Lo sneered. 'You'll do as I say or die.'

Liz lay still. 'You wouldn't have brought me here, saved my life, if you were gonna kill me straight off. It's a bad investment.'

'Perhaps I wanted to see how well you'd take the news? Perhaps I had other plans for you. Trade you as a pleasure slave to House Helmawr?'

'Nah,' Liz said, 'You ain't that smart.'

'Perhaps,' Kassat said, letting go of her shoulders and sitting up. 'Perhaps I'm not. So let's say we make a deal? You are a mercenary, after all.'

'You're wrong, Kassat. I was ready for death the day I smuggled myself Uphive.'

'How about revenge?' The nobleman resumed opening the elaborate steel case and produced a small holo-monitor. He tapped some switches and a spectral image flickered into light. Men and women, Uphivers, moved about one another in a large chamber, drank from elaborate fluted glasses and watched as slaves, tethered together at the ankles, fought for their pleasure.

This is a ball I gave some week-cycles ago. I had a holo-recorder inserted into a servitor, keeping him alive long enough for me to get this recording.' The image bucked and swayed as it moved throughout the crowd. There is a man who will be present at the next such occasion. His name is Terrak Ran Lo. I want him dead. I want his place at the Ran Lo council.'

'And you want me to do this for you?'

'For yourself as well. He is the man who employed Aldus Harkon, the man whose money sponsored the ambush that saw the death of your friends.'

'What?'

'You may not consider me to be smart, Liz, but you, my sweet thug, are as dense as concrete. You talked and talked during your malaise. I know all about your gang, the hunters, your friends' deaths, coming Uphive and killing Harkon. I had to increase your dosage just to keep you quiet when night came.'

Liz stared at Kassat, tracing his calculating features with her eyes. His face was alight with satisfaction. He could barely suppress his grin.

This man-' Kassat hit an inlaid rune and froze the device's image. Terrak Ran Lo is the man who organised for the deaths of your friends, organised their deaths as a blood sport, as entertainment for his young proteges. It was a hunt, Liz, and you and your gang were the animals.'

Liz stared at the image. Terrak was old, his face soft and unthreatening. His eyes looked calm, like tranquil waters.

'Doesn't look like a man with murder on his mind, does he?' Kassat growled.

Liz fixed her gaze on those eyes; still, unfathomable, unmoving. 'What do you need me to do?' she whispered.

* * *

'IT'S SIMPLE. Really,' Kassat pressed, restrained, patient.

'Really?' Liz sneered, her face close to his, eyes reflecting the bank of grid lights above them. Kassat stood in the centre of his living quarters, his elaborate furniture pushed to its edges, the ornately tiled floor cleared

of clutter. She stumbled in the awkward shoes Kassat had given her to wear and landed on her rump. She had never seen anything like them, so impractical: spindly, elongated heels forcing her forwards, up onto her toes. The hum of the lighting grid droned behind the thin music Kassat had set piping from a cone-shaped machine that ran off a rotating copper disc. It echoed though the high ceiling and around the ironwork gargoyles which clung to the corners of the room. Liz noticed that the table, onto which she had crashed the other day, had been replaced.

'Yes,' Kassat said, stepping backwards for a moment, brushing down his silk coat, 'the man leads. You simply follow.' The noble held his arms out again.

Liz spat on the floor. 'What is this thing anyway?' she growled.

This dance is called a vaults. It is an elegant practice many millennia old.' 'I don't get it.'

'I don't understand,' Kassat said.

'Oh yeah?' Liz replied, crouching down.

'No, you should say "I don't understand",' he chided.

'Look! All I need to do is kill this guy and we're square,' Liz said, bending to pull off a dress shoe and shaking it at him. 'I don't get... understand why I need to do all this,' she sighed, rubbing at her blistered feet.

'You will not infiltrate Terrak's guards at his quarters. At the ball he'll have only one guardian. He will not be expecting an attack.'

'Because it's suicide?' Liz pulled at the muscles in her neck and rolled her shoulders.

Kassat paused, considered the woman at his feet, and adjusted his cuffs. 'For some, perhaps.'

And for me?'

'You were born with an animal's instinct for survival. Uphive assassins are less-' 'Cunning?' Liz said, standing and replacing her shoe. 'No, they're cunning all right. Rather, they are less crude.'

'Crude,' Liz said coldly, 'Yes, I think I understand.'

Kassat returned to his position. You need to appear as though you have been an Uphiver all your life. Not some savage from the lowest level. You will have to tame some of your feral impulses.'

Liz sighed, then slowly sashayed forwards with small, fluid steps. Kassat's eyes widened in delight. She took him by the arms and held him gently at the small of her back.

'Excellent,' Kassat purred. And again...'

LIZ STARED AT her reflection in the window of Kassat's private chambers. She could hardly recognise her reflection. She was c lad in a bodysuit, cross hatched with nano-filaments that cast a cascade of changing colours, primarily intended to accentuate her figure. Kassat had provided her with a pair of those elaborate, impractical shoes, that revealed much of her feet. Her broken toes, she had noticed, had been reset, the missing two replaced. Kassat had employed some woman to spend many hours reconstructing and painting her toe and finger nails. She couldn't see the point.

A dark blue, feathered head-dress was strapped to Liz's shoulders. It fanned out around her face, which was the part that Liz least recognised. Her hair was slicked back and bound into a tail and painted completely white. Her face was similarly covered, bar her lips, which had been painted a bright blood red where they met.

Liz turned to one side and then the other. She looked through her reflection, through the window to the night sky outside. She had never been in these private quarters before. They were filled with strange devices, antiques and furniture made from an organic substance Kassat called 'wood'. They had the only exterior window in Kassat's quarters, but even the one spoke of quite unimaginable wealth. They would provide a good view of the sunrise, they were that high above the toxic ash clouds. At the moment, outside Liz could see the sad little stars. They were like nothing she had imagined, more like pin-pricks in the darkness. The way the merchants had spoken of them she believed that they were massive planets of fire. But she was glad it was dark now. She could not really imagine what the view would look like during the day, but she knew she could not help but be unnerved by the vast openness of the view, all these miles above her natural home.

Kassat entered the chamber, clapping his hands together happily. They've done fantastic work, don't you think?' he grinned. 'It's

impractical.'

'Nonsense, my dear. Kick the shoes off and you're in a fully functioning combat suit. Much like the one you stole from those hunters. That padding isn't simply there to flatter you. That's mesh armour. Finest quality. Lighter than those feathers.'

Kassat was attired in a material that adjusted its colours to match the background as he moved throughout the room. 'Latest thing, adapted from Imperium camouflage,' Kassat said, noticing Liz's scornful gaze.

'I'm going to need a weapon,' she sniffed.

'Ah yes. But I don't quite trust you to give you one now. No offence,' Kassat said.

'None taken,' Liz said, gazing at the immense desk set before the window. Kassat had it piled high with papers, holocards and locked files. It was the only place in his quarters that was in disorder.

'Besides they are still somewhat security-minded at these things. No one gets in without being scanned. I've arranged for your weapon to be hidden in the centrepiece of the main banquet table,' Kassat said, walking face to face with Liz.

The point exactly?' Liz starred back at him.

They wouldn't dare break a fragile object of such beauty. They wouldn't expert that a weapon would be hidden in an ice sculpture that took hundreds of hours to create. It's simply not within their nature,' Kassat said, adjusting the head-dress on Liz's shoulders.

'But I'm crude?' she replied.

'You can be,' Kassat returned, unfazed. He placed his hand on Liz's cheek. 'Looking at you now I'd never guess that you weren't born Uphive. You're a remarkable woman, Liz.' Kassat stroked her face gently.

The gun is in the ice statue,' Liz said as if to herself, stepping away.

That's right.' Kassat turned to the door. 'How long now?'

Twenty minutes or so before I am expected.' Kassat moved towards the door his back still turned to Liz.

And me?' She took one last look at herself in the window. Part of her wished that she had a record of this woman, this new incarnation of Liz from the Underhive.

I've arranged for you to go with another party of nobles. Eddas Ulanti owes me a favour. My people will take you to them,' Kassat said, partway

through the door.

Til see you there then,' Liz said quietly, returning his gaze.

Yes. Emperor bless you, my dear. I hope to see you safe at the end of all this,' Kassat said, turning to face her for a moment, before he strode out of his quarters in a rush of shimmering cloth.

'Liar,' Liz said, and spat on the tiled floor.

GIANT DOORS, THREE storeys high, driven by huge pneumatic arms decorated with ornate crests, slid open, the air from the hydraulics purring out across the floor. Liz walked amongst the Ulanti, at the back of a procession arranged according to a hierarchy she didn't start to understand. She took a place amongst the body slaves, the dancers, courtesans and pit-fighters. She had remained close to Eddas Ulanti, a rat-faced man, the whole while keeping her mind fixed on her objective and her way out.

The noble's ball was in full sway by the time she arrived in the vast ballroom, as wide as an entire Underhive dome. All present, with only one exception, were dressed in a kaleidoscopic collection of fabrics and colours. Liz could not believe the complexity of some of the garments, nor the shapes worked from the hair and bodies. All around her, men and women moved about in the same states of undress she'd expect of an Underhive pleasure bar, not a nobles' ball. The exception was a man, plainly an off-worlder, dressed in dark grey robes and bearing a heavy iron talisman around his neck. Where he strode, the crowds parted; even the most arrogant looking of Uphivers bowed their heads and averted their eyes. Aside from the guards, this man was the only one to openly carry a weapon. A heavy pistol hung alongside the talisman. He was dangerous. Liz tried not to stare at him.

At the centre of the great room was a gaping hole that plunged deep into the heart of this part of Hive Primus. It was covered with glass a metre thick, so as to give the illusion that those present were walking upon the Hive itself, thousands of feet above the foundries below. Gingerly Liz took a single step out on to the glass. On either side, pillars of rough-hewn stone and iron soared high up into the air above, creating an equally dizzying effect. This openness was unfamiliar to her, the expanse of space oppressive and dizzying. The only cover afforded were the frail, carved

wooden tables at which many of the nobles sat, gorging themselves. They wouldn't stop a shell from a juve's first pistol, let alone automatic gun fire.

Kassat, from within the crowd, caught her eye. She followed where he was looking and caught sight of her prey, Terrak Ran Lo, just as Kassat had described him. She looked back, wanting him to nod, confirm it, make it real, really happening - but Kassat was already striding away. Liz followed, to another open area over which hung a giant structure made of crystals of many colours, hanging from spider web-thin chains, that reflected shimmering spotlights about the room. In the centre of this space was a pit. A barbed, steel cage was part-sunk into the ground. In it, two bloodied men chained at the necks fought with dulled, stabbing blades. Nobles stood at the edges and threw paint, nails and fruit at the fighters, jeering and sniggering at the trapped men. They were desperate men, their lives sold to slavery, death a certainty for one of them tonight.

Kassat approached Liz and took her by the hand. She followed him beyond the pit, onto a polished dancing floor. As they whirled, Kassat clasped her close and pulled her face close to his. Liz tensed.

'An ancient bolt pistol, custom design - explosive, caseless, laser sighted and recoil compensated...' Kassat whispered. Liz could feel his heartbeat, the micro-conduits of the combat suit amplifying its pulse. His heart was racing - as was hers.

'Who's the man in grey?' she hissed.

'A witch hunter. An Imperium inquisitor, from off-world. Come to inspect the nobility, root out mutations and deviance. Needless to say, he is not pleased with this event.'

'He has a weapon,' Liz growled.

'Yes. You may have to kill him too.'

'What? Did you know he would be here?'

'No!' he spat. 'I knew nothing about it until just now. There are others too: Arbites, Ecclesiarchs, military men and those with something invested in the Imperium. Unlike these nobles, they are men who are prepared to fight' Kassat pulled away from Liz.

She dragged him back, in close, staring deep into his eyes. Kassat, if this is a set-up I will kill you,' she said softly.

You know,' Kassat smiled, 'I will have to fight back.' The noble patted the small of her back and released her. 'Good luck,' he whispered, then

bowed his thanks for the dance.

Kassat slipped quickly back into the bustling crowd. Liz stood alone in the middle of the dance floor, close to the fighting pit. The combatants' arms were locked in a strained grapple. The release system on the cage was a simple catch. Liz started to think. The ice sculpture was thirty or so paces away. One, two... five guards, all armed with autoguns, stood by the doors. The exit route Kassat had mentioned, through a vent set in the wall, was another hundred strides beyond the table where Terrak Ran Lo was flirting with a young woman, hand on her shoulder, laughing.

'Time,' Liz sneered and headed towards the cage. A dancer tripped over her as she strode purposefully across the floor. He fell backwards in alarm, hundreds of tiny beads cascading from his suit. Liz flicked the lever on the cage.

'Hey, rat-bait!' she called down to the men.

They stared for a moment only, their tired eyes enlivened at this opportunity. The men burst out of the cage, flailing at the nobles standing closest to them. One gripped a young boy by the neck and drove his duelling-blade into his throat. Nobles screamed.

Liz ran for the statue.

The guards reacted slowly, The fighters started slashing a red swathe through the crowd. Their necks still linked by chains they crashed through the nobles like loosed bulls, their awkward, bleeding bodies slipping about on the polished steel floor.

Liz turned to the ice-statue. The carving was of her, Liz, dressed in her gang colours, a naked man at her feet. It was placed in the centre of a table, two score of dishes spiralling out from its centre. She could see Kassat's mocking grin in her mind. The ganger collided with a fleeing noble and rolled over his back as he fell, kicking off the stupid shoes. She landed solidly on her feet and sprinted hard for the table.

The guards began firing at the freed slaves, their shots taking one down. The other, tied to the dying man, tried to drag his body across the floor.

Liz leapt up onto the table, knocking a sallow-faced trader face-first into a platter of eel spawn. He looked up, the tiny eggs spitting from his mouth. Liz grabbed the ice-statue and hurled it at the trader, knocking him onto the ground. The ice shattered, slivers spinning wide and far across the floor. A noble woman screamed as Liz leapt from the table like a feral cat.

Trapped in a deadly embrace with his now-dead opponent, the live slave thrashed like a trapped animal, growling and swiping wildly at the nobles as they clustered around him. The inquisitor stepped through them and calmly shot out his leg, sending him slipping to the ground in a cascade of blood.

'To raise a weapon against an agent of the Emperor is heresy,' the inquisitor said. The guards massed at his back opened fire, tiny red explosions erupting all over the slave.

Liz landed on her hands and feet. An Arbiter came at her with a club. She rolled onto her back and kicked him hard in the gut. Over his doubled-up back she saw the inquisitor turn to face her. Liz used the momentum from the roll to smash her elbow into his face, letting her body weight carry him to the ground. They both fell into the shattered ice. Liz crawled onto her hands and knees, and swept about on the floor scrabbling for the gun.

The inquisitor rose, his hands thrusting his pistol at her. Liz dived between the legs of a panicked, fleeing noblewoman. The shot clipped her and her hip burst red. Liz caught sight of the bolt gun as, in the pandemonium, it was kicked into the clearing before the inquisitor. He raised his gun at Liz again. She dived forward and rolled across the ice. A shot spat over her shoulder. Sliding through melting slush, she snatched up the assassination weapon and swung it wide towards the witch hunter. He pulled his trigger.

A flash almost blinded Liz. Something knocked her hard in the chest. Like someone had pulled the floor from beneath her, she fell to the ground. Her heart ached like she'd been knifed. The inquisitor stared. His mouth opened but he said nothing. A few feathers from Liz's headdress floated to the ground.

Liz looked down at her chest. The mesh armour had stopped the blow. Slowly and deliberately, Liz levelled the laser sight between the inquisitor's eyes and pulled the trigger. Nobles behind him were showered in gore and brain matter. She ran for the crowd and it parted about her. She dived beneath a table. A wave of gunfire tore through the table, disrupting Liz's dark world with violent keyholes of light.

Liz stood, throwing the table back off her shoulders. Liz closed on Terrak Ran Lo. The old man was moving for cover, crouching behind a

side-table.

Terrak!' Liz screamed.

Her prey did not notice her. She leapt from above the table and fell upon him, dragging him to the ground. His breath was wine-rancid, his eyes glazed with age.

'Who?' He looked at Liz, her white face sprayed with the blood of the inquisitor, and his eyes span.

'A message from the Underhive,' Liz spat and pulled the trigger. The blast tore the old man from her hands, throwing him up into the air. The guards, moving in formation through the thinning crowd, began shooting. Liz was clipped twice; the wind was knocked out of her but neither shot pierced the body armour. She grabbed her injured arm and returned their fire, running parallel to the guards, shooting around stricken nobles and courtesans. Her shots flew wide, but the explosions forced the guards to seek better cover. Liz ran full sprint for her escape vent. An Ecclesiarch stepped in front of her, blocking the entrance. The guards returned fire as Liz span the man in front of her. The blasts impacted through the light robes the priest wore. His body shook as Liz held him close to her. She returned fire and clipped one guard in the shoulder; he fell to the polished dance floor. The guards hit the ground again. Liz rolled from underneath the dead Ecclesiarch and dived for the grate.

She slid across the polished floor, crashing face first into the wall. The grate was fixed at its corners. A snaking line of bullets traced across the ground towards Liz. She flicked her pistol to full auto and blew away the grate. Metal shards spat past her face as she dived for freedom. One final, hopeful shot hit her full in the back and blew her forward.

KASSAT SAT IN his study, staring blankly at desk-top before him. Audits, mercantile reports, credit transferrals both above and below board. A dizzying array of numbers, estimations and processed units, many hundreds of hours of work to process, but he could not concentrate enough to dive in.

Now he waited, staring at the antique timepiece on his wall, which sat on the wall between his weapons cabinet and an ancient brass-and-leather vox-caster. It was very old and could not keep true Imperial hours. He

turned in his chair to look out into the dawn sky. The sun would rise above the cloud cover soon, sending its yellow rays to touch the Spire, lighting up the dark, nebulous mass drifting in swirls below. The ash clouds could be quite beautiful if the light was right. However, like the brightly coloured arrow frogs of Catachan, they were also poisonous. Nevertheless, he had the clouds to thank. They had been the reason for Hive Primus and her sisters. If it weren't for the clouds he would not have been a powerful man.

He fingered the pistol on his lap. Should have been back by now. Wild thoughts of her capture ran though his head. In his head, he ran a possible scenario: the inquisitor uses his years of experience of information retrieval on the Underhive girl. She is strong, but not without the frailties of the flesh. Pain can be very real. What's more, she has no reason to conceal him. She reveals all, the plan, his involvement - the truth is released. He is sentenced to death. His only chance, to escape now? His bags are packed, his shuttle readied. Three more minutes and then he can take flight. He has some guards on his books, he can find out what is happening.

Kassat turned from the window and glanced again at the grate through which he expected her some time ago. Perhaps she had not found the section schematic he had left for her.

He pressed the button on his communication relay.

'Sir?' the voice crackled.

A filth-covered form crashed in through the vent in front of him.

'Never mind,' Kassat said, flicking the switch back. 'Kassat,' she said standing.

She was dripping blood on his Talleran rug. She had been cut on the hands and feet, but the suit had held. Her face was no longer pristine white, but stippled red and black with blood and oil.

'You look quite daemonic, my dear. Are you successful?' he asked.

Liz brought her gun up to face him. It was bent and dented, the sight destroyed. Perhaps it had only a few rounds left.

'What's the matter, my dear?' Kassat said smoothly.

'Just checking,' Liz said with a thin smile, and lowered the pistol.

'You kill him?' 'Oh yes.'

'Excellent.' Kassat cocked the gun silently beneath his desk. You've done good work.' He pulled the trigger and she span to the ground.

'Whaaa-?' Liz screamed.

Kassat peered over his desk. She lay there, clutching her leg. 'Weak spot at the right knee. Sorry. Failed to mention it,' Kassat grinned.

'You bastard!' Liz screamed, bringing her gun up towards him and staggering to her feet.

'Liz, Liz, what do you take me for? That won't work in here. I have a suppression emitter dialled in to that weapon. It won't fire.'

Liz pulled the trigger again and again. It clicked over lifelessly. She screamed and threw the gun at him. He nimbly stepped aside, then levelled his own gun at her head.

'Just think of the honours I'll be awarded for capturing the killer of Aldus Harkon, four Ran Lo hunters - and of course the mighty Darlon Ulanti.'

'Who?' Liz groaned.

Kassat stood, pressing the gun barrel to her head, twisting it so that it cleared a patch of pink flesh beneath the white and blood. That wasn't Terrak Ran Lo, silly girl. You killed Darlon Ulanti, a man intent on stopping the hunts. On stopping my business.'

What?'

'Oh, I thought you would have got that one. I'm Terrak Ran Lo,' Kassat smiled, bowing his head slightly. 'But-'

'I knew who you were the minute you arrived,' Terrak said, delicately wiping the grime from Liz's face with the gun. 'You can't believe the harm you've done to my business. So many of these whinging nobles are now reluctant to send their useless whelps off on the hunt on account of one rat-loving ganger.'

Now, in the dawning light, Liz could see Kassat change before her. His movements were no longer refined and practised, but harsh and savage. His eyes narrowed and intensified like laser sights. There was no ambiguity any more, just her and Terrak Ran Lo.

Why didn't you kill me?' she yelled.

'So much to be gained, my dear. Besides, like a cat, I prefer to play with rats before I kill them.'

Faster than he could react, Liz slapped the gun away from her forehead and stepped to one side. Terrak brought his weapon back to face her but now she was standing before him, her leg trembling... and with the inquisitor's bolt pistol in her own hands. Terrak growled.

'Something I picked up along the way... dear,' she hissed.

'You can't win. The Arbites will be here in a few seconds. If you shoot you'll kill us both. Those are explosive shells. The window will break and the air pressure will suck us out.'

'Good,' Liz replied, aiming over his shoulder and pulling the trigger anyway. The glass behind Terrak burst outwards, throwing the room into mayhem. Caskets, papers and hangings were ripped out through the window.

As the air sucked at him, Terrak fired back, catching Liz in the arm. She spun like a swamp lizard and fell to the floor, the debris sweeping her towards the window. She crashed into Terrak's table and a wide gash opened up on her forehead. The Arbites rushed into the room, shouting something that was lost in the howling torrent.

Liz slid towards the howling window frame but managed to grasp the edge. The shattered glass cut deep into her hands. Something was tugging at her legs. Liz looked over her shoulder. Terrak clung to the body suit, legs flailing in the rush, his hands a vice around her ankle. His icy face was shot through with fear.

'Save me!' he screamed.

An Arbiter swept out through the window, knocking Liz's right arm from the sill. Her other hand was being shredded by the remaining shards of glass.

'Liz!' Terrak screamed. 'Pull us in... and I'll give you anything! Anything!'

Liz looked back towards the noble. 'No, Terrak! You will die today!'

She let go of the window and spun around as the gale swept her away from the building. She grabbed Terrak tight around the body and together they sailed out into the air.

'Why? Terrak screamed, his face white with fear.

'A promise to a friend!' Liz screamed back, the air screaming around them, slapping Terrak's coat into her face. 'Doubt your doctors can piece you together... after you land... if they find you!' she yelled.

Liz pushed free of Terrak. She sailed out into the howling rush of air, her arms spread towards the rising sun, its orange rays lighting up soft fissures and rising peaks in the boiling ash clouds below. She smiled as the winds swept her out over this landscape, through its gullies and down into the darkness.

DESCENT
BY SIMON JOWETT

ONE

'So the old pus-bag was telling the truth after all.'

Cullis Chan, master of the Queequeg, stood at the conning tower rail, sweeping the lantern beam through the tunnel's gloom. Another, larger lantern had been slotted into its mounting at the prow of the boat shortly after they surfaced; now its more powerful beam stabbed through the deeper darkness ahead. Slick rainbows painted the surface of the water as the twin beams played across it, moving steadily from one side of the tunnel to the other, then back.

'Like sliding down a reef-eel's gullet,' muttered Barak, the Queequeg's first mate and self-appointed Voice of Doom, who was standing to the rear of the stubby conning tower, next to the brass columns of the periscope assembly. A man of few words, all of them pessimistic, he was probably the longest-serving member of the crew. Probably, because there wasn't a member of the submersible's crew who could remember a time when he hadn't been first mate. Given his pit-fighter's physique and the almost inhuman level of violence of which he was capable, Chan couldn't imagine that anyone would ever be stupid enough to challenge him for the post.

Tilting the lantern in its U-shaped mount, Chan ran the beam up one side of the tunnel's gentle curve, across the low dome of its roof.

'It's too regular to be natural,' he said quietly. 'Must've been drilled centuries ago. Virad said the plans he saw dated back to the Great Crusade.'

'"Great Crusade" my puckered end!' Barak spat sourly. That treacherous old-'

A whistle from the communication pipe cut across his words. Barak flipped open the hinged cover and bent to listen.

'About time!' he barked into the pipe. 'And make sure the batteries are charging. We don't know when we'll have to duck and run.'

As he snapped the cover back into place, a violent shudder ran the length of the vessel, followed by a volley of congested explosions from the stern as the Queequeg's surface engines coughed into life and expelled whatever Sump matter had collected in their exhaust tubes while submerged. Most of this voyage had been spent running as deep as possible to avoid the possibility of being followed, relying on the echo sounder to avoid collisions and only surfacing when the air inside the vessel had become too clogged and rancid to tolerate. As a result, the batteries that powered the ship while submerged were dangerously low on charge.

Unconsciously, Chan adjusted his balance as the ship wallowed, then settled and moved forward at greater speed, the sudden lurch an indication of how depleted the batteries had become.

Time we unlashed the skiffs,' Chan said.

Now they had surfaced, the crew would be expecting something to happen. They had been confined within the long, narrow teardrop of the Queequeg's hull for far longer than was usual - not hunting, just hiding from those who would rob them of the information that had brought them this far. They knew this voyage promised the richest pickings of their lives and, as time had passed beneath the water of the Sump, anticipation had begun to turn into impatience. Chan wasn't the first master of this vessel, and he knew that at least one of his predecessors had been tossed overboard because of the crew's dissatisfaction with their takings under his command. As ever, Barak had the final say over his replacement, just as he had had over Chan's assumption of the captaincy when Waylan Gaff was reduced to a smear of organic slurry by the venom of a raft spider large enough to rival the mythical White Mares of Varan.

The skiffs? Why? We don't even know what's at the end of this tunnel.' Barak had stepped over the open hatch in the conning tower deck and now stood beside Chan at the rail. He was peering ahead, as if trying to see beyond the range of the prow lantern. 'Could be we just find another shaft, this time heading straight down. I wouldn't be surprised if Virad gave us directions to hell - anything to get us off his back.'

'If he did, he'll be the first person to greet us when we arrive.' Chan smiled up at the puzzled look on Barak's face. 'After he handed over the maps and bearings, I had Bryll slip a little extra something into his drink.'

Like all ratskins, One-Eye Bryll, the Queequeg's most experienced harpooner, revered the venom of the raft spiders as sacred, a source of ecstatic visions to their hybrid kind and of death to all others. He had been sitting slumped in a corner of the ramshackle drinking hole, a half-empty jug of gutrot clutched loosely in one hand, before either Chan or Naz Virad, the broken-down information broker, arrived for their meeting. After Chan had left, taking Virad's oilskin chart-case with him, Bryll had hauled himself to his feet and stumbled unsteadily in the direction of the bar. One more drunken ratskin wouldn't attract anyone's attention in this place. Bryll had lurched against a group of Sump dredgers, who were arguing over whether to accept the price they had been offered for their latest haul. He was rewarded by several curses and a kick, which propelled him towards Virad's booth. Catching himself before he sprawled full-length across the pitch-blackened iron-wood of the table, he had slurred an apology, righted himself and stumbled away, this time heading for the door. Virad showed no sign of having seen or heard him. As he left the bar, Bryll glanced back to see Virad lift his tankard and drain its contents - ale and the vial of spider venom Bryll had emptied into it.

'I was halfway to the wharf when he started screaming. It sounded like the Arch-Zealot had come for his soul. That or he'd just caught a look at Bryll's wife.'

Barak grunted - the closest he ever came to expressing amusement - and moved back to the communication tube.

Flipping open its lid again, he barked out another order to those below. Seconds later, the fore and aft hatches clanged open. The crews of the hunting skiffs moved with practised speed along the slick, sloping hull of the submersible, towards the narrow five-man skiffs that were secured, keel-up, by bolts and spider-gut lines, like sharp-edged metal blisters on the Queequeg's outer skin.

Working more by touch and memory than by sight, the almost total blackness of the tunnel lightened only by the backwash from the prow and tower lanterns, the skiff crews removed the bolts and loosened the hawsers. Five soft splashes sounded in quick succession as the skiffs were

tipped over the side, landing in the thick Sump water right side up, now tethered to their mother ship by a single line. Their crews swarmed aboard them, checking their benzene-powered outboard motors and fitting harpoon guns into their binnacle mounts. Each boat's ratskin harpooner intoned a ritual invocation to the mysterious gods of the Sump and the hunt, their monotonous chanting punctuated by the cries of 'Ready!' from each skiff s leading hand.

'What are you going to buy with your share, Barak?' Chan asked vaguely. The prospect of an imminent hunt always prompted him to think ahead, past the danger, to the profit on the other side. 'A ship of your own? If Virad's information is only half-right, we should all come out of this with enough to buy a fleet each.'

'The Queequeg's all the ship I need,' the first mate growled in reply, then leant over the tower rail' to bellow orders to the skiff crews. A less confident man than Chan might detect a threat in Barak's words. A reminder that, on this ship, captains were expendable, that Barak always had the last say in their appointment and, without his support, they wouldn't last long past the first unsuccessful hunt under their command. And he would be right. Chan was under no illusion about who was the true master of the Queequeg. He knew that his role was to gather information, to point the ship towards its next quarry - be it spider, human or some incomprehensible technological relic from an earlier age - and let Barak and his crew do the rest. All that mattered was the reliability of the information and the size of the profit to be earned.

And the information he had taken with him from his last meeting with Virad promised riches that would make the Emperor blush.

'Light! Dead ahead!' Roark called back from his post at the prow lantern. Chan peered ahead. A faint, nacreous glow was visible, almost at the limits of vision.

'Some other skag get there before us?' Barak had joined Chan at the front of the conning tower. 'Maybe Virad made more than one copy of the charts.'

'No. He knew what I'd do to him if he did that.' Chan blinked, then tried to focus more tightly on the light. It was still too far away to make out whether it came from a single source.

'You did that to him anyway!' Barak snorted, as if pleased to have found something else to be pessimistic about. 'Maybe he decided to get his revenge in early'

That's glow-moss, I'm sure of it' Chan hoped that he sounded as confident as a captain should. He turned to face the first mate. 'Full ahead, Master Barak. Tell those rats in the engine room to push it to the red line.'

Barak reached once more for the communication tube.

'And Barak...'

'Cap'n?'

'Break out the auto-cannon and shotguns. Just in case.'

The pounding rhythm of the engines echoed back from the tunnel walls and shook the deck beneath Chan's feet. The ship surged forward, the still-tethered skiffs dancing in its wake, as if the Queequeg was a vast and ancient spider, and they, all five of their harpoons having struck home, were riding it down, waiting for it to tire before moving in to deliver the killing stroke.

With every beat of the engine, both the light ahead and Chan's confidence grew. The luminescence was too diffuse to come from another ship's lantern. It filled the tunnel ahead, swallowing the beam that reached out from the Queequeg's prow. Chan called for Virad's charts to be passed up to him. He checked and re-checked every bearing, sounding and hastily-copied extract from the log of the last ship to pass this way, decades, possibly centuries before. Virad had claimed access to a forgotten Imperial archive, but that old liar would say anything if he thought it might save his life. And, since he'd sold details of the Queequeg's last voyage to not one but two sets of would-be pirates, only to see the ship return, still in the hands of its original crew, he knew his life was in desperate need of saving.

'Spiders'

The word was barely recognisable. Virad's voice sounded strangled, high-pitched and fearful.

The captain sat across the table from him, in the booth he had used as an office for as long as anybody could remember, buying and selling information, settling his percentage of any salvage rights. Virad had never

liked Chan. He smiled too much, like many of the merchants he had known in his younger, wealthier days. They would smile, pat you on the back and buy you a drink - then stab you in the back, relieve you of your merchandise and hand you over to the Judges on some trumped-up charge. Virad still bore the A-shaped brand of the Adeptus Arbites on his left shoulder, albeit faded and blue now with age. It was a sign to all who saw it that he had spent time on one of their correction gangs, shackled together with other offenders and set to work clearing debris from the latest hivequake, wading unprotected through the effluent from ruptured conduits and fighting off giant rats and milliasaurs with pick and shovel. Ever since then, he had been wary of men who smiled too much.

But Chan wasn't smiling now. His right eye was swollen shut and half of his right ear was missing. Virad imagined he could see bite marks on the bruised flesh of his cheek and neck. Human bite marks. There were fresh scorch marks on his heavy spider-pelt jacket as well, as if a volley of las-fire had recently come much too close for comfort.

Not close enough, Virad decided.

'I don't see any spiders in here,' Chan hissed, keeping his voice low. 'Just a treacherous old has-been who tried to sell me, my ship and my crew to the highest bidder. Now, are you going to come quietly or am I going to have use this?' He opened his jacket far enough to reveal the knurled grip of the laspistol holstered across one side of his chest.

'F-fire that in here, you'd never make it out alive,' Virad stammered.

'You really think anybody in here'd want to take a shot for you?' A thin smile lifted the corners of Chan's mouth. 'Even if they did, you'd be past caring.'

'Just business, that's all it was,' Virad decided to change the subject. 'Look... I owed some people. I- I want to thank you for getting them off my back.'

Chan's smile grew, as if he was actually enjoying Virad's stumbling attempt to talk his way out of the slow, painful death the Queequeg's crew had planned for him.

'Oh, it was our pleasure,' he replied, his voice dripping with irony. 'Now you owe us - in blood.'

'I... I can do better than that' Virad's voice cracked, jumped to an even higher pitch. 'I can give you spiders. More than you ever dreamed of...'

'We can find spiders without your help,' Chan cut across Virad's words. His smile had faded, his patience exhausted. 'Get on your feet. You're coming with me.'

'No!' Virad's sudden cry caused several of the dive's other occupants to turn, hands unconsciously twitching towards their weapons. Upon seeing the tableau in the booth, however, they turned back. A business deal gone sour - nothing new in this part of the Underhive.

Virad realised that Chan was right. If he drilled Virad where he sat, all anyone would do was complain to the bar owner about the smell of over-cooked meat.

'Wait!' Virad raised his hands in abject surrender. 'Listen. The information I have could set you up for life. Your crew as well. I'm not just talking about one or two spiders, or even a nest. I'm talking about a nursery - a hundred spiders, maybe more, all laying their eggs in one place!'

'I'm too old for bedtime stories.' Chan sounded impatient, dismissive, but Virad, who had spent his life listening not just to what people said, but how they said it, knew that he had just extended his life expectancy by a few more minutes at least. Chan was the master of the Queequeg, the most extraordinary vessel ever to sail the waters of the Sump, but he was just another freebooter and all freebooters were interested in only one thing: profit.

'It's true! I've got the charts and bearings. Been under Imperial Seal for centuries. But I knew someone who knew someone who wanted something I could provide and...'

Something in Chan's expression made him falter. Time was running out.

'L-like I said, hundreds of spiders, thousands of eggs. All in one place. I don't know why - maybe this is a more sociable

kind of spider. Anyway, inside each egg is a baby spider, too young to defend itself. Thousands of baby spiders. Tens of thousands of eyes. Sure, they won't be a big as a grown spiders' eyes, but with that many of them, who cares? Captain's share of that haul would make you the richest man in the Underhive. Hell, you could buy the Underhive!' Virad paused.

For what seemed like forever, Chan said nothing.

'Of course, you don't happen to have these charts with you,' he said at last, his tone flat, expressionless.

'Well, no. They're way too valuable. I always wanted to put together a crew of my own, but...'

'But you can get them easily enough. Bring them here.'

'Yes! I could be back here in an hour, maybe less.' The sense of relief that rushed through him was so great that when it came time to stand, to leave the bar, Virad feared his legs would be unable to carry him. 'I swear, you won't regret this.'

'You'll be watched. Get clever, try to run and, charts or no charts, it'll be your head that's delivered to me.'

'I was right,' Barak growled, the light from the glow-moss painting his face with a sickly greenish tint. Virad sent us to hell.'

Chan looked out across the glass-flat pool into which they had emerged. The size of a small quay, it might almost have been carved out of the rock for exactly that purpose. An uneven ledge ran around the half of its circumference that faced the tunnel entrance, leading back into inky shadows. Rust-red glow-moss coated the ragged dome of the stalactite-heavy ceiling, grown so dense in places that it hung down in iridescent strips like threadbare chandeliers.

'If you're a spider, maybe,' Chan said, indicating one of the inert carcasses that floated a short way off the starboard bow. There were nine of them, floating like massive, grey-pelted islands in the pool. Judging by what was visible above the surface, each one would have taken all five of the Queequeg's skiffs to bring it down, aided by a volley from the submersible's auto-cannon. Nowhere in the log fragments that Virad had handed over along with the charts had there been any mention of fully-grown spiders acting as guardians of the nursery - although, had he been thinking beyond the vast wealth on offer, Chan should have expected it. Maybe Barak was right. Perhaps Virad, assuming that Chan would kill him anyway, had left any such warning notes in their hiding place, hoping to send him and his crew to their doom.

But something had intervened to frustrate Virad's plan. Each of the floating corpses exhibited massive wounds, tears in their pelts and the tough tissue beneath, exposing ruptured organs or else forming hollows into which a glutinous ichor of blood and venom had collected and begun

to coagulate. Roark, the harpooner aboard the skiff Chan had ordered to take a closer look at the nearest of the corpses, had taken one sniff of the mixture and recoiled, babbling wildly about sacrilege and corruption. He had even refused to harvest the beast's eyes, leaving the job to the rest of the skiffs crew. Every other harpooner, even the normally strong-minded Bryll, had done likewise as the other skiffs moved among the submerged carcasses, their non-ratskin crew members carving the fist-sized gems from the spiders' eye sockets.

'Whatever did this could still be here,' Barak replied, looking resolutely on the dark side.

'We don't know that,' reasoned Chan. 'How do we know that they didn't do this to themselves? Perhaps there was some kind of dispute over whose egg sacs got pride of place.'

Barak stared at him as if unsure whether or not he was joking, then waved a hand in the direction of the ledge. Looking past him, Chan noted that Jostin's skiff had almost reached the ledge, towards which he had directed them. He also noted that Bryll, Jostin's harpooner, whom he had seen stand up and roar his defiance into the jaws of living spiders at least as large as those that floated inertly around them now, had retreated to the rear of the boat.

And that's why there isn't an egg sac left whole?' Barak asked. The wall that curved up over the water's edge was draped with the tattered remains of more egg sacs than it was possible to count from this distance. The milky white skins of the sacs hung flaccidly, like punctured bladders and ragged festival banners, their contents reduced to streaks and smears on the rock all around them.

Chan turned his gaze back to the first mate. There had been an edge in his voice that Chan hadn't heard there before: unsettled, almost fearful. If this place was having such an effect on the normally stolid Barak, Chan could be sure that the rest of the crew were feeling it too.

Time to calm things down, he decided. Take control, gather what booty we can and get out of here.

'Look,' he said out loud. 'I'm no expert on the child-rearing habits of raft spiders. We came here to kill them, didn't we? Well, it looks like they saved us the trouble. The eyes from these beasts alone are double a normal year's takings. Let Jostin and his men take a quick look on the ledge - there

might yet be some young ones over there with eyes worth having. Call back the other skiffs, get them lashed down. We can be under way as soon as Jostin's had his look around. You know as well as I do: nothing calms the nerves like a share from a good haul.'

The first volley of gunfire from the ledge was followed by a chorus of alarmed shouts and the splash of a body hitting the water. There were more shouts, but these were swallowed by the combined reports of the landing party's shotguns.

With a muttered oath, Barak cupped his hands to his mouth and began bellowing orders to the other skiffs to move in on the ledge and support Jostin's crew. Chan directed his attention to the source of the sudden confusion, but couldn't make out what was going on. Three of Jostin's crew stood on the ledge, firing wildly into the shadows; Bryll was still aboard the skiff, not showing any sign of wanting to climb ashore. The fifth member of the skiffs crew was nowhere to be seen - Chan could only assume that he was in the water and therefore beyond help. The noxious chemicals beneath the pool's faintly iridescent surface would already be eating through the crewman, rendering his body back to its component parts. Whether he had been pushed or had merely missed his footing was irrelevant - this expedition had claimed its first casualty.

Chan lifted the macro-glasses that hung on a leather thong around his neck. Pressing the twin cylinders to his eyes he spun the knurled brass wheel set between them and the scene on the ledge jumped into sharp focus. He saw the three crewmen, two of whom were still firing while the third - Jostin - was digging in the pocket of his jerkin for fresh shells. Shifting his gaze slightly, he tried to detect some sign of who or what it was they were firing at. At first all he saw were shadows, then a hulking figure stepped into view. It appeared to be human, wearing armour that gave its arms and shoulders an over-developed, ape-like outline. A shotgun blast hit it in the shoulder, the impact causing it to take a step back and flex both arms, as if to check for damage, before continuing its progress towards the crewmen.

It wasn't alone. Other figures stepped into the light: two more that shared the heavy-set aspect of the first and another pair that were more lightly armoured, but no less menacing. One was armed with a sword and a shield that flashed with reflected light; the other appeared to possess long,

tapering claws instead of hands. This last figure took a single step, then leapt to avoid a volley of gunfire, which passed harmlessly beneath it. Too high, too fast to be merely human, the sight made Chan think of the sudden leaps he had seen spiders make when surprised in their lair. The moment its feet touched down, it flung one arm forwards as if hurling a projectile at the crewmen, who had begun to retreat towards the lip of the ledge. Chan saw nothing leave the figure's hand but, switching his attention back to the retreating crewmen, he saw one of them drop his shotgun, arms pinioned as if by some invisible force, before being jerked from his feet and dragged, kicking and screaming, towards the figure.

By now, the sword-wielding attacker had advanced ahead of its hulking comrades. Fending off a volley from Jostin's rifle with its shimmering shield, it sliced through the gun's twin barrels with a single downward sweep of its sword. Jostin raised the truncated shotgun in an attempt to club his attacker with its butt, but was grasped around the throat by one of the heavyset creatures and lifted off his feet.

At that moment, Chan knew there was only one thing to do.

'Barak, call the skiffs back. Now!' he shouted at the first mate, then leant over the rail to address the crew of the autocannon that had been brought topside and fixed in its mounting midway between the prow and the conning tower. 'Aim for the ledge!' he ordered. 'Push those bastards back and give us time to secure the skiffs!'

The skiffs were already executing tight turns in response to Barak's shouted orders when the autocannon opened up, its deep throaty coughs followed by the explosive impacts of its shells on the rock above the ledge. Adjusting their aim, the gun crew fired again, this time throwing up a curtain of rock shards from the ledge in front of the advancing creatures. Eyes once again pressed to the macro-glasses, Chan was surprised to see the creature, one of whose over-sized hands was clenched around Jostin's throat, turn as if to shield the struggling crewman from the rain of shrapnel kicked up by the autocannon's second volley. The razor-sharp shards of stone ricocheted off the plate armour covering its back.

The third crewman left on the ledge, faced by the other two hulking creatures, which were advancing on him from either side, obviously decided to follow the skiffs' example. Dropping his shotgun, he took a running leap off the ledge in the direction of the landing party's skiff -

only to discover that Bryll had already gunned the boat away from its temporary mooring. He hit the water, disappeared beneath its surface with a splash. A second or two later he reappeared, flailing uselessly, mouth open but his shouts drowned out by the autocannon's roar, before sinking once again.

The Queequeg's hull rang as each skiff returned at speed to their mother ship. Unconsciously, Chan counted the impacts, calculating how long the crews would take to secure the boats and how quickly the submersible could be underway. Only the landing party's skiff remained, powering across the water towards them, Bryll crouching low in the stern as the autocannon shells pounded over his head.

The figures on the ledge had retreated under the barrage from the autocannons. They stood on the threshold of the shadows as if frustrated by the flight of their last potential victim. Bryll was halfway between the ledge and the Queequeg. Chan could tell by the shouts that came from the aft deck that the last of the skiffs had been secured, their crews tumbling through the aft hatch. Barak was barking orders to the engine room; the idle hum of the engines changed, becoming heavier, more insistent, as if impatient to be away from this place.

'Keep them pinned until we're underway!' Chan shouted down to the autocannon crew. 'I don't want to find out whether any of those monsters can swim!' Chan would take the Queequeg out of the grotto at flank speed, then dive soon after entering the tunnel. If any of the attackers were able to follow, by the time they reached the tunnel's mouth it would seem that the submersible had vanished.

Then he saw it, arching upwards from the ledge like a jet-black bird of prey. Jet-black except for its wings: stiff, sharp-angled pinions that shone with a shifting iridescent blur of colours, mirroring the sheen on the water below. Its fast, rising trajectory took it over the angle of the autocannon barrage, almost to the glowing, moss-hung roof - and then down, arrow-straight, towards a point roughly midway between the ledge and the Queequeg. Straight at Bryll's skiff.

'Bryll! Evasive!' Barak had seen it too and was bellowing a warning to the harpooner. Bryll, either deafened by the noise of the autocannon, or simply too intent upon reaching the Queequeg to register the first mate's warning, showed no sign of having heard. He kept the skiff on its original

course, making no attempt to throw the airborne menace off his tail. Chan doubted that the ratskin was even aware of the armoured raptor that was bearing down upon him.

Watching through the macro-glasses, tracking the metal-winged apparition as if it were merely some interesting new avian species, Chan saw its wings shift, the spear-pointed sections of each wing parting to slow its descent. Mere heartbeats before impact, its body swung down towards the vertical, arms and legs reaching out like the finger-like pseudo-limbs of a ripperjack, moments before fastening around the head of its prey.

Bryll was plucked from the speeding skiff like a true rat, caught by an airborne predator before it could reach the safety of its lair. Too surprised to even cry out, he was carried upwards, as the skiff slewed drunkenly off-course, heading for a collision with the grotto wall while his captor executed a combined roll and turn that dazzled Chan with its elegance and careless ease. He noticed idly that the backs of the creature's wings were coloured solid black, as if in readiness to melt into the shadows from which it had come.

The sudden roar of a bolt pistol next to him on the conning tower jolted Chan from his fugue state. Barak was pumping bolt after bolt into the air, apparently heedless of the fact that, should he bring the creature down, he would also doom Bryll to a corrosive death in the pool's shimmering, deadly water. Perhaps he didn't care. Perhaps all he cared for was to exact some kind of revenge upon the monstrosity that had taken a crewman who had served aboard the Queequeg almost as long as him.

Chan, however, cared for something else: escape. Stepping to the communications tube, he screamed the order to submerge, to be answered, almost immediately, by the high-pitched whistle of air venting from the dive tanks.

Taking their cue from the sound, the autocannon crew ceased firing, unpinned the weapon from its mount and hurried below decks. They were followed by the prow lookout, who slammed the forward hatch shut behind him.

Barak was still firing uselessly after Bryll's winged captor, which avoided the bolt pistol's shells with almost contemptuous ease, sliding through the air in a zigzagging evasive pattern with flick after delicate flick of its wings.

'Barak, get below!' Chan shouted but the glassy-eyed first mate showed no sign of having heard him. The sound of the venting tanks had changed from a whistle to a thick bubbling as the ship began to submerge; in a matter of seconds, the Sump water would wash over the conning tower rail.

'I said get below! Bryll's gone! We're leaving!' Chan repeated the order and backed it up by thumping Barak on the shoulder. The first mate turned, his face a grimacing mixture of murderous rage and stark terror. He stared at Chan for a moment, during which time the master of the Queequeg wondered if he might receive Barak's next bolt in his gut, then blinked, nodded quickly, holstered his weapon and dropped through the conning tower hatch. Chan allowed himself a moment of relief at having been spared the sight of his own intestines smeared across the periscope assembly, then followed Barak inside, slamming the hatch shut above him.

Chan had never felt so glad to feel the familiar melange of old sweat and engine oil coat the back of his throat. It meant he was wrapped within the cramped metal cocoon of the Queequeg, out of sight of their attackers, soon to be beyond their reach, protected by the waters of the corrosive sea that would lead them home.

Chan issued orders to the helmsman and the operator of the ping-board, the brass-coiled echo-sounding device whose signals, transmitted from the antennae arrayed around the ship's mid-line to the jug-shaped apparatus clamped to the operator's ears, would guide them back into the tunnel mouth and from there, through the tunnel's twists and turns, past the reefs and sudden changes in its width and depth, to the open Sump. Then, after shouting a mixture of threats and encouragement to the engine room via another communication tube, he stepped up to the periscope.

As a crewman cranked the handle set into the rear of the periscope assembly and the viewing glass rose to eye-level, Chan glanced across at Barak. The first mate leaned heavily against the curved hull, still glassy-eyed, as if unable or unwilling to acknowledge what he had seen. Chan knew that every crewman who had been aboard the other skiffs would share at least a portion of Barak's horror. Jostin, Bryll and the others would be missed but, once the sparkling, multi-faceted eyes they had torn from the floating corpses had been sold and the profits divided among the crew, Chan knew that the money would work its magic upon their memories.

The day's events, the loss of their comrades would be told and re-told, gradually becoming one more legend to add to the multitude of legends that formed the Queequeg's reputation among the other Sump-farers. There would be glasses raised in toast to the dead, many glasses. And there'd be women, Chan promised himself. Lots of women.

The view through the cracked eyepiece moved sideways as Chan scanned the surface for any sign of the armour-clad enemy. Nothing. The ledge was empty, the spider-corpses floated as before, receding as the submersible sped towards the tunnel mouth. Satisfied, he flipped the handles up against the periscope tube and motioned for it to be lowered. He was about to say something reassuring to the control room crew when Stavek, the ping-board operator, called out:

'Contacts aft, moving in fast!' He turned, the nest of cables that connected his earphones to the board swinging around his shoulders like a particularly luxuriant head of hair. 'And there's something else. It sounds like... like insects.'

The tone of Stavek's voice and his puzzled expression showed that he was aware of how ludicrous the last part of his report would sound. He held one earphone away from his head and invited Chan to listen.

Chan bent down, placed an ear against the grill that ran across the top of the metal cup... and heard it too. A high-pitched jumble of insertile clicks, punctuated by a sudden squeak or wave of what sounded like white noise from an untuned radio receiver. Stavek was right to compare it to the noise made by a large number of insects. Chan had heard a similar sound when a swarm of steel locusts had descended upon the settlement of Carter's Crag, his childhood home, and stripped every piece of metal from roof and wall, causing over half the settlement's buildings to collapse. But there was something else about it, something unnatural. Something mechanical. Chan suddenly felt as if he was overhearing a high-speed conversation going on between several piece of delicate machinery. 'Evasive manoeuvres!' Chan ordered.

Then they heard it: a rhythmic banging, transmitted through the dense metal of the hull. Then another, emanating from a different part of the ship's outer skin. Then another. Something was out there.

Something that wanted in.

TWO

Times of strife are the proving ground of the Redemption.'

The words of Pastor Zydo's last sermon rang in Poldar's memory as his autogun chattered and bucked in his hands. Three of the four rag-wearing scavvies who had jumped down from the wagon to avoid the cleansing fire of the flamer that had washed over their transport danced an absurd jig, blood erupting from the stinking folds of their clothes, before falling in separate ragged heaps. The fourth, somehow unscathed, continued to run along the downward slope of the cinder track, until he was punched sideways by the impact of a shell from Hastor's stub gun. Hastor appeared around the front of the ancient tractor that had been pulling the wagon down the track until a direct hit from Malec's grenade launcher had turned its wheezing, arthritic engine into just so much slag and signalled the beginning of the attack.

Poldar raised a hand in acknowledgement of Hastor's marksmanship. The latter, breaking open his weapon and inserting another shell, smiled in reply, his lopsided grin visible beneath the ornate fringe of his mask, then disappeared back around the other side of the tractor.

Times of war and civil unrest,' Zydo had addressed the assembled gangers in a warehouse on one of the lower levels of House Cawdor's industrial holdings. 'At times such as these, each man must look into his heart and make a choice: does he stand with the Redemption, with the manifest destiny of mankind as decreed by our One High Lord, the Emperor of Man. Or does he side with the darkness that is all around us, and which threatens to engulf us all?'

Gangers in various parts of the warehouse shouted their answers, every one the same: 'Redemption!'

'I am here to tell you that the Last Days are all but upon us. The Underhive is rife with rumours of yet another manifestation of the sin and corruption in which all but the faithful wallow. Creatures that walk like men, but speak with the tongues of the insect and the machine. Once human, they have taken all that is inhuman into their hearts, their very

souls, in preparation for the apocalypse, the final fire, which shall surely soon be upon us!

'These creatures skulk among the refuse of the hive bottom, biding their time, gathering their forces. Now they are but few, but they stalk the dark between the settlements, the waste hollows and slag plains, seeking converts. They must be denied!

'All who are unholy, whose lost souls might provide a welcome to the new darkness that would use them to its own ends must be saved. Must be cleansed by bolter, sword and fire!'

'Redemption! Redemption!' The warehouse rang to the gangers' chant. Poldar punched the air with his fist, over and over. From his makeshift pulpit atop a container that bore the marks of House Cawdor and the Merchants' Guild, Zydo surveyed the sea of raised fists. He nodded in satisfaction, then raised his own hand for quiet.

'Go forth and seek your destiny, the destiny of Man. You are touched by the fire of Redemption. You are instruments of its cleansing touch. You are blessed!'

'You are blessed!'

Poldar remembered the pastor's final benediction as he moved along the length of the wagon, heading towards its rear, alert for any other scawies who might have escaped the fire. Ahead of him, a short way up the cinder slope, stood the second tractor, forced to a stop by the destruction of the vehicle which had preceded it down the track. The tractor driver had been armed, as were several of the wagon's pox-faced passengers. The driver had already been reduced to a bleeding, broken-stringed marionette, his pistol clutched in a dead man's grasp. Weapons' fire from the wagon's passengers, however, had forced Poldar's brothers to pause in their attack, find cover and return fire.

By the time he reached the end of the first wagon, Poldar was sweating heavily under his cowl, due to the intense heat from the burning bodies of the wagon's passengers - the only fitting end for all scavvies, whether or not they had embraced the new darkness of which the pastor had spoken.

The sickly odour of roasting flesh descended on Poldar in a wave, causing him to gag. Why didn't Malec pump a grenade or two into the

midst of the remaining scavvies, he wondered as he spat in a useless attempt to rid himself of the heavy, oily taste? Peering around the end of the first wagon, he saw why: Malec lay in open ground, his face and mask torn away by a scavvy's bullet. His grenade launcher lay a few feet from him.

Poldar swore an oath to the Arch-Zealot and opened fire on the second wagon. His first round caught a woman high in the back, exiting in a spray of blood and bone from her chest. Some final nervous impulse caused her to arch up and over the side of the wagon. As she fell, a rag-wrapped bundle tumbled from her grasp. It hit the ground with a high-pitched squeal, which thickened into an unmistakable ululating wail: a child, another of its mother's twisted, mutant kind.

Poldar ignored the child. Too small and harmless to be worth a bullet, he would come looking for it after the battle was won. He continued to pump rounds into the wagon, hoping to draw the fire of some of its armed occupants and give his comrades a chance to move in, to bring the flamer into range.

The dull concussive thump of the flamer's fuel tanks exploding took everyone by surprise. In the momentary lull in the weapons' fire, Nerran's screams were clearly audible, almost as high-pitched as those of the baby that still lay beside one of the tractor's wheels. Without realising it, Poldar had advanced into the gap between the first and second wagons. By simply turning his head, he was afforded a clear view of Nerran as he staggered forward, still screaming, completely engulfed in the tanks' volatile, flaming liquid. The wretch managed three or four steps before his legs buckled and he fell forward, still burning, but silent.

Poldar's first thought was that the flamer had malfunctioned. The gunfire that kicked up ash all around the sheltering gangers changed his mind. Tearing his gaze from the still-twitching form of Nerran, he saw them racing down the slope of the slag heap that rose at the gangers' backs, one of the succession of such heaps that loomed over both sides of the track. Some of Poldar's brothers shifted their positions behind the smaller heaps of ash and clinker that they had been using as cover from the scavvies' bullets and returned fire. Their attackers, however, had the advantage. They had already found their range and were moving too fast for the gangers to draw an accurate bead on them. They were, in fact,

doing to the gangers exactly what the gangers had done to the two-vehicle convoy - and were showing just as much mercy.

What felt like a punch in the side of the neck caught Poldar by surprise. He stumbled sideways, legs suddenly unsteady, only to collide with the rear of the first wagon and bounce drunkenly back. One knee gave way and he sprawled in the cinders.

Struggling into a semi-recumbent position on the granular surface of the track, he shucked one of his gauntlets and pressed "his bare hand to his neck. It could only have been a glancing hit, perhaps from a ricochet, but it had opened something vital. Hot blood pumped between his fingers, painting the ground with broad strokes.

More confused than fearful, Poldar noted absently that his legs had gone cold and numb, while his chest seemed to have caught fire. Blinking away the mist that now edged his vision, he looked again at the firelight that was taking place at the edge of the track. Caught in a crossfire between the ambushers and the scavvies in the wagon which, though only a couple of paces from where Poldar lay, might as well have been parked on one of the highest levels of the Spire, the gangers were being cut to pieces. Horror, despair, righteous anger - Poldar knew he should feel something as he watched Hastor, the last of his comrades, cut down. He just didn't seem to have the energy.

As his brothers' killers reached the now silent ganger positions, Poldar watched as they searched the bodies, collecting guns and ammo packs. There looked to be ten of them: Underhivers carrying autoguns, bandoleers slung across their chests. They wore a motley of various kinds of protective gear, probably scavenged from the industrial levels - hard hats, anti-splash jackets and leg-guards, metal-tipped work boots - but no gang colours. Just a bunch of freelancers, then, out for what they could get.

No. Not ten. Eleven. Poldar hadn't seen this figure during the attack. Taller than the others, broader in the shoulder, evidently the product of a more comfortable upbringing than was the norm in the Underhive. He carried a bolter, an unusual and expensive piece of equipment for an unaffiliated freebooter to possess, and was dressed differently, too.

Poldar's vision swam. The fire in his chest had burned out. Blinking rapidly, he regained focus for a brief moment, during which he saw, with almost unnatural clarity that, beneath the bandoleers slung across his

shoulders and the cartridge belt cinched about his waist, this last figure wore the tattered but still unmistakable remnants of a Redemptionist's robes.

A Redemptionist? Impossible! The House of Cawdor was the House of the Redemption. No acolyte of the Arch-Zealot would lead an attack on a Cawdor gang!

Then he heard it. The victorious freebooters were singing - no chanting - something. A single word, a name perhaps: Vex.

The word meant nothing to Poldar and he was much too tired to give it any more thought. He slumped onto his back and discovered that someone was standing over him. A scavvy, its face pockmarked and dotted with sores. A scavvy with a gun.

Staring into the barrel of the scavvy's weapon, the darkness seemed to rush towards him. From somewhere far away, he heard again the words of Pastor Zygo: 'You are blessed.'

Oh, Poldar thought. Really?

Vex spun round at the sound of the single gunshot, senses alert to another possible threat, bolter braced in both hands. In the gap between the burnt-out wagon and the tractor that had escaped the attentions of the gangers' flamer stood a young scawy woman, holding what looked like an antique single-shot rifle. The rifle was angled down at the headless body of another ganger. The woman threw the gun aside, then moved behind the tractor. Seconds later she reappeared, cradling a ragged bundle in her arms. A faint exhausted mewling came from among the rags.

'Someone exacting a little righteous vengeance, pastor.' Slant-Eyed Micc stood beside him, stuffing scavenged autogun cartridges into the pouches of his bandoleer.

Vengeance is a sin,' Vex replied as he lowered his bolter. Several other scavvies gathered around the young woman, cooing over the child in her arms as if it was a talisman, a good luck charm or just some vague promise for the future.

'But a holy sin, surely,' Micc smiled, his unevenly-set eyes and crooked mouth giving the impression that his features were all crowding to one side of his face, 'when one is avenging an evil deed?'

'Has the Crusade issued some new edict of which I am unaware?' Vex asked.

'You mean, since the one that called for the delivery of your still-beating heart to the dinner table of the Arch-Zealot? I don't think so.'

'At least it stopped that chanting. The last thing we need is to advertise our location.' Vex paused, then added: ' Don't the men know that it makes me uncomfortable?'

'Hey, I've told them,' Micc replied, mock-defensively. 'Even offered an alternative. They pointed out that shouting "Micc" is nowhere near as inspiring as shouting "Vex". And besides, I'm nobody's saviour.'

'Don't you start with that nonsense.' Vex slung his bolter over one shoulder, then scanned the slag dune on either side of the track. 'Post lookouts and get the rest to help shift that wreck.' He indicated the burnt-out wagon and tractor. 'We should already be on our way. Emperor knows how many other gangs are lurking round here, looking for blood.'

'Let 'em come,' Micc commented before leaving Vex's side. 'We'll give 'em blood. It'll be their blood, sure, but who can tell the difference when it's running all over the floor?'

It was a story Vex had heard countless times before, but with greater frequency over the last few months: Redemptionists sweeping through a sector, armed to the teeth and psychotic with self-righteous anger, backed-up by an army of Cawdor foot soldiers. Rich or poor, human, ratskin or scavvy - no one was spared.

Ironically, it was the scavvies' place at the bottom of Underhive society that saved them. Living in a small tent ghetto in the shadow of a forest of pipes leading from the sector's waste treatment complex, they heard the sounds of the massacre before it reached them. Striking their tents and gathering their belongs, they climbed aboard the wagons and headed off, descending through a maze of tunnels and access ramps until they reached the slag dunes.

The gangers came at us out of nowhere,' the scavvy named Neesa told Vex as she walked with him ahead of the wheezing tractor. Her voice was coarse, phlegmy, as if the sores that covered her skin also afflicted her inner surfaces. She was still carrying the child - her sister's, she had

explained when he suggested that she let someone else carry it for a while. Her fellow refugees were riding in the wagon, apart from those who were already armed or had scavenged weapons from the dead gangers; these had joined forces with Vex's men, either scouting ahead or covering the rear.

They probably weren't part of the force that attacked your sector,' commented Micc, who was striding along beside them both, autogun carried casually in the crook of one arm. 'More than likely, they were just roaming around, looking for trouble. That's happening a lot, these days.'

They believe the Last Days have come, when the Underhive shall be purged of the sinful and unworthy'

'By sinful and unworthy, they mean anyone who isn't a Redemptionist,' Micc added sardonically.

'Your grasp of the complexities of the Crusade's theology continues to amaze me,' Vex returned. Micc snorted his amusement and shifted his weapon to the crook of his other arm.

'But you're a Redemptionist,' Neesa finally asked the question Vex imagined she had been wanting to ask for some time. 'Your robes...'

'Indeed,' Vex replied. 'Or, at least, I was. My brothers and I had what you might call a falling out.'

'A theological disagreement,' Micc chipped in. Vex shot him a look.

'Quite. It's enough to say that we're no longer on speaking terms.'

'With them that can still speak, that is,' Micc added brightly. His grin faded at the sight of Vex's expression. 'I'll go check on the scouts,' he muttered and moved on ahead.

'So why do you still wear the robes?' Neesa asked. It felt like a very long time before Vex answered.

'As a reminder.'

* * *

The settlement sat in a natural amphitheatre formed by a towering, curved rock wall and a depression in the earth that might have been scooped out, aeons ago, by some vast godlike hand. Several tracks ran through the shantytown of tents and ramshackle huts that huddled around the circular wall that enclosed the settlement's more permanent-looking buildings. The

wall itself appeared to have been thrown together using wrecked vehicles, and wagons, rocks, girders from long-derelict buildings, each and every kind of industrial detritus. All the tracks led to a set of double gates which long ago might have been the doors to a spacecraft's loading bay.

Neesa stood at the point in the track where it began a steep descent towards the settlement, listening to the noise that rose up from it, focussed and amplified by the rock wall.

'Hope's End,' Micc stood beside her. Vex had gone on ahead. The wagon was moving away from them down the track. He was waiting for the rear-guard to reach them. 'Last working privy before the Sump and home to the homeless, courtesy of Pastor Vex.'

Neesa looked at him. 'He built this?' she asked.

'Well, there was a settlement here before he arrived, but he got things organised. Got the wall built, stuff like that. Made it safe to grow. Ordinarily, one of the gangs would've moved in, or the Redemption might have come a-cleansing, but Vex is smart and tough - and I do mean tough. He must've been a holy terror when he was a believer. Had quite a reputation, I'm told.' Neesa could tell from Micc's voice that he thought highly of Vex - more highly than the wiry, crook-faced little man would ever let on.

'He organised the militia, comes out with us on patrols like this, but I'd swear it's his reputation that keeps most of the trouble away - or has done till now.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Something's changed. Surely you can feel it? A whole new bunch of rumours are flying around - creatures that look human but aren't - and I don't mean zombies. And then there's the Redemption. Even Vex says what they're doing now is more serious than anything they've tried before. One of their plans for the Last Days is what they call the Final Crusade. Vex reckons that's what they're doing now. Those tents and huts outside thee wall, they weren't there a month ago. A lot of people are on the move - like you. Something's going on and I'll bet it's coming our way.'

A shout from back along the track caused Micc to start. The rearguard had come into view. Micc waved to them, then turned to Neesa, the unhappy, distant expression that had come over his face as he spoke was gone, replaced by another lopsided grin.

'Come on,' he said, leading her down the track, towards the settlement. 'Let's get you settled in.'

THREE

The clockwork bird spiralled down through the shaft of sunlight, its jewelled wings alive with multicoloured fire. Spinning down from the high vaulted ceiling, it chimed a harmonious yet melancholy series of notes. A dying fall.

Ty Helios Kayne watched the bird's descent and wished that he could be somewhere, anywhere else but here.

The bird's downward path looked to be taking it towards one of the series of ornamental fountains that ran the length of the gallery, whose waters caught the light that streamed in through the high arched windows, transforming it into a thousand small rainbows. A metre or so from the fountain, the bird suddenly changed direction. Its inner mechanism, rewound by the motion of its fall, drove it once again upwards, towards the vaulted ceiling and the flock of similar toys that inhabited the gallery's upper reaches. As it rose, on a gentler trajectory than it had taken during its descent, it chimed again: a rising, more cheerful cadence.

Kayne left the bird to its flight and looked out from his position on the dais that had been erected in front of the altar. The hunters stood in a line before him, helmets held in the crook of one arm, trying not to shuffle and twitch with suppressed excitement. He knew that their minds would not be on the ceremony taking place in their honour. They would be trying to imagine the hunt to come, trying to conjure up the sights and smells of the Underhive, the world below the Wall, below the Spire in which they had lived their whole lives. No more practice bouts with each other and members of the House Ty militia, learning the rudiments of combat in their offworld-crafted battlesuits. The next fight they found themselves in would be for real and upon their success or otherwise would depend much of their future fortune. A successful hunter would not be short of supporters in the kaleidoscopic landscape of shifting alliances and petty

politicking between the noble families of House Ty and, by extension, between the Ruling Houses of Hive Primus.

Kayne caught himself on the verge of a yawn - easily disguised when one was just one of the hundreds of attendees that filled the body of the gallery, unforgivable when one stood before the altar, representing one's family. He clamped his jaws shut and fought to suppress the impulse. How did his father manage to endure these things? If the old man wasn't confined to his bed amid the usual rumours of poison and attempted assassination, Kayne wouldn't be standing here alongside the other Nobles of House Ty, feeling more keenly than ever the unwelcome attention that had been directed at him since his return alone from the last hunt that was sanctified in this place.

Old Man Cal might very well be poorly, Kayne could almost hear the whispers that were passing among the assembled congregation, their bellies full from the banquet that preceded the blessing, tongues loosened by wine, but Bael should be standing there in his place, not Kayne. Bael was pureblood, not the fruit of some concubine's loins.

It didn't matter that fully four-fifths of those present were also the products of semi-official liaisons in their families' seraglios. All the surreptitious talk of bloodlines, 'fitness' and 'honour' was coded language, disguising the one word whose utterance could lead only to a formal challenge and to blood: cowardice.

'May the Emperor who watches over us all grant you courage, luck and cunning,' intoned the priest, standing at the altar, overlooking the dais and the gallery beyond. The massive carved monolith bore a representation of the Emperor in Glory, triumphant after his defeat of the Heretic, Horus. Looking out from the dais, Kayne spotted the black-robed retinue of the Emperor's living representatives, standing out like a patch of unnatural shadow among the brightly-dressed throng.

Inquisitor Cinar had come to the end of his tour of the Spire and was awaiting passage on an Imperial transport due to arrive in this Segmentum in a few days. He and his acolytes had moved from House to House, accepting the ritual entertainments that were his due and, apparently, doing little else. The rumour mill had, of course, ground out stories of clandestine meetings, even journeys beyond the Wall, but there had been

no arrests, no show trials; none of the noble families had been exposed as a nest of heretics.

Kayne wondered whether his own story had reached Cinar's ears. Seven of them descended into the Underhive, as is the custom among young House Ty noblemen, yet only he returned. His older brother - their father's true heir - was among them. He claims he saw his comrades slain, that he barely escaped with his life. The Underhive is a dangerous place, to be sure, but...

Kayne could imagine Cinar, moving among the crowd at yet another interminable banquet, nodding absently as a fawning noble, anxious to be seen as a confidant to the Inquisition, poured out the tale in a conspiratorial whisper. A footnote to be added to the inquisitor's report on his visit, perhaps, or just one more piece of gossip to be discarded, forgotten moments after Cinar moved on through the crowd. Kayne knew which of the alternatives he would prefer.

'Good hunting,' intoned the priest.

'Good hunting,' repeated the congregation. Kayne realised with relief that the ceremony was nearing its end. Soon the hunters would leave the gallery, conduct the final checks on their suits and begin their descent.

'Go forth and return in-'

The priest's last word, 'glory', was destroyed by the sudden bark of gunfire from the far end of the gallery, followed by a strangled scream and a crash as one of the ornate, tempered-glass doors was torn from its hinges.

The noise caused an immediate reaction in the packed gallery: panic. Those nearest the source of the commotion surged towards the far end of the gallery. Those already standing closer to the altar did likewise in an attempt to avoid being trampled. From his vantage point on the dais, Kayne watched as a tidal wave of richly dressed bodies rolled towards him. There were more gunshots, more screams as people fell beneath others' feet. A uniformed figure flew through the air, over the heads for the fleeing crowd, legs and arms pinwheeling brokenly. Kayne, straining to make out what was going on at the far end of the gallery, caught sight of a hulking figure with broad, armoured shoulders, lashing out with an oversized fist in a blur of piston-driven motion and slamming another militiaman into the backs of the terrified mob. A rain of autogun shells

broke against the intruder's breastplate, fired by a militiaman who was back-pedalling frantically. The armoured hulk closed in on him, its other arm outstretched, and was lost to sight behind the furthest of the fountains.

Time froze, then ran backward, taking Kayne with it. The gallery's glass-and-gilt dissolved, to be replaced by the shattered landscape of the Underhive. For an impossible, endless moment, Kayne found himself in the time and place that he had last seen such a figure, moving with the same deadly purpose...

The impact drove Kayne to the very edge of the dais, almost tipping him into the clear floor space at the feet of the hunters who, after a second spent exchanging confused glances, were locking their helmets in place and powering up their suits. Kayne turned and saw that his erstwhile companions on the dais were engaged in an undignified scramble for the higher ground of the altar. The priest had already retreated behind the monolith; Kayne caught sight of his pale, wide-eyed face, staring out from one side of its bulk.

At the foot of the dais, the line of militiamen, seconded to form the hunters' honour guard, struggled to turn and face the attack, only to be confronted by the onrushing tide of terrified nobility. In an ill-advised attempt to bring the wave to a halt, one of the honour guard fired his autogun over the heads of the crowd. The wave broke, people scrambling in all directions, pushing, kicking and clawing at those around them. There was an almighty crack as one of the ornamental fountains was dislodged by the sudden force of bodies slamming against it. Water plumed from the broken pipe, knocking people from their feet, washing them back under the well-shod heels of the mob.

Homing in on the tell-tale hiss of las-fire hitting flesh, Kayne spotted the inquisitor and his retinue, backed up against one wall in the space between two plinths, each topped with the bust of a past ruler of House Ty. Each of the black-robed retinue had produced a laspistol from within the folds of their robes and was cutting down any member of the mob unwise enough to seek sanctuary in their direction. At occasions such as this, all but ceremonial weaponry was forbidden - Kayne himself was wearing his father's jewel-encrusted, blunt-edged and utterly useless sabre. Presumably no one had dared attempt to apply this restriction to the Emperor's representatives. The cowl had fallen from the head of one of the

retinue; Kayne glimpsed the ruby glow of a tech-adept's ocular prosthetic before the deep-throated cough of a bolter launcher, followed by a chorus of renewed shouts, screams and curses wrenched his attention back to the area immediately in front of the dais.

The monster stood in the middle of a suddenly clear space, as if it had emerged from a trap door in the marble floor slabs at the behest of a stage conjurer. In one oversized metal paw it held the limp body of a member of the family militia. Once again, Kayne was assailed by memory; the intruder wore an Onus-class battlesuit, as he had done when he travelled below the Wall, as did three of those hunters this ceremony was intended to honour. But this suit bore the scars of innumerable battles. The once-smooth surfaces of its plating were heavily pitted and gouged; the plates covering one shoulder appeared to have been peeled back by far heavier ordnance than was available to the militiamen in the gallery, exposing some of the suit's wiring and the actuator mechanisms. Having emerged from the throng to one side of the dais, it seemed to pause. Its head swung from side to side, as if searching for something. Tilting its head upwards, its gaze fastened on Kayne, by now the only person standing on the dais. He half-expected it to emit the growl of some feral animal about to pounce.

Two of the Orrus-clad hunters fired their glove-mounted bolters, hitting the intruder mid-chest. The interloper was punched backwards, but managed to retain its footing. Several unarmoured bystanders and a militiaman fell, caught by shrapnel from the twin impact. It was a good strike. By rights, the threat should have been eliminated - its chest had been reduced to little more than a smoking ruin. But, impossibly, it stood there, stubbornly refusing to die.

Worse yet, it struck back. Firing bolts from both fists, it blasted both its attackers back into their fellow hunters and the chaotically milling crowd beyond. Under other circumstances, it might have been comical - some of the brightest lights of House Ty, clad in combat rigs assembled at vast expanse by off-world expertise, thrown into an ungainly heap of servo-driven arms and legs. However, as the monstrosity, the fresh wounds in its carapace still smoking and leaking drive-fluid onto the

floor, turned its gaze back to the lone figure on the dais, Kayne could find little to laugh about.

There was no point in trying to ran. To turn his back on this thing was to invite a bolt between the shoulder blades. Feeling like a prize fool, he drew his sword. Even the intruder seemed to appreciate the absurdity of Kayne standing above him, brandishing the antique weapon in the face of an opponent who, wounded or not, bore enough firepower to smear him across the altar stone and all those who were currently sheltering behind it.

Kayne hurled the sword at the intruder and leapt from the dais, landing beside the prone body of one of the hunters' honour guard. As Kayne bent to pluck the autogun from his nerveless grasp, the fallen man twitched and moaned. Kayne ignored him and levelled the autogun on the intruder. A head-shot might work, but down a foot or so, at the point where the flexible mail protecting the neck and the more solid plates that covered the chest...

The interloper rocked back on its heels as the bullet slammed home, then righted itself. For a moment, it seemed as if this shot would also be shrugged off. Then both knees buckled. Twisting as it fell, it slammed onto the floor face-up.

Kayne was first to the body, autogun still held ready. His target might have been a statue, fallen from its plinth. Kayne bent, reached out with one hand and unfastened the clasps on either side of the helmet, then wrenched it away.

The pale grey eyes were still open.

'Brother.'

A fine mist of blood accompanied Bael's words, bubbling up from his throat, ruptured by Kayne's single shot. 'We're still there... where you left us.' He coughed, struggled to continue, the light fading from his eyes.

'Waiting for you.'

FOUR

'We're still there... where you left us.'

What else could he do? Ever since his return, there had been rumours, unvoiced suspicions that followed him everywhere, ranging from cowardice to fratricide. His father's declining health had done nothing to

calm them; his solitary return from the Underhive had put Kayne in the position of heir apparent.

All he could do was go about his business, pretend not to hear the whispers or see the sneers that marked his path, until the court gossips tired of the story and found a new, undamaged reputation to tear to pieces.

That was before Bael returned to the Spire - and Kayne killed him.

Bolum, Kayne's personal manservant, checked his master's suit's systems and seals before he entered the gallery. Normally, another of the hunters would do this, but Kayne felt safer knowing that the person testing his suit's integrity had no interest in its sudden, mysterious failure shortly after entering the Underhive. Leaving his personal chambers, Kayne strode fully armoured through the corridors, annexes and galleries of the Ty House apartments, the suit's servomotors humming as he marched. He wanted them all to see, to believe: Ty Helios Kayne was returning to the Underhive to rescue his lost comrades, or die in the attempt.

The gallery was silent, empty. All sign of the previous day's mayhem had been erased: blood washed from walls and floor, the damaged fountain repaired. The clockwork birds still rose and fell, chiming mindlessly. Kayne resisted the temptation to blow one of them out of the air with a shot from his suit's glove-mounted bolters as he strode the length of the gallery, his heavy-booted footfalls echoing on the marble.

There were six of them, not counting the priest: Mot, Gyse, Schular, Telmac, Maas and Nikol. They sported Malcadon, Yeld, Jakara and three Orrus; he would be the fourth in such a rig. The complement of each hunting party was determined by ancient tradition. The fact that Fidor, the party's fourth Orrus, had been injured during the brief exchange of fire with Bael had been taken by some to be an omen. Fate, it seemed, had decreed that Kayne should accompany them below the Wall.

The priest raised an eyebrow when he saw that Kayne had already donned and secured his helmet, his eyes invisible behind the iridescent sheen of the photo-visor, nasal filter plugs in place. For a moment, Kayne thought the priest might order him to remove his helmet, standing as he was before the altar of the Emperor, but, after a moment, the priest composed himself and began the blessing. He jogged through the ritual with almost irreverent haste, Kayne thought, barely giving the hunters

time to utter the prescribed responses. There was none of the stately pomp of the previous day, no visiting inquisitor to impress.

'In the Emperor's name I ask you: what is your vow?'

To seek those who went before us and are lost,' the hunters replied in unison. This vow replaced the traditional: 'To seek honour and glory in the name of Ty House'. It had been composed late the previous day, by the priest and a conference of family heads. Kayne's father had, significantly, been excluded from the discussion.

To return with them,' the hunters continued, 'or with news of their fate.'

Kayne did not join in with this last section of the oath. Raising his voice, he spoke over their words: 'Or to die!'

Heads turned. Mot, another of Ty Helios Cal's harem-brood, opened his mouth as if about to rebuke his half-brother. A rangy, undernourished-looking man, his Malcadon suit accentuated the angular aspects of his physique. Kayne remembered him as being a quiet child who had grown into a sly man, always looking for ways to ingratiate himself with their father.

Kayne returned the others' gaze for a moment, then turned to the priest.

'Are we blessed?' he enquired.

'You are blessed,' the priest replied, taken aback and anxious to conclude the ritual. 'Good.'

Kayne stepped around the line of hunters and marched towards a door set to one side of the altar. It led from the gilded outer surface of the Ty House apartments, to the more functional service areas, to corridors and elevators used by the vast numbers of servants and menials whose families could trace their lineage as far back as those of noble blood, should anyone be sufficiently interested to ask. And beyond those areas, there were other shafts, deserted, half-forgotten, whose purpose was simple: descent.

Just like the last time...

'You're quiet, brother,' Bael had said. 'Worried?'

'No,' Kayne had replied, his voice faltering. The rusty cage of the elevator car rattled and jolted as it descended. Already the Ty apartments were far above them, the pitted and discoloured links in the elevator chain

their last remaining link with that world. And, when the cage reached the foot of the shaft, even this would be gone.

'Probably just feeling queasy from all this jerking around,' Aidor said, moaning as usual. 'You'd think they'd send someone down here with a pot of lubricant.'

Who'd waste it on a rickety old elevator?' asked Volk, her wicked leer distorted by her Malcadon mouthpiece.

'Not you, from what I've heard!' laughed Pitar. Even in the confined space of the elevator cage, Kayne found it almost impossible to make out the outline of Pitar's body, cloaked as it was by his Yeld wings, whose chameleonic skin mimicked the rising bands of light and dark through which the elevator was descending. Only his head was clearly visible and seemed to float, unsupported, in mid-air.

The banter had been almost continuous from the moment they left the high gallery, as if in reaction to the solemnity of the pre-hunt ritual. Their path through the service corridors had been cleared by the House militia. As they bustled along, their armoured figures looking bizarrely out of proportion with the passageways they passed along, they laughed and joked as if they were just a group of friends on their way to the theatre or a party. The laughter continued when they reached the elevator shaft and ran through the final checks on each other's suits before cramming themselves into the too-small metal cage.

Under other circumstances, Kayne would have joined in. But, this time, he found himself with little or nothing to say.

'He's looking forward to the hunt,' Meela said. The sport to come. I know how he feels.'

'I know how I feel,' Bael said. 'My nose itches. But how do I scratch it with these?' Everyone laughed as he held up his hands, clad in the massive gloves of his Orrus armour. Even Kayne laughed at last, easing some of the tension that had gripped him as the priest pronounced the final blessing.

The sport to come.' Georgi's monomolecular sword was slung over one shoulder. The jewels on his Jakara suit's buckler gleamed dully in the flickering light, which was weaker than before, an indication that they were almost at the bottom of the shaft.

Bael suddenly slapped Kayne on the back, making him jump. He hoped no one noticed.

'Honour and glory, eh, brother?'

Kayne looked at him and nodded, glad that his visor prevented Bael from seeing the uncertainty in his eyes. 'Honour and glory,' he replied quietly.

The cage slammed to a halt at the foot of the shaft, jolting Kayne back to the present. He looked at his fellow travellers on this new mission. Though their armour looked familiar, their faces, where visible, were the faces of strangers. He stared long and hard at the Malcadon mask to his left, reminding himself that behind its rubberised mouthpiece and the circular lenses of its goggles, he would find Mot's features, not Volk's.

'Is there a problem, brother?' Mot asked.

'No, Mot. No problem.' Kayne turned to Nikol, standing pressed against the concertina-mesh of the elevator's gate. 'Open the gate. Proceed with caution.'

Turning with some difficulty in the confined space, Nikol clamped an armoured hand around the gate's handle and slammed it aside - too hard, as she over-estimated her suit-enhanced strength. Several of the hunters, Mot included, started at the noise of the gate crashing open. The sound echoed down the three enclosed serviceways that led away from the elevator.

'Why not tell the whole hive we're coming?' Gyse joked weakly. He wore his wings folded back as he followed Nikol out of the cage.

'All the better sport, if our quarry knows we're coming.' Maas slapped Gyse on the shoulder as she followed him. On the way down, she had done most of the talking. The others had been quiet, stealing - Kayne was sure - surreptitious glances in his direction.

Kayne was the last to leave the elevator. The low light level had already triggered his photo-visor, which cast the area in a pale greenish glow. He saw that Maas and Telmac were running through a short series of exercises designed to prepare both their bodies and their suits for the coming hunt. The others were staring into the mouths of the serviceways, debating in low voices which one to take.

Kayne stepped between them and strode into the square mouth of the left passageway. Light panels were set flush with the top of the metal tunnel;

all were dead except for one, a hundred paces or so ahead. Kayne didn't need the light, or the enhanced vision provided by his visor to know that, another hundred paces beyond the solitary light source, he would find a junction, another serviceway running across the end of this tunnel at right angles.

'Stay alert.' Kayne's voice drifted back to the others. 'We don't know who might have been sniffing around down here since last time.'

At the mouth of the passage, Gyse turned to Mot.

'Maybe having him along will have its uses after all,' Gyse muttered, then stepped into the tunnel which Kayne and his companions had taken last time.

'Clear ahead.'

Bael and Pitar had been gone for close to an hour, scouting the levels below. Since stepping from the elevator, their progress had been uneven. One of the three servicewaysthat had greeted them at the bottom of the elevator shaft had quickly proved useless, its metal walls twisted and warped into an impassable dead end by some unguessable force. The second led them to an open-sided ramp, angled upwards across a pitch-black abyss. Bael edged several steps along the incline before his foot met only emptiness. Another dead-end.

The third tunnel proved more promising, leading them through an enclosed maze of passages, then out onto a web of open walkways, latticed metalwork being all that kept them from what promised to be an endless fall.

'At least it'd be quicker than walking,' Volk joked as she peered over the rust-pitted railing of one of the walkways. Warm air rushed up from below, causing the metalwork to hum gently. From above - a long way above, Kayne thought - came a dull repetitive beat.

'Some kind of ventilation shaft,' Aidor speculated. As if in response to his words, the shaft resounded to a sudden broken grinding. The hunters froze, heads jerked upwards as if waiting to see doom, in the shape of some vast piece of mechanical debris, finally freed from its moorings by age and neglect, come crashing down.

The noise faded, to be replaced once again by the regular beat.

Time we were somewhere else,' Georgi muttered, as Bael and Pitar appeared at the far end of the walkway, beckoning the others across. As well as scouting a route, they had been checking for possible threats, either natural or man-made. It was not unknown for two or more groups of hunters to meet unexpectedly in the no-man's land these ancient shafts and passageways had become. Sudden close-quarters combat between hunters from rival Houses had claimed the life of more than one young noble before they ever reached the Underhive.

Kayne followed the others across the remaining walkway towards the far wall of the shaft, where Bael was waiting for him.

'Soon, brother, I'm sure of it,' he said. 'We'll be done with this scurrying about like vermin. Then the real sport can begin.'

Kayne nodded. Bael smiled, then turned and followed the others into the service tunnel. Kayne made to follow, then stopped, cast a look behind him. The way home.

'Honour and glory,' he muttered, then hurried to catch up with the others.

Like the memory of a nightmare made flesh, the blade plummeted out of the darkness, accompanied by a rain of smaller pieces of debris. Gyse saw it first. Yelling a warning over the cacophony of tearing and falling metal that filled the shaft, he launched himself over the railing, unfurling his wings and shooting upwards on the rush of heated air.

Lost in his dark memories, Kayne was already standing at the threshold of the service tunnel towards which he had been leading the hunters. At Gyse's shout he turned and saw Telmac leading the race along the companionway towards him. Fragments of dislodged metal and concrete were bouncing off the walkway, ricocheting from the hunters' armour. First Telmac, then Maas raced past him into the tunnel. Mot and Schular were close behind. Kayne looked up, trying to locate Gyse.

And then he saw it: a narrow teardrop of tempered steel that had spent countless decades as part of a ventilation unit, set high in the shaft, now arrowing downwards.

Time we were somewhere else, said a familiar voice from Kayne's memory, seconds before the free-falling blade hit the companionway.

The shock of the impact hurled Schular past Kayne, into the arms of Telmac and Maas. Mot stumbled, regained his feet as the walkway tilted sharply, threatening to spill him back along its length into the pit, and launched himself towards his half-brother. Kayne reached out, caught Mot's arms just above the bulge of his suit's mono-fibre dispensers and hauled him into the tunnel.

'Nikol!' Telmac was shouting over the sound of falling metal. Where's Nikol?'

Kayne looked back along the companionway, now inclined downwards at a suicidal angle, its ragged end swaying drunkenly. The falling blade had struck the walkway like an executioner's axe, severing it close to the halfway mark, tearing away a section and carrying it down the shaft. The last time Kayne had seen Nikol, she had been working her way along the companionway towards him. Now all he saw was empty space.

'Kayne, get back!'

Kayne jerked his head up at Gyse's shouted command. The winged hunter was several metres above the tunnel mouth, describing a ragged figure-of-eight in the air as he fought to descend against the flow of heated air that was rising up the shaft. Without waiting for a reply, he glided towards the far side of the shaft, executed a sharp turn, then folded back his wings and arrowed towards the tunnel mouth.

Back-pedalling quickly, Kayne shouted a warning to the others. As he retreated, Kayne kept his eyes on the square of the tunnel mouth and the winged figure that grew to fill it. The slightest miscalculation would slam Gyse into the shaft wall on either side. To lose one hunter so early in the hunt was bad enough. To lose two...

With a sharp crack of unfurling metal, Gyse's wings scooped at the air, bringing his flight to a neck-breaking halt. Swinging his body to the vertical, he shot feet-first into the service tunnel, re-furling wings ringing and scraping against the tunnel's sides. He tried to hit the ground running, to absorb his remaining momentum, but there was just too much. He slammed into first one, then the other wall, before ploughing into Kayne, who had braced himself in the middle of the tunnel.

It took a moment for Gyse to realise he had come to a stop. Then, with a curse of surprise and relief, he eased himself out of Kayne's oversized embrace.

'Good catch,' he said, then coughed. 'I think you only broke half my ribs.'

'At least you're still breathing,' Maas muttered. Gyse shot her a puzzled look and she gestured towards Telmac, who stood a short way further down the tunnel, staring blankly at the wall. Without warning, he slammed a piston-driven fist into the tunnel's thin metal skin.

Where's Nikol?' Gyse asked. Kayne shook his head. With another curse, Gyse stepped past him and moved to comfort Telmac.

'Nikol and Telmac... were they close?' Kayne asked.

'Good guess,' Maas replied sardonically.

'We should move on. This isn't a child's game. These things happen.' Kayne strode away from her, passed Gyse and Schular, who were still comforting the grieving Telmac, towards Mot, who stood waiting for them at the next junction.

'I guess you'd know about that,' Maas muttered after Kayne's retreating back. Kayne turned; his suit's comm-link must have picked up her words.

What?' he asked.

'Nothing,' she replied, stone-faced. 'Let's get moving. I really want to kill something.'

FIVE

Back then, the first time, they had emerged from the maze of apparently forgotten shafts in a sector that looked like it was dedicated to hydroponic agriculture. Below them had been a series of low domes, their canopies opaque, the colour of eggshells, lit by vast arrays of luminescent elements designed to mimic the even, diffuse radiance given off by a sun not obscured by mile upon mile of dense industrial emissions. Some of the domes were well-maintained, the long ranks of nutrient vats full of densely-packed staple crops. Many more were all but derelict: dead lighting elements hung over ranks of cracked, empty nutrient vats. The plants that should have been growing, suspended, in these vats now hung limply over their sides, brown-leafed and decaying. In places, the floor was slick with a brown-green layer of reeking vegetable mulch.

The hunters moved cautiously from dome to dome, hugging the shadows that were more numerous in the neglected areas. Bael was the first to take point, then Kayne, edging between the vats and nutrient storage tanks, ducking under ropes of tubing thicker than a man's chest, his suit-enhanced senses alert, heart pounding, mouth dry.

The vats, storage tanks and connecting tubes all bore Van Saar markings - no surprise, given that House's reputation for technological achievement - but many had been scratched away or overlaid by the crest of House Escher. Evidently such a valuable installation as this had been the subject of a good deal of territorial haggling.

And - judging by the sound of gunfire that drew the hunters like night-flyers to a flame - the argument was far from over.

From the look of things, the Orlocks had bitten off more than they could chew, or else they simply lacked the infiltration skills of Bael, Kayne and their fellow hunters. Either way, they now found themselves pinned down by a vicious crossfire from the Escher women atop the service gantries that flanked an area given over to production control machinery. Half the Orlocks' original number lay dead in the aisles between the ranks of levers, gauges and valve assemblies that might normally be manned by members of Escher House's servile, intellectually-deficient male population - were it not for the fact that their bullet- and bolt-riddled corpses also lay sprawled across the tiled floor. It was only a matter of time before the Eschers picked off the intruders, or until reinforcements arrived and they moved in on them en masse. The Eschers knew it. The Orlocks knew it.

The hunters knew it too.

Bael, of course, had a plan. The hunters split up, three heading for the foot of one gantry, three for the other. Only Kayne remained, crouching among the tangle of pipes that marked the end of the last rank of vats before the production area.

Though he knew his heart was racing, the time between each beat seemed to grow ever longer. His mouth, already dry, now felt impossibly arid; he imagined his tongue as a cracked and swollen thing. Stinging sweat ran into one eye as he triggered his suit's targeting mechanism. He blinked it away as he raised his right hand and brought the twin crosshairs that now floated before his visor-enhanced gaze together on the curve of a

valve assembly, midway between both gantries, behind which a beleaguered Orlock sheltered.

The blood being spilt in the open area before him might as well have been a play, a mock-battle staged in recreation of an episode from the Imperium's history for the amusement of a noble audience, high in the Spire. Kayne was waiting for the whispered signals from his comm-link, telling him that the others were in position.

'We're ready.' Bael's voice crackled in his ear.

'On your mark, Kayne.' Meela's voice followed in quick succession.

Kayne tried to speak, swallowed, tried again.

'Kayne?' There was concern in his brother's voice.

'Honour and glory,' Kayne croaked through a dry, constricted throat then triggered his bolter. Despite the recoil-suppressing mechanism built into the forearm-mounted weapon, he felt the shock of its discharge run back up his arm and down the length of his spine.

Trailing vapour from its reservoir of propellant, the bolt shot through the crossfire like a shuttle through a loom and slammed into the valve assembly. The pipework was peeled back by the impact, releasing a pressurised stream of superheated vapour. The Orlock who had been sheltering behind the valve leapt to his feet and staggered away from the scalding geyser. By some fluke, he had escaped injury from both the blast and the flying shards of red-hot shrapnel that followed. The Escher gunners on both gantries saw to it that he had little time to enjoy his good fortune. He danced first one way, then another as hundreds of autogun rounds slammed into him from both directions, before finally hitting the floor like a slab of half-chewed meat.

Taking Kayne's shot as their signal, the other hunters attacked. Sparks erupted from the supports of the gantry to Kayne's left as Georgi sprinted between them, slicing through them with the irresistible blade of his monomolecular sword. The walkway above him sagged then, accompanied by the sound of shearing rivets and twisting metal, came crashing down. Those Eschers who survived the fall found Aidor and Bael waiting for them on the ground, oversized, piston-driven arms open wide.

From atop the second gantry came shouts of surprise, quickly followed by cries of terror and pain. The shock of seeing Pitar, climbing spider-like over the gantry rail, clad in the body-hugging Malcadon suit, would have

bought his companion enough time to select a target. To buy herself more time, Kayne imagined she would pinion more than one victim with the iron-hard pseudo-silk from her suit's spinnerets before moving in, claws extended.

Over the sound of screaming, the audio-enhancers in Kayne's helmet picked up the soft fizz of las-discharge as Volk, wings open, dived upon the Eschers from above. Any lucky enough to make it to the gantry steps would find themselves confronted by Meela, pounding her Orrus-shod way up to the walkway by the more usual route.

Realising with a shock that he hadn't moved since firing his first bolt, Kayne broke cover. Head singing with a sudden exhilaration, he raced towards the collection of consoles behind which the Orlocks had been cowering and from behind which several of them had already emerged, wearing almost comical expressions of puzzlement at the unexpected turn of events.

Spotting Kayne's running figure, one of the Orlocks turned, levelling his autogun. Kayne loosed off a wild shot. The bolt flashed past the Orlock and blew a gaping hole in a bank of gauges. The Orlock didn't flinch, even when a figure raced past behind him, shield held up to deflect a ragged peppering of gunfire, blade descending. Nor did his expression change as his body fell in two, neatly bisected from shoulder to opposite hip.

It took a heartbeat for Kayne to realise what had happened but, by then, he was already pumping bolts in the direction of the Orlocks who had been foolish enough to open fire on Georgi as he raced to Kayne's aid. One of Kayne's bolts hit a ganger square in the chest, turning him' into just so many litres of blood and liquefied bone. The sight of their comrade's explosive dissolution was enough for the rest of them. They raced away, disappearing among the vats, preferring to face their gang boss's wrath than certain death here.

'Emperor's blood!' Aidor's face was alight as he and Bael strode towards Kayne and Georgi. 'The trainers never told us to expect this! I've never felt so alive!'

'It's feedback from your suit, boosting your neuroware,' Meela told him as she and Volk walked towards them from the opposite direction. From the look on her face, Kayne could tell she was feeling it too.

'Like I care what's causing it!' Aidor laughed. 'I just don't want it to stop!'

When our suits' memories are purged, the record of this hunt will be preserved,' said Pitar after she had dropped lightly out of the air, folding her wings as she did so. She walked over to join them. 'Every trainer will use it to show every hunter what it means to hunt for House Ty.'

'No one hunts like House Ty!' Aidor bellowed, broke into another peal of hysterical laughter, then slammed a fist into a control panel, ruining it amidst a shower of sparks.

We're going to have to watch him,' Georgi muttered.

'He'll get used to it,' counselled Bael. 'But now we really ought to be on our way. We're here to hunt, not fight pitched battles with Escher reinforcements out for revenge.'

The hunters moved off, heading out of the hydroponic domes in a different direction to that taken by the fleeing Orlocks. Aidor didn't stop laughing until they had left the sector.

No one hunts like House Ty!

Aidor's laughing face, never to be forgotten, flashed before Kayne's mind's eye as he closed his steel-gloved fist around the lower jaw of the Underhiver with the flamer and squeezed. Blood, teeth and fragments of bone squirted between his fingers. Ignoring his twitching victim, Kayne flicked the ichor from his glove. The Underhiver had been edging between the stanchions of the overhead conveyor system that seemed to run the length of the derelict smelting plant into which he and the others had followed the hunters. Accompanied by two other scavengers, each armed with an autogun, he had been trying to outflank Schular and Gyse, who had become pinned behind the coils of a vast chain, long since fallen from the complex of pulleys and tracks that still ran across the plant's high ceiling, now half-buried in the grey metallic dust that covered the floor. They had darted from stanchion to stanchion, unaware that they, too, were being outflanked.

Kayne took the time to target the first of them, then charged forward as the remaining two stood frozen by the shock of their comrade's sudden, apparently spontaneous, explosion. Batting aside the second autogun-

wielder with a chest-crushing swipe of one hand, he then closed in on the last before he had time to bring the flamer nozzle to bear.

No one hunts like House Ty? he thought grimly. We'll be lucky this time not to end up as trophies traded in some vermin-ridden pit-market.

Telmac must have been asleep on his feet or else too busy brooding over the loss of Nikol to notice that someone was on their trail. Given the number of scavengers who had descended upon them shortly after they had entered the smelting plant in search of a down-shaft, they must have made as much noise as a particularly ill-disciplined army on the march. When they had emerged from the service shafts in this derelict industrial zone, rather than the hydroponics sector Kayne had been expecting - though he was sure he had followed the same route through the forgotten labyrinth that he had taken with Bael - Kayne had given Telmac the rearguard in order to give him something else to focus on, to distract him from his loss.

Bael wouldn't have made that mistake.

He brushed the thought aside, but the suspicion remained: that it should have been Bael who returned to the Spire after the last hunt, not him. But that would never have happened. Because Bael would never run.

'Maas here. Can anybody hear me?' Her voice crackled in Kayne's ear, followed by calls of acknowledgement from the other hunters. Only Telmac didn't reply.

Tra with Telmac. We think we've found a way off this level,' Maas continued. A loading ramp, heading down. Follow the conveyor, magnetic west.'

'Easier said than done,' replied Gyse. Off to Kayne's right came the sound of another fusillade from the scavengers who had pinned Gyse and Schular. Focussed on the hunters hiding among the fallen chains, they were apparently unaware of the fate that had befallen their flanking team. Kayne moved to a nearby stanchion, peered around it.

The scavengers had sought cover among the scattered wrecks of various trolleys and bins that littered the smelting plant's floor. There were too many for him to try to pick them off with his bolters. They'd range in on him as soon as he started firing, force him back. All it would take would be one lucky shot and his hunt could end here.

A rush of memories assaulted him: Bael, laughing Aidor and the others, overwhelmed by a tidal wave of chittering Underhive scum, heedless of

the hunters' firepower, as irresistible as an ocean.

And he, Ty Kayne, standing momentarily in the clear, the comm-link ringing with his brother's screams.

The force of the memories caused Kayne to take an involuntary step back. Feeling his foot strike something, he turned, looked down. The faceless scavenger lay at his feet, ruined head surrounded by a halo of rust-brown blood, seeping into the grey dust that carpeted the floor. The body lay face-up, back arched over the flamer's tanks and feeder assembly.

Kayne knelt by the corpse, tore away the weapon's straps and rolled the corpse away. As he stood, flamer held in one hand, he realised that he was being watched.

The scavenger stood several paces away, autogun held limply in one hand, his other arm pressed tightly across his chest, where Kayne had swatted him. His breathing came in ragged gasps and his face was pale beneath the layer of dust that covered most of it. He stared at Kayne, as if unsure what to do next.

Well?' Kayne asked, intending to distract the scavenger while he swung his free hand into a firing position. The crosshairs of his targeting system edged slowly towards a point in the middle of the stooping figure's chest.

'Spyrer!' the scavenger croaked brokenly. It had been a long time since he had been called that. The word was both an insult and the name that had been given to those like himself, unbidden visitors to the hell beneath the Wall.

Either way, the scavenger had made up his mind. Letting the autogun fall into the dust, he turned and ran, weaving between the metal boles of the conveyor supports with a painful, limping stride.

Kayne watched him go for a moment, then turned back to the firefight. Barely pausing to consider factors of distance and trajectory, he hurled the flamer in a high arc that would take it over the heads of most of the scavengers who continued to rain fire on Schular and Gyse. As it approached its apogee, he targeted and fired.

The flamer's tanks exploded with a dull concussion, spilling fiery rain onto the scavengers' ranks. Several of them jumped up, heads and shoulders alight, flames licking hungrily at their clothing. Kayne watched as they ran about like frantic marionettes, screaming, batting uselessly at

the flames, colliding with those of their number who had not been touched by the fire and passing it on.

Las-fire cut down one such blazing puppet - Gyse had obviously decided to exact a little vengeance of his own.

'Don't waste your time,' Kayne barked into his comm-link. 'Head for Maas's position. This isn't what we're here for.'

He saw Gyse and Schular emerge from the chain's coils, head off, following the line of the conveyor. He cast a glance behind him, along the path the fleeing scavenger took, felt a sudden pang of envy, then turned again and pounded after the others.

They were still too high, even here, in the midst of the seemingly endless darkness of the Underhive. They had to move on. Move down.

SIX

The broken pillar against which he had slumped was surprisingly comfortable. Not as comfortable as his usual seat in the Grog Bucket, but... But that was where this fool's errand had begun! The dark, smoky drinking hole had been alive with gossip, as usual, but one subject kept cropping up. Archaeotech. A new motherlode.

He coughed and spat, wincing at the feeling that shot through his chest: something in there was loose. It ground against something else every time he breathed too heavily. It was a wonder he'd made it out of the old factory without passing out from the pain. Judging by the screaming that erupted shortly after he ran from the Spyrer, he ought to count himself lucky that he could feel anything at all. Until he reached the wide doors leading to the factory's deserted yard, he had expected each step to be his last - the first thing he saw when he came round, nose and mouth clogged with dust, chest on fire, had been Frenc's corpse. He had recognised it by the jacket - the bloody ruin of its face could have belonged to anyone. Luckily for him, the Spyrer must have had other things on its mind.

'Damned if I ain't the luckiest guy in the Hive,' he muttered, then wished he hadn't as the broken pieces inside him ground together.

If he'd known what they were tracking, he would never have followed the others into the factory. He'd heard the stories, how they were souls damned by the Emperor himself, hiding from his wrath in the depths of the Underhive - that, or else they were just rich kids from way up in the Spire, looking for thrills. Either way, they were bad news.

A wave of nausea rushed through him, causing his guts to clench and his vision to swim and fog. 'Oh, yeah,' he muttered through clenched teeth. 'Real lucky.'

'I've heard the damn stories,' Klyde had said, sitting across the table from Frenc and Clemm. 'An' you know what I think? I think someone's been list'nin' to too many Redemptionist sermons.'

'You don't have ta be a Redemptionist ta believe in blasphemy,' Clemm replied defensively.

'If your mother had believed in it, she'd have taken one look at your face and strangled you at birth!' Frenc laughed, then took a swig from his tankard. He stopped mid-swallow and peered suspiciously at its contents.

'I mightn't be the prettiest of fellas,' Clemm agreed - and anyone catching sight of the ludicrously misaligned set of features that hung beneath his patchy, uneven hairline would be hard pressed to disagree, 'but I ain't a complete fool, neither. There's things movin' about down here like as no one's seen before.'

'There's something moving about in here, all right.' Frenc upended his tankard. A bug the size of his thumb hit the tabletop, along with the dregs of his ale, and scuttled away before he had the chance to bring his tankard down on top of it.

'I know I've asked this before,' Frenc continued, 'but why the blazes do I drink in this place?'

Frenc didn't belong here, this far down in the Underhive. Word was, his family had connections with the Guilders. His manners were those of someone who'd had the time and money to acquire such things. He'd been doing well for himself, people said, until he got into some kind of tangle with a merchant's wife. Or daughter. He was a good-looking lad, so it might have been both. One day, he had just turned up at the bar - Klyde

must have been one of the first people he spoke to. Since then, he'd been doing the same as everyone else down here: getting by.

'These things ain't your reg'lar muties or zombies.' Clemm stubbornly persisted with his tale. 'I heard, they don't kill ya. They do stuff to ya. Make ya like one'a them.' His already deep voice dropped a level. 'They take away ya soul.'

'I've heard other stories about these so-called monsters,' Frenc said, ignoring Clemm's baleful gaze. 'I've heard they're just like you and me - only they've found something: archaeotech, still functioning, and they're using it to secure their territory so they can dig out some more. I know a man who's putting together a little hunting party. Says he's got a Guilder willing to pay very well for a sample.'

At the mention of archaeotech, Clemm got up and left. While not very intelligent, his loyalty and bravery were beyond question - he wouldn't think twice about walking into a pitfight with Bull Gorg himself - but he drew the line at having anything to do with archaeotech. To his uncomplicated mind it smacked of the unholy. Klyde watched him go, then turned back to Frenc.

'You haven't been over at the Two Tunnels, talking to Jerico, have you?' Klyde asked. 'Cause he ain't ta be trusted. Always got a plan, that one, but when the waste hits the walls, he's always got a way out. I know plenty a' people who've been left in the lurch by him.'

'It's not Jerico,' Frenc replied, 'though I hear he might be getting together a hunting party of his own - and he's not the only one. Clemm, the Redemptionists and every other superstitious half-wit in the Underhive can shout "blasphemy" all they want. I want to make some money.

'Bevan's group is meeting at the old filtration works in an hour. He says he's getting some heavy gear from a dealer he knows, but to bring along any hardware you've got.' Frenc got to his feet. 'Interested?'

Klyde looked up at him for a moment then, without really knowing why, shrugged and said: 'Why not?'

Why not? 'Cause if you do, you'll end up unarmed and alone, with a chest full of broken ceramite.

The world swam back into focus in time for Klyde to see, in vivid colour, the red-veined gobbet of mucus he had just hawked onto the dirt... between the pair of scuffed boots that he was sure hadn't been there a minute ago.

It took an enormous effort for him to raise his head from where it had fallen forward on his chest. His chest felt as tight as a drum. He wondered if he might be bleeding inside, as well as just feeling all broken up. He'd seen that happen to Torus, another old drinking buddy from the Grog Bucket. There'd been a fight - over a game of dice? - but Torus had come out of it without a scratch on him. Then, a while later, he just keeled over. Apothecary opened him up and found his lungs were full of blood. A little piece of rib had done the damage, must have been cracked in the fight...

Dragging his mind back to the present took almost as much effort as raising his head. Everything was slipping away. The ground in front of him, the ground on which the owner of the scuffed boots was standing, might look pretty solid, but it was slipping away, too, he could feel it.

The boots' owner was a woman, a scawy by the look of her. The skin across her pale flat face was pockmarked; it looked as if someone had held a candle too close to one of her cheeks -the skin there fell in uneven folds. She held her head at an odd, tilted angle as she looked down at him.

Klyde tried to speak, coughed, spat more red-tinged phlegm into the dirt, tried again.

'I... I got nothin' worth stealin' but... but, if you help me back to the Grog Bucket... I can show ya how to get there... I've got money... landlord keeps it behind the bar for me.'

The woman continued to gaze down at him. Klyde noticed how her lower lip hung limply from one side of her mouth. Was she some species of imbecile? If so, he was surely going to die here.

'Name's... name's Klyde,' he tried, feeling both desperate and foolish. What's yours?'

The woman opened her mouth with a sudden, almost mechanical snap. The stream of high-pitched clicks and squeals that issued forth from somewhere inside her was like nothing Klyde had heard before. Mechanical? Almost. Insectile? Almost. But not human. Definitely not human.

As the woman bent towards him, Klyde wanted to get to his feet and run, as he had run from the Spyrer, but his legs refused to move. The woman reached out a hand, palm first. Moments before it covered his face, he was sure that he saw something move beneath the dirt-caked skin.

Her hand pressed over his mouth and then he felt it, pressing against his lips, forcing its way between them, prising apart his clenched teeth, moving over his tongue.

Something sharp stabbed against the roof of his mouth and Klyde found that he could, for the last few seconds of his life, move his feet again. He kicked frantically at the dirt, clawed at it with his hands, but it was too late.

His last, absurd thought was that this wasn't how he imagined it would feel to die, to be killed. It felt more like... more like being drained.

The woman took her hand from the corpse's mouth, the slit in her palm closing of its own accord, and stood up. Information, newly acquired, sang through her veins: images from a solitary life, lived among hundreds of thousands of other lives, but still, like them, alone. She heard voices, snatches of music, fleeting memories of fleshy pleasures. Conflict, too: arguments, brawls, gang fights. One such memory captured her attention, one voice: Well?

Details of the face and body were obscured by the heavy combat suit, though the type of suit was familiar to her. But the voice. She recognised the voice.

Tilting back her head she emitted a stream of sound. Shifting to a pitch beyond human hearing, it drove vermin of every description to seek shelter and feral dogs to howl in anguished, frightened protest, caused airborne insects to spiral crazily through the air, suddenly unable to navigate.

The acknowledgement came in similar fashion, informing her that her message had been received and was already being passed on. Her mouth snapped shut and she experienced a moment of what she would once have called anticipation.

He had returned. Ty Helios Kayne.

The prodigal.

SEVEN

'This is what we're here for, isn't it - to hunt?' Mot held up the length of Malcadon silk so that they could admire the three human ears that had been threaded along it. He could tell by the set of Kayne's mouth that he was not impressed.

'Not this time,' Kayne insisted through gritted teeth. 'Do you know how much time we've wasted waiting for you? You'd do well to remember your vow.'

'I remember it!' Mot spat back. From the tone of his voice and his body language, Kayne could tell that the bio-boost from his suit was having an unsettling effect on his nervous system. 'Perhaps, if you had remembered yours, we wouldn't be having his conversation. "Honour and glory" - is that really what you've brought to House Ty, brother?'

Think you could do better?' Kayne growled, closing the gap between them. Mot took a step back, already half way into a fighting stance, but Maas stepped hastily between them.

'We all remember our vow,' she said. We have the chance to do more than earn honour and glory. If we stay focussed, work together, we might bring home our lost hunters - think of that!'

Staring levelly into Kayne's visored eyes, she continued: 'Bael said they are still alive. You can lead us to them - or at least to where we might begin our search.'

She turned, now fixing Mot with her steady gaze.

'And there'll be other hunts, Mot, when you'll be able to wrap yourself in even greater glory.' Kayne remembered that Maas's father was a respected diplomat, always involved in negotiations between House Ty and the other Ruling Houses, the Merchant Guilds or other off-world bodies. Evidently she had inherited some of her father's skills.

What I want is last on everybody's list,' Mot muttered petulantly. Maas raised an eyebrow. 'Other hunts,' he conceded, then fell silent.

That's right,' she said, gently, then continued more briskly: 'we should be on our way. We don't want to be caught flat-footed by any more of the

locals.'

The smelting plant was several levels above them by now. The loading ramp found by Maas and Telmac led down to a multi-layered complex of warehousing. Some of the units had been echoing and empty, others had been crammed with containers, discarded parts for vast machines. One level had been chosen as a nest by an extended family of rats the size of children and had been the scene of a brief, bloody melee and a swift exit by the hunters while the rats turned on their wounded brethren.

They now stood among the ruins of what once had been a waste processing plant, whose pipes and tanks had been overrun by garishly-coloured varieties of giant fungus which evidently found the noxious fluids that now ran untreated through a complex of sluices highly nutritious. Though he had not admitted it to the others, Kayne was relieved to come upon this hallucinatory landscape of broad, spotted caps and bulbous orange-and-blue puffballs. For the first time since guiding them through the service shafts, he was sure that they were following the route he had taken - not from his descent with Bael, Pitar and the others, but from his return journey to the Spire. He had passed through here, nervously checking that his suit's filters were proof against the mist of spores that hung in the dense, still air.

'Perhaps you would like to take point?' Maas asked Kayne. 'After all, you are our pathfinder.'

Kayne nodded and led the way along a duckboard path which, he remembered, would lead to a narrow bridge across a wide culvert, running with an unhealthy-looking soup whose rank, organic odour was strong enough to fight its way past their filter plugs.

The hunters moved in single file down the path. At the rear, Gyse tapped Mot on the shoulder.

'Good kill?' he asked. Mot just nodded, apparently still nursing a grievance. As long as Gyse had known him, Mot had been a sulky, resentful person, sensitive about his place as Ty Helios Cal's third son, quick to take offence at any imagined slight to his status and always ready to spread damaging rumours behind the backs of his enemies. He had once drunkenly boasted to Gyse that he had arranged with agents from House Ran Lo for the 'disappearance' of a daughter of another Ty family who had

refused his attentions, but Gyse had dismissed it as an alcoholic fantasy. Such a thing would be tantamount to treason against the House.

Gyse pointed to the ears that now dangled by their thread from one shoulder of Mot's suit.

'Why only three?' he asked.

That was all they had between them,' Mot replied with a shrug, making the ears dance on their thread.

'Do you think Kayne really knows where he's taking us?' Gyse asked. There had been something in Kayne's voice - a vagueness, an uncertainty - whenever he had been called upon to decide their route.

'It doesn't really matter,' replied Mot, then picked up the pace. Gyse thought about his words, not sure of their meaning.

'I suppose you're right. In a hundred years or so, none of this will matter. That's what you meant, right?'

Mot looked back over his shoulder at Gyse. His face was hidden behind his mask, so Gyse could not read his expression, but there was something in his tone - flat, non-committal - that worried him. Yes,' Mot said. That's what I meant.'

Hunt had followed hunt that first time, as Kayne, Bael and the others moved down through the seemingly never-ending levels of the Underhive. Sporadically their sport was punctuated by periods when, at the centre of an intricate web of tripwires and semi-autonomous proximity alarms, the hunters rested. While their suits' self-repair mechanisms attended to any minor damage picked up during a hunt, or resolved any glitches that had developed in the suits' internal systems, the hunters floated in a narco-assisted reverie state, somewhere between sleep and trance.

Kayne experienced this state as a feeling of deep calm, the sense of being wrapped in a cocoon of soft white light. Unbidden, images would coalesce out of the whiteness and he would enjoy again the sensations of the hunt:

The shouts of surprise and alarm from the scavvy traders when they discovered - naked, trussed in Malcadon silk and deposited at a crossroads on one of the maze of trails between settlements - the outriders who had been guarding the rear of their caravan of wagons.

There had been more shouting from within the ramshackle meeting hall when one of the Redemptionist brethren assigned to guard the door had been lowered, again by means of Volk's silk-spinners, through the makeshift skylight Kayne had torn in the roof. The ecstatic cries and hysterical wailing inspired by the priest's sermon were nothing compared to the screams that erupted from the congregation when, rushing for the exit to escape the unholy vision of the 'floating' brother, they discovered that the doors had been barred from the outside.

The priest's retinue had recovered themselves sufficiently to turn their weapons towards the roof, though their first volley succeeded only in sending their helpless, dangling brother to the Emperor. Kayne and Volk, laughing wildly, had jumped from the roof to avoid the next fusillade; before following them, Aidor remained long enough to drop through the hole where the other brother had been guarding the door. By the time the remaining brethren shot their way through the hall's rear wall, the hunters had melted into

the shadows of the settlement's twisting, garbage-clogged streets.

They had chased mutants, howling like unquiet spirits, through the ash-grey landscape of a petrified forest, whose trees were so brittle with age and poisoned by the earth in which they grew that one blow from an Orrus suit's fist would reduce them to powder. They had stood silently in the shadows beyond a campfire's light, listening to the songs sung by a band of homeless, travelling scavvies to keep their fears at bay, each selecting their targets.

They had hunted. They had killed. And they gloried in the knowledge that they held the power of life or death over all who, wittingly or unwittingly, crossed their path.

'Father told me that is why we hunt,' Bael had told him after the traps had been laid and the hunters prepared to enter the current rest cycle. They had chosen a narrow defile in the middle of a landscape of garbage. Vast, rolling dunes of refuse stretched for a league in every direction. On the edge of the dunescape, the hunters had seen hivers scavenging among the mountainous piles of waste, cooking Helmawr-knew-what on small fires at the mouths of caves that had been burrowed into the sides of the dunes.

Fanning out in search of a suitable resting place, they had moved deeper into what felt like the interior of an alien world. Cresting a dune, Kayne

had been amazed to find himself looking down upon a pool of effluent, on whose bank sat a child, hideously deformed, fishing with a stick and a length of wire. The child had looked up, but made no sound when it saw him. For a long moment, they regarded one another: the son of one of the noble families of one of the ruling Houses of Hive Primus and the barely human byproduct of the Hive's millennia of operation and growth. The child had looked away, apparently no longer interested in the strange figure that stood above him. Kayne, imagining that the child had likely seen many stranger sights than he, moved away.

As he plodded up the slope of the next dune, a sudden birdlike chirruping made him pause and scan the space above him - the floor of the level above was still several hundred metres from the tops of the tallest dunes. He almost expected to see one of the clockwork birds from the Great Gallery in the Ty

House apartments spiralling down towards him. But he saw nothing and resumed his climb.

'Father said the Houses send their young nobles below the Wall to hunt, so that they come to understand the power they will wield over those below them,' Bael had told him. 'Because, when they understand that power, they understand what it means to rule.'

His brother's words were the last thing Kayne heard before the skin-hypos set into the inner skin of his suit silently administered the sedative. The compacted layers of refuse beneath his feet seemed to melt away, leaving him suspended as the world faded to soft white nothingness.

The proximity alarms had been shrieking as the milky veil was shredded from his eyes, the stimulant administered by the suit's autonomous dispensers washing the narco from his system. The rapid chatter from several of the sentry units came next, followed by the low thump of someone firing a bolter. There was another noise, one he had heard recently. A chirruping, multiplied a hundred, perhaps a thousandfold.

'Where the Llud did they come from?' Bael's shouted question was lost in the twin-bolter volley he loosed at what appeared to be a tide of Underhivers - scawies, mutants, ratskins, the more-or-less human - advancing towards them along the defile. Georgi's bolts were already

blowing holes in the advancing tide, which were quickly filled as the horde continued its advance.

A shout from Aidor, followed by more bolter-fire made Kayne turn and look up one of the defile's steep slopes. They were there too, slipping, sliding, chunks of dislodged refuse rolling down the slope ahead of them. Aidor's bolts had as much effect as Bael's. No matter how many of the attackers were reduced to bloody tatters, more stepped forward to take their place.

Attackers - that was hardly an accurate description, Kayne realised. They appeared to be unarmed. They moved at a steady walking pace into the teeth of the hunters' weapons. Kayne imagined that they hadn't broken stride even as they were raked by high-velocity rounds from the sentry units. Those whose faces weren't slack and devoid of expression seemed to be smiling, even as they lost limbs to Pitar's las-fire or their chests were pulped by bolter rounds.

And, smiling or not, they were singing - that bird-like chirruping, interspersed with weird high-pitched clicks and squeals.

'We can't just stand here and let them come to us!' Bael's voice blared through Kayne's comm-link. 'Pitar, get some altitude, find out how many of them there are.'

'On my way!' Pitar unfurled her wings - and damned them all.

The pitch of their chirruping changed, became higher still, faster, denser. Kayne's comm-link squealed as if in sympathy. As if taking the opening of Pitar's wings as some kind of signal, they rushed forward, arms outstretched, tripping over each other in their anxiety to reach the hunters. Previously blank expressions had become animated as if by some kind of ecstatic frenzy. Kayne realised with sudden, awful certainty that the hunters stood no chance of stopping them.

Pitar almost made it into the air, before grasping hands grabbed her legs. A scabrous creature vaulted onto the backs of its fellows and wrapped its arms around her waist, adding to the weight of numbers that pulled her back to earth. Las-fire hissed out from beneath the pile of bodies that closed over her, crisping flesh, but it was not enough.

A trio of ratskins hurled themselves at Kayne. Reacting on instinct, he pulverised them with bolter-fire, only to see them replaced before him by

more human-looking Underhivers, arms outstretched as if anxious to greet a long-lost friend, faces alight with an unnameable joy.

Kayne crushed a skull, shattered a chest, then turned to swat away a mutant that seemed intent on clambering onto his shoulders. The defile was a cacophony of gunfire. His commlink whooped and howled with interference, from which emerged the shouts and curses of Bael, Meela and the others. There was no time to check on their status or location. There was no time to think, only react - to pound, to crush, to fire off round after round.

He had no memory of fighting his way up the side of the defile, or of how long he had been alone. He just found himself standing there, looking down into the seething mass of bodies that filled the defile. Kayne felt as if he had overturned a rock and was looking down at a nest of outraged insects.

'Kayne!' Bael's voice rang in his ear, the comm-link momentarily clear of interference. Kayne scanned the defile, trying to locate him.

Suddenly, he saw him, in the centre of a clear space that opened in the midst of the chittering tide. His visor had been torn away. Spirals of smoke rose lazily from both empty, overheated bolters. He turned slowly, surveying the mob, massive arms swinging slowly, menacingly, as if he was an ogre from a child's story, idly selecting his next victim.

He must have caught sight of the figure standing alone atop the slope. His head jerked up.

'Kayne!' he yelled again.

Kayne almost moved, almost raced down the slope, back into the teeth of the mob to carve a path for his brother's escape, but, in the heartbeat before he took a step, he saw other heads turn in his direction, faces locked in a rictus of ecstasy, frenzied eyes fixing on him. At the fringes of the mob, figures turned, moved towards the slope.

'Kayne!' He heard his brother's voice one last time, before an intolerable shriek of interference howled from the comm-link, seeming to pierce his skull. Tearing it from his ear, Kayne turned.

Turned and ran.

EIGHT

'Kayne!'

Mot's shout was followed by the ratcheting sound of autogun fire, loud enough to rupture an eardrum. From the way Schular, running ahead of him up the sloping trail between the slag heaps, slapped a hand to her ear, Kayne guessed that Mot was broadcasting on the general channel - and had forgotten to close the connection.

'Mot!' Gyse, metres above and ahead of Kayne, Schular, Maas and Telmac, shouted into his comm-link as he circled the derelict transport depot. Skeletons of heavy haulage machinery lay scattered across the yard like the remains of long-dead monsters. Container stacks, rusted together in the time since they had been left there stood like ancient monoliths, patterned with moss and lichen stood like tombstones in a titans' graveyard.

Figures moved between the stacks, ducking, dodging, fanning out in a bid to encircle a lone figure, clad in a suit of off-world design. Muzzle flashes illuminated the shadows cast by the stacks. The lone figure ducked, froze, then moved on.

'Mot! For Helmawr's sake, close your comm-link!' Gyse shouted, ears ringing with the sound of bullets ricocheting off metal. 'I've got a fix on you. The others are on their way. They'll arrive at the gate to your left, on the far side of the depot. Make your way there, I'll give you some cover!'

As he began his dive, Gyse glanced towards the towering rookery - originally a vast complex of workers' residences, now home, he imagined, to all kinds of Hive Bottom detritus - which stood a short way off. He saw groups of figures heading towards the depot, drawn by the sound of gunfire, hoping for fresh pickings.

There's more company heading our way,' he reported via his comm-link. 'And I'll lay odds that they're not the only ones. We really don't want to still be here when they arrive!' Gyse tilted his wings, powered up the las-tubes mounted on his suit's forearms, and began his dive.

Schular raced between the drunkenly tilting gateposts - and was forced to leap aside, diving and rolling to avoid the gunfire that tore into the ground

around her. A group emerged from behind a container stack, weapons tracking her. Gangers, allied, judging by their heavily muscled physiques and multicoloured crests of hair, to House Goliath.

'Hah! Lookit the skinny go!' bellowed one.

'It's a woman!' shouted another. 'Keep 'er in one piece - I wan' 'er first!'

Their shouts and laughter turned to cries of surprise and pain as Kayne, Maas and Telmac charged through the gateway, bolters spitting death. Three of the gangers went down, chests gaping, before their remaining fellows rallied, turning their fire on the new arrivals.

Grabbing the corpse of a ganger by the straps that crisscrossed its chest, Kayne hefted the carcass off the ground, using it as a shield to absorbs the impact of a stub charge another ganger fired in his direction, then hurled the twice-eviscerated cadaver in his attacker's face. By the time the stub-wielding Goliath had pushed his dead comrade off him and half-regained his feet, Kayne was standing over him, fist raised.

Telmac fired a volley at the ganger who turned a melta in his direction. Two bolts missed, tearing holes in a nearby stack. The monolith rang with the impacts, teetered for a moment, but did not fall. His last bolt hit the weapon, not the man who held it, but the effect was the same: the Goliath was vaporised by the suddenly unleashed power of his fully charged weapon. For a moment, an after-image of the ganger's almost comical look of surprise hung before Telmac's eyes.

Schular, back on her feet, had to duck almost immediately, to avoid the wild swing of a ganger's chainsword. She rose behind the chattering weapon's swing, lifting her own monomolecular blade as she did so.

The bisected ganger fell back. Behind him stood another, armed with a las-pistol. Seeing the blood fountaining from both halves of his dead comrade, he paused before opening fire. That pause doomed him.

The las-beam seemed to disappear as it struck Schular's buckler shield. The gems that studded its rim flashed once - then the beam re-appeared, heading back the way it had come. The ganger didn't have time to realise what had happened before his headless corpse hit the ground.

A rapid cannonade of explosions sounded from the far side of the depot, followed by a grinding and tearing as a container stack toppled over. There were more shouts - battle cries - and the sound of gunfire - bolters, autoguns, the dull report of a heavy stubber.

'Sounds like that company Gyse mentioned has arrived,' Maas said, a broken Goliath hanging limply from each fist.

These scum must have arrived from another direction,' added Telmac, kicking a corpse that had been reduced to little more than a smoking torso by the impact of multiple bolter rounds. 'Mot's presence here has attracted a lot of attention from the wrong sort of people.'

'I want to know what the idiot was doing here in the first place,' Schular said.

'Chasing trophies most likely,' Maas replied. 'I told him: there'll be other hunts.'

'Not if we aren't somewhere else - and soon.' Kayne opened his comm-link. 'Mot, we've waited long enough. We're leaving. With you or without you.'

'No need to shout, brother. I'm here.' Mot's reply came from the shadows between two nearby stacks. 'We should move. Gyse distracted them long enough for me to slip away, but they're bound to head this way eventually'

'We wouldn't be here if you hadn't sneaked off to cause trouble with the locals,' Schular pointed out.

There were only two of them,' Mot explained, defensively. 'A pair of scabby prospectors. I followed them here, expecting to deal with them, then have the pick of whatever paltry treasures they might have stored around here somewhere. How was I to know there'd be more of them?'

This nonsense is getting us nowhere,' Kayne declared. More grenade rounds exploded, nearer than before. Kayne opened his comm-link again.

'Gyse, Mot's with us. Get back here. We're leaving before those grenade-happy low-levellers bring this place down around our ears.'

'Incoming!' came Gyse's reply. Kayne jerked his head up, scanning the air.

'There!' Maas shouted, pointing towards the winged hunter, who had shot out from between two of the taller stacks. The smooth outline of one wing had been spoiled by a near miss from a las-bolt but otherwise his Yeld suit appeared to be undamaged. Gyse arrowed toward the waiting hunters.

'Don't wait for me,' he advised them over the comm-link. 'Get-'

The first autogun rounds punched through the metal of Gyse's wing almost before anyone had time tň register the weapon's chattering bark.

Another joined it, bullets raking the air before slamming into Gyse's body, drawing a line of impact wounds from hip to shoulder. The winged hunter was falling now, tumbling through the air, the ground rushing up to meet him.

'Gyse!' Schular screamed. Gyse made no reply as he hit the ground, bounced brokenly, then lay still. A horde of Underhivers emerged from between the stacks, all well-armed, all baying for blood.

There weren't that many, last time I looked!' breathed Mot. Kayne shot an uncomprehending look at his half-brother, unable to decide whether Mot was too stupid to acknowledge the fatal chain of events he had set in motion or whether he was, quite simply, insane.

'Gyse!' Schular repeated, taking a step towards the inert hunter. Maas planted a restraining hand on her shoulder, shook her head when Schular turned to face her. When she looked back, she saw that the baying mob had almost reached Gyse's body. Several of the front-runners raced ahead, anxious to tear what trophies they could from his suit.

'Helmawr's blood, Mot!' Telmac shouted. 'You've killed us all!'

The deep, grinding rumble followed so closely on Telmac's words that it sounded as if the Hive itself was offering a reply. The ground beneath the hunters' feet shifted, seemed to sag, then lifted, reminding Kayne of the sensation of being aboard an aircraft at the moment it lifted from the landing pad.

Another rumble followed. The sound of containers torn loose from their corroded embrace and tumbling to earth resounded around the depot. Kayne looked down at his feet, expecting to see the ground ripple like the surface of one of the ornamental ponds in the Great Gallery. Instead, he saw a tracery of cracks had appeared. The cracks were spreading, growing wider.

'Hive-quake!' he shouted. Time we were gone!' Grabbing Mot in both hands, he spun him round, then propelled him out through the depot's gateway, whose already unsteady-looking gateposts had keeled over completely. Mot almost tripped over one of the fallen posts, stumbled, regained his balance, shot a look back at Kayne, then carried on down the track.

Telmac, keep an eye on Mot. Don't let him wander off!' Telmac nodded, then followed Mot through the gateway. Kayne shouted to Maas and

Schular, beckoned them to follow. Beyond them, Kayne saw that a wide fissure had split the earth a short way from Gyse's body. The mob of Underhivers had recoiled from it as if they were single entity. Their shouts of alarm became cries of fear as a nearby container stack toppled, its constituent parts loosing their ages-old grip on each other and tumbling into the midst of the horde. Kayne took some small satisfaction from knowing that Gyse's killers might be lying, crushed beneath one of the heavy metal boxes.

'Come on!' Maas shouted, cuffing him on the shoulder as she and Schular ran past him and out through the gateway. 'This is no time to start admiring the view!'

'Your half-brother he may be,' Schular said as she and Kayne pounded down the trail in Maas's wake, 'but he's going to wish he stayed and took his chances with the quake when I get my hands on him!' 'You'll have to join the queue,' Kayne replied grimly.

They retraced their route to the service shaft at which they had waited for Mot, before finally heading off in search of the errant hunter. As suddenly as it had begun, the quake subsided, leaving an eerie silence in its wake. Telmac speculated that the Underhivers' successive volleys of grenades had set off some weakness in the surrounding structure, but no one cared to join in the geological debate. First Nikol, now Gyse. They climbed into the shaft one by one in a brooding silence, then edged their way cautiously through the network of ramped tunnels that it led into, checking for rats, milliasaurs or other such monstrosities that were known to lurk in such places. Mot, whether from some sense of shame or simple self-preservation, chose to keep his mouth shut.

Whenever they came upon another gaping shaft-mouth, they took the opportunity to descend, finally finding themselves in a wide tunnel, running calf deep with a stream of viscous ordure. Unconcerned, they waded through it, heading in the direction from which they heard the low rushing roar of falling water: a weir of some kind, perhaps, or a drainage shaft. The sounds of scuttling life reached them from both ahead and behind, but did not grow in volume. Whatever life existed down here had obviously chosen to keep a safe distance.

The stream dropped over the edge of a vertiginous downshaft. Designed to handle vast quantities of run-off sewerage, the drain was too wide to cross to reach the tunnel on the opposite side, with no ladder or handholds to enable the hunters to climb down. Retracing their steps a short way they found a rusted metal ladder, up which they had little choice but to ascend.

As he climbed, Kayne offered a silent prayer of hope that, when they emerged from the shaft, it would be into a landscape that he would recognise from his journey back to the Spire.

As he surveyed the ash dunes that ran steeply away from the door of the pump-house into which the service shaft had led them they felt like an answer to his prayer. The ash-scape rippled like sand at an ocean's edge, the ripples gradually growing larger, becoming dunes that grew larger as they swept away towards the horizon. He remembered trudging along the paths between these dunes for what seemed like days, occasionally climbing to the top of one of the taller dunes in the vain hope of getting some kind of bearing, some clue that he was heading in the right direction. In the end, he settled for following the dune-scape's generally upward slope.

Looking down upon the dunes from just outside the doorway of the pump-house, which stood alone in the landscape like a bizarre monument to a forgotten civilisation, Kayne felt almost elated. He had to search within himself for several heartbeats before he was able to identify the sensation: hope.

'We've got company.'

Maas didn't sound pleased to be passing the information on from the rear of their five-man column, moving, well-spaced, along the trail between two ranges of ash-dunes. Kayne half-turned as he walked, looked back along the line, saw nothing.

Then he looked up.

Three robed and cowled figures stood atop the long, flat dune that flanked one side of the path. Behind them stood a line of gangers - House Delaque from the look of their long duster coats and wrap-around goggles.

'Oh no,' Telmac, walking in the middle of the column behind Schular and ahead of Mot, sounded even less happy than Maas. He was looking up at

the dune on the other side of the trail. Kayne looked up at the other dune - and all hope turned to ashes to match the dunes that rose around them.

Two more of the robed cloaked figures stood on this other dune, flanked by roughly the same number of gangers as the first three Kayne had seen.

As if on some unheard signal, the cloaked figures pushed back their cowls. Beneath them they wore helmets and eyepieces of familiar design.

Not just gangers.

'Spyrers!' Kayne unconsciously used the Underhive term for hunters such as he. The injured scavenger he had last seen running between the conveyor supports in the smelting works, many levels and what felt like ten times as many years ago, sprang unbidden to his mind. Is this how the man had felt in the long moment he spent, staring at Kayne who, seconds before, had torn off his friend's face?

'Hunters of House Ty,' one of the new arrivals called down to them. Judging by his visored helmet and the bulky outline of his cloak, he wore an Onus rig. 'I tell you, according to the Rules of Engagement, that I am Mordecai Gyre of House Ulanti. I tell you that we could have taken you in the sewer, but that would not have been seemly.'

As Gyre spoke, Mot moved slowly along the trail until he reached Telmac.

'What is this?' Telmac whispered, eyes still fixed on Gyre. 'Are they going to take up back up-Spire? Ransom us back to House Ty?'

Mot shook his head slowly, saying nothing.

'I also tell you that this is not a hunt. This is a kill, bought and paid for.' Gyre's voice continued to float down from the dune-top.

'You remember, back at that depot, just before the quake, you told me that I'd killed you all?' Mot asked Telmac. Telmac looked down at him, not understanding.

'I also tell you,' Gyre concluded, 'that you have been betrayed.'

'Well,' Mot continued, smiling behind his mask. 'You were right!'

Telmac felt something long and hard punch him in the chest, at a point where two of his suit's thick armour plates met. He took an automatic step back, then looked down. All he could see was Mot's fist, as if he had simply thumped Telmac on the chest, but Telmac knew that was not the case. The claws fitted to Mot's combat rig were now buried deep inside him.

'Why?' he asked, already feeling faintly detached from the scene around him. It had suddenly become, he realised, very hard to breathe.

'Why not?' Mot answered, then withdrew his claws with an oblique, slashing motion, opening the wound further, tearing flesh and suit material away as he did so. One of Telmac's chest plates fell away from his suit. Telmac took another backward step, then dropped heavily to his knees.

Schular sprinted to Telmac, dropped to her knees and held him against her. Telmac looked up at her with heavy-lidded eyes. He frowned slowly, seemed puzzled.

'Nikol?' he asked, then died, blood running in a sudden gush from his mouth as his head lolled forward onto his chest.

By the time Schular had reached Telmac, Mot was halfway up the slope of a dune, moving with long, suit-assisted strides, heading for the other hunters and their ganger support. A number of the Delaques opened fire. Mot jumped sideways to avoid the sudden rain of bullets.

'Not the Malcadon!' Gyre bellowed the order. The others!'

The gangers obediently shifted their aim. Ash kicked up around Maas and Schular. Maas returned fire immediately, blowing several gangers backwards, out of sight over the lip of the dune. She swung round, hoping to take out some of the attackers who were now moving down the side of the opposite dune. The sliding ash made their progress unsteady. None, gangers or hunters, were willing to risk a shot while they half-marched, half-slid towards the trail. She triggered both bolters.

Nothing. Two red lights had started to blink in her eyepiece's head-up display.

'Kayne!' she yelled, looking past where Schular half-lay behind Telmac's corpse, her sword useless against the long-range attack, the energy absorbing properties of her mirror shield nullified by the fact that the gangers - no doubt under instructions from their Ulanti commanders - were all using solid projectile weapons. It occuned to Maas that the gangers were also under instructions merely to keep them pinned down, to allow the hunters to move in for a close kill.

'Kayne! I'm out of ammunition!' Maas called. 'Cover me!'

Kayne didn't remember taking so many backward steps down the trail, eyes fixed on Maas, Schular and the dead Telmac. A small voice in the back of his head told him that Maas carried more ammunition in pouches

set into the thigh armour of her suit. All she needed was the time to reach for them and reload.

His eyes flicked from side to side, taking in the scene on either dune. The hunters and some of their retinue, advancing down each slope, the rest laying down a pinning fire from the dune-tops. He saw Mot, standing with the gangers atop one of the dunes.

This time, I shall be the only hunter returning from the hunt.' Mot's voice over the comm-link startled Kayne. 'I shall stand ready to assume our father's place when the old man finally gives up the fight. It almost worked for you. Why not for me? As you see, I already have developed a most fruitful relationship between the Helios family and certain members of House Ulanti.'

'Mot, you motherless piece of sewer-scum!' Maas's words stabbed into Kayne's ear. 'Kayne! We need you!'

But Kayne had already turned, was already pounding along the trail, pursued by autogun fire from the dune-tops. As before, as if in a dream, he tore the comm-link from his ear as he ran.

Ahead the trail divided, curving around a tall, steep-sided dune. Kayne ignored both trails and drove himself up the slope, almost losing his footing as one foot plunged knee-deep into the shifting ash. Righting himself, he continued.

Gunfire raked the ash all around him, ricocheted off the armour across his back. Something stung past his cheek, drawing blood. Still he ran, reaching the top of the dune and suddenly finding himself staring down at an unexpectedly long, steep drop. Again his foot sank into the ash and he overbalanced, arms pinwheeling uselessly as he fell forward, tumbling end over end, unable to control his descent.

NINE

Kayne crouched beneath the outlet pipe and tried not to think. A foul-smelling liquid gurgled from the pipe above his head, splashing merrily into an open drain a metre or so from his feet. He had crawled into the

space beneath the pipe a while ago. How long exactly, he couldn't be sure. To be sure would mean having to think. Having to remember. The sport to come, eh ?

Kayne flinched, jerked his head round, expecting - no, fearing - to see Bael, about to deliver a brotherly slap on the shoulder. And, in remembering Bael, he couldn't help but think of the others of his hunting party. Georgi, who he had seen, carving the ecstatic, chittering attackers into odd-sized chunks, before the sheer weight of their numbers overwhelmed him; Pitar, being dragged from the air by so many grasping hands. He had no memory of seeing how Meela, Volk and Aidor met their fates, but it took little imagination to guess. He remembered well enough how the attackers had seemed to fill the defile between the garbage dunes, like a tide, rushing along the defile from nowhere, washing the hunters from his sight.

He remembered how the tide had seemed to part, revealing his brother. He remembered Bael, calling his name, looking up at him.

He remembered seeing the attackers also turn and look in his direction.

But most of all, he remembered running, at first with no thought of direction. Then, later, he thought of only one thing: the Spire. He had to make his way up-hive, back above the Wall and away from the nightmares that stalked the lower levels.

Judging by the condition of his suit, that was not going to be easy. His visor's head-up display was a kaleidoscope of warning indicators, all glowing or blinking accusingly. He should have stopped, allowed the rig's self-repair mechanisms to at least make a start on bringing the suit back up to somewhere near optimum efficiency. But to do that, he would have had to stop running.

He remembered clambering up a chute, as wide as the broadest thoroughfare in the Spire, clogged with yet more waste, until he reached a gallery along which were ranged vast compactors, presumably intended to process detritus from the levels above. Most were silent, a few were still operating, collecting, grinding, compressing as they had from the moment they were set to work, centuries, perhaps millennia ago.

He had drawn fire from a group of scavvies camped among the compactors. When he tried to return fire, to cover his escape, he found that the firing mechanism of one of his bolters was jammed and that the bolt

magazine of the other was empty. He couldn't remember pumping so many bolts into the faces of the chittering attackers, but there was the indicator, glowing red at the edge of his visor. Grabbing a wheeled skip from beside one of the compactors he hurled it in the general direction of the scavvies and made off, his headlong flight given renewed urgency by the gunfire that spattered against the machinery around him.

Beneath the pipe, Kayne shifted his position, felt more than heard the grinding of one of his suit's knee joints. A stray scavvy bullet, perhaps, had damaged the hydraulics. A yellow-green fluid stained the suit's lower leg, though it was hard to make it out, given the slick brown mush in which he sat, and which now coated most of the lower half of his body.

Left unrepaired, the joint would surely seize up, leaving him limping through the Underhive like a wounded animal, easy prey for the predators - human or otherwise - that lurked down here. But, to effect the repair, he would have to trigger the suit's restorative mode and submit to narco-assisted sleep state. Given his suit's current condition, how could he be sure that it would administer the correct dose of sedative? He might never wake, starving to death while his suit repaired itself then lay, quiescent, in the mud. Years from now, he might be found, his suit opened like the burial casket of a forgotten race, his desiccated corpse crumbling to dust at the first breath of air.

Appalled as much by the grotesque avenues along which his imagination was running as by the apparent hopelessness of his situation, he clambered out from beneath the pipe, splashed across the open drain and stood upright for the first time in what felt like days. As he did so, it became clear that his knee joint wasn't the only one in need of attention. His right shoulder clicked loudly, then, for a heart-stopping moment, froze completely. A sharp downward movement freed the joint, the actuators again operating smoothly. But for how long?

For the first time, Kayne allowed himself to consider what would normally be the unthinkable: that he might have to abandon the suit.

He might as well walk into a pit-fight naked.

Fighting down the panic that rose, threatening to choke his resolve and send him scurrying back under the pipe, he forced himself to consider his options. There was only one: to acquire some other weaponry, albeit less sophisticated than the off-world marvels of his combat rig.

'Right now, I'd settle for an antique stub pistol, if I knew it would work.'

The sound of his voice surprised him; he hadn't intended to speak out loud. Worried that he may have been overheard, he looked both ways along the trench in which the pipe ran. Off to his right, the pipe disappeared beneath what looked like a tumbledown collection of buildings. One thing he had learnt during his time in the Underhive: no matter how old, how derelict a building may look, how long-forgotten was its original purpose, if it offered shelter, it would be inhabited. Scavvies, mutants, it didn't matter what kind of barely human refuse might be living there. They would be armed - and Kayne was suddenly very anxious to meet them.

The buildings, he discovered, were little more than hollow shells. Originally several storeys high, they appeared to have been scythed away as if by some dark god's axe. Walls bowed outward, or else teetered on the brink of collapsing atop the piles of debris that already littered their interiors. Anyone foolish enough to seek shelter here would more than likely wake from their slumber to find a wall falling on top of them.

No shelter, then. But the buildings were evidently of interest to someone.

There were ten, maybe fifteen of them - more than Kayne would have liked to be facing with his suit in its current state. Most of them looked to be scavvies, but a couple, stripped to the waist as they all were, were more seriously deformed. Kayne was surprised to see them working together, salvaging building materials from one of the ruins that lined the opposite side of what once might have been a street from the crumbling shell in which he crouched, watching them. Mutants were the least welcome members of the Underhive population, treated with open disdain, if not outright violence by all other classes of Hiver.

One member of the working party stood out from the others. Taller, more heavily muscled, he seemed to be directing operations. As Kayne watched, the figure pointed at a beam that was protruding from a clump of concrete slabs, then joined in with the others who gathered round, working to free it.

Three of the Hivers were not joining in the salvage operation. They stood, autoguns cradled in their arms, scanning the street in either direction. If they were the ones with weapons, Kayne decided, they were his targets.

A mutant and a scavvy staggered crab-wise towards one of the two tractor-drawn wagons that stood a short way from the ruin on which they were working, a heavy-looking slab of ragged concrete between them. As they approached the wagon, the scavvy stumbled, almost dropping his end of the slab. The guard nearest to them turned. Seeing the situation, he propped his weapon against one of the wagon's wheels and moved to help. Together, the three of them manoeuvred the slab towards the inclined plank that led up to the wagon's flatbed.

Kayne seized the chance. Charging through the ragged hole that once had been the doorway of the building in which he had been hiding, he targeted one of the two guards who still held their weapons and fired.

The bolt hit the corner of the neighbouring building, punching a large hole through the crumbling structure. Kayne silently cursed his suit's failing systems, but ran on. He was committed. There was no turning back.

The working party reacted to his appearance and to the bolt's explosion with unexpected efficiency. Dropping whatever tools they were using to free the slabs and beams from the rubble, they ran towards the wagon and tractors. They might have been seeking shelter, but they moved more calmly that Kayne had expected. There were no shouts of alarm, no sense of panic.

Autogun fire raked the dirt in front of Kayne, bringing him to a skidding halt. He jinked sideways, only to jump back as another volley kicked up tiny dust devils in front of his feet. Changing direction yet again, he pivoted on one foot.

The wrong foot.

The damaged knee joint clicked - the sound all too familiar - and locked. Kayne completed his spin, arms outstretched like some ludicrous children's toy, then sprawled, face down, in the dirt. As he lay there, breath blowing tiny clouds of dust up into his face, the last dregs of his strength draining away, he heard it: wheezed out through deformed throats, barked out with more than a little derision, or simply pealing out with the gusto normally associated with a damn good night's drinking. Laughter.

They were laughing at him.

Stung by the sound, he hauled his face out of the dirt and found himself staring up at the tall figure he had noticed earlier, the apparent leader of the working party. He held a bolt pistol loosely in one hand, but the

weapon was not aimed at Kayne. He was looking down at Kayne, not laughing, but the broad smile he was wearing showed that the absurdity of the situation wasn't lost on him.

Kayne swung his still-functioning bolter from beneath his body, aiming it directly into that smiling face.

'You could kill me,' the man said, his voice betraying no hint of fear. His voice was deep, the kind of voice Kayne could easily imagine addressing and holding the attention of a crowd. The voice of an politician, perhaps, or a priest. 'But what good would that do you?'

He gestured for Kayne to look past him, towards the wagons and tractors, around and between which were ranged the rest of the working party, each of them armed. These were not the average type of Underhiver, disorganised and concerned only with their own survival. These had been trained.

'Y'all right, pastor?' called a short, stubby specimen. There seemed to be something wrong with his face, Kayne noticed.

'I'm fine, Micc,' the man replied, without taking his eyes off Kayne. For all his soothing reassurance that Kayne held the upper hand in their one-on-one situation, there was something in the man's eyes that made Kayne suspect that the opposite might very well be true. 'Our friend here is just weighing up the odds.'

'Pastor?' Kayne asked, not sure whether he did so to play for time, or because he was genuinely interested. Was this why he abandoned Bael - to delay his own death by a few hours?

The title's a relic,' came the answer. To Kayne's amazement he almost looked embarrassed. Then he reached down with his free hand, offering to help Kayne to his feet. 'My given name is Monad. And my family name is Vex.'

'Pastor?'

Vex closed the book and turned to face the door. He had been reading the words of the Arch-Zealot concerning the Last Days and the Final Crusade with which the Redemption would greet them. Every follower of the Redemption would rise up, take arms and, led by their priests, sweep away the sins of the Hive in blood and fire. As a young man, Vex remembered,

he would lay awake at night, on his bare wooden pallet in the novice's dormitory of Sin's Defeat, one of the oldest Redemption strongholds in the Underhive, praying that he would live to see it, be a part of it.

And now, it seemed, his prayers were being answered - though not in the way his younger self would have expected.

For some reason, as he read, his thoughts had also turned back to Kayne, the Spyre Hunter who had passed through their lives for a short time, back then. It had been more than a year since he had left Hope's End, during which Vex had had more than enough to occupy his mind. The settlement had grown to an unmanageable size as Underhivers abandoned their homes in the face of escalating paranoia, superstitious dread fostered by the Redemption and, of course, good old-fashioned righteous violence. So many people looking to the pastor for guidance, for protection that he knew he would be unable to provide.

So why should he be thinking about one more privileged thrill-seeker who, when Vex met him, was struggling with the realisation that he was not as invincible as life in the bosom of the Spire had led him to believe?

'Micc's back.' Neesa stood in the doorway. Since her arrival at Hope's End, she had somehow become a part of Vex's unofficial retinue. Vex was sure that Micc had something to do with it; he had taken an almost paternal interest in the girl since they had rescued her ragged group of refugees from the attentions of a roving band of Cawdor gangers. There had been a worrying increase in the numbers of such bands of murderous zealots roaming the Underhive at the time. In the short while since then, their numbers had doubled.

And the faithful shall rise up and smite the unbelievers. Their souls shall burn in the fires of the Redemption and Mankind shall be cleansed, for it is our destiny!

The last words he had read before closing the book came back to him. Once he would have seen them as Holy Writ. Now they sounded like a justification for slaughter on an industrial scale.

Thank you, Neesa,' Vex replied. 'Is he in the barracks?'

The building in which the militia rested while on duty had once been a school. Now there were too many children in Hope's End to fit in the building, so lessons had been transferred to what, judging by its size and

layout, had once been a church. Whenever he thought about it, Vex allowed himself a moment to appreciate the irony.

'No,' Neesa said. 'He's in the infirmary.'

There were too many to count. Coming over the ash-dunes. Too many to keep to the trails.'

Micc sat on the edge of a cot. A grubby strip of cloth had been wound around a head wound and he had been told to rest for a few hours - which, of course, wasn't going to happen.

'We stayed out of sight, watched them pass. It took a long time. There were all sorts: a priest, obviously...'

'Obviously,' repeated Vex. When he had entered the long, low-ceilinged building, everything had gone quiet. Conversations stopped in mid-flow, all heads turned in his direction, the same question on every face: who has he come to bless? Who's dying?

'Pastor,' Micc broke off from his report. 'I didn't mean...'

'I know.' Vex smiled ruefully down at Micc and waved for him to continue. We all make mistakes when we're young.' He plucked at his faded, tattered robe. 'This was mine. Carry on.'

'Yeah, well, sorry anyway,' Micc coughed, then continued. 'Like I say, there was a priest, deacons, brethren, more zealots than I ever wanted to see in one place and an army of gangers - Cawdor, taking point, guarding the flanks. It was like they're going to war.'

They are,' Vex added quietly, almost to himself.

Then there were the regular hivers - settlers, traders, I even saw a bunch wearing guilder colours.' Micc paused, raised a hand unconsciously to his head wound.

'We were heading back, trying to stay outta sight. Must've not been careful enough,' he continued. 'Cawdors blind-sided us. We were trying to outflank them. They outflanked us. Almost funny'

He paused again, stared at the floor. When he spoke again, his voice was little more than a whisper. 'Lost three - Komo, Ludi and Dieko - before we managed to shake them off. Lost a lot of time. Rate that mob was moving, they'll-'

'Pastor.'

Vex turned. Neesa was standing at his side. There's something you should see. Outside the walls.'

'I'll come with you.' Micc eased himself up from the cot and walked with them towards the door.

There was something I noticed about the priest,' he said. 'He wore a black hood.'

'Zydo,' Vex said absently. 'An old acquaintance. Renowned for his piety and fervour. I studied with him. Took it very badly when I suggested people might be more willing to accept redemption if it wasn't offered at the point of a gun.

'He'll have been waiting for this chance for a long time. The Final Crusade is just the excuse he's been looking for.'

As they followed Vex out of the infirmary, Micc turned to Neesa and grinned.

'I feel so much better knowing that, don't you?'

TEN

It had been Vex's suggestion that Kayne take off his suit.

'It makes you look more war machine than man,' Vex told him, a hint of a smile playing about his lips. Kayne wondered if he was enjoying the memory of this war machine's shambolic, self-defeating performance against his men. 'When the people here have seen such things, they - or someone dear to them - have often been its next victim.'

People? Under normal circumstances, Kayne would not use such a word to describe the ragged collection of misbegotten creatures he had seen since arriving at the settlement. The two-wagon caravan had ground its way from the site of the salvage operation, both tractors wheezing and coughing with the effort. Kayne had sat amidst the jumble of salvaged materials in the rearmost wagon, closely flanked by most of Vex's men. No one spoke. Kayne got the impression that most of them would have preferred Vex to have killed him where he lay, not help him to his feet and offer him a ride. But, Kayne noticed, no one argued with Vex.

Kayne's first impression of Hope's End was that it looked little different to the collection of uninhabitable shells they had left behind. As the tractors inched down one of the trails into the basin in which the settlement sat, overlooked by the hanging crag at its back, he saw just another conglomeration of buildings whose purpose, perhaps vital to the development and construction of the Spire that now towered unreachable leagues above their roofs, was now long-forgotten.

But, where the salvage site had been deserted apart from Vex's reclamation team, Hope's End was alive, seemingly with every kind of human and semi-human refuse. Much of the activity was focused on the wall that had been erected around the town, constructed, it seemed from every broken down vehicle for levels above and below, shored up by salvaged spars and irregular chunks of concrete.

As the caravan passed through the gate it was greeted by shouts from the settlement's inhabitants. Those not involved in the construction of a pair of unsteady-looking towers on either side of the gate hurried over to help with the unloading. When they caught sight of Kayne, however, they stopped in their tracks.

'Spyrer!' The word was hissed by what might have been a man, had his skeletal frame not been so hideously twisted, his skin not a scabbed and mottled collage of grey and green. He took one limping step forward and spat in the dirt.

'All who need help are welcome at Hope's End.' Vex had climbed down from the lead wagon. The moment he spoke, every face turned towards him. 'AH are welcome because all can be saved. All can find peace.'

Vex signalled to his men in the second wagon, who dismounted, then waited while Kayne also climbed stiffly down, livery joint in his suit had grown stiff; his locked shoulder still refused to budge, though a little play had returned to the knee joint that had pitched him into the dirt. The warning indicators on his visor display continued to glare at him. He couldn't even be sure that his suit had enough power left to enable him to walk unassisted to wherever Vex intended to imprison him.

'My quarters,' Vex instructed. 'Assuming he can fit through the doorway in that armour.'

Kayne, still flanked by Vex's men, followed the pastor across what might once have been the town square. More and more of the settlement's

inhabitants appeared, drawn by the news of their unwelcome visitor. They kept their distance and Kayne found himself walking along a wide avenue lined with expressions of fear and hate.

Kayne was escorted towards a crumbling two-storey structure - some kind of meeting hall, he guessed. A few paces from the door, he stumbled, his knee joint locking for a moment. Two members of his escort grabbed his arms, preventing him from falling on his face for the second time that day. Someone in the crowd hissed a remark. Kayne didn't catch the words, but the tone was unmistakable. Not fear. Not even hate. Contempt.

Vex ordered that the double doors of the meeting hall be closed behind them, then ushered Kayne into a small room that opened off to one side at the far end of the hall. Kayne had to edge gingerly through the doorway, the chest and back plates of his suit squeaking against the ancient wood of the frame. The scavvy with the lopsided face made to follow Vex into the room, but the taller man shook his head and closed the door.

'You know what I am?' Kayne asked in reply to Vex's suggestion that he remove his suit. 'Your people clearly do.' Vex nodded.

'Your kind are the stuff of legend in the Underhive,' he said. 'Mothers warn their children to behave, or else the Spyrers will come and carry them away.'

'Then why am I still alive?' Looking past the winking kaleidoscope of warning indicators that edged his vision, Kayne assessed his chances of taking Vex hostage, using him to force his way out of the settlement. Not good. The pastor was a powerfully built man and something about the way he carried himself suggested that he was no stranger to physical combat. And, encased in this crippled piece of off-world technology, Kayne might as well have been bound hand and foot in Malcadon ironsilk. He'd be lucky to get his hands on Vex in the first place, let alone restrain him for any length of time.

That's a good question,' Vex replied. 'Your kind usually hunt in packs. Yet you attacked us alone and your equipment is clearly in need of repair. This leads me to surmise that your fellow Spyrers are dead, or else they are too far away to be of any help to you - in which case, they might as well be dead.'

'Hunters!' Kayne shot back, stung by Vex's use of the Underhivers' term for Kayne and his kind. 'We are hunters!'

'I doubt your prey would see much honour in that name,' Vex replied smoothly, unperturbed by Kayne's sudden display of anger. To them you are killers, pure and simple.'

Vex paused, glanced down at his hands, then rubbed at a discoloured patch on his robe's tattered skirt.

There is no honour in killing,' he added, quietly. Silence hung in the room for a long moment, during which Kayne had the acute sense that Vex had suddenly forgotten that he was there, that he was unwittingly intruding on the pastor's most private meditations. And he was suddenly very glad that he had not attempted to attack the priest.

Vex lifted his gaze from his robe. We can offer you shelter,' he said. Time to make repairs to your equipment, though I doubt any tools that we have would be of much use.'

'My rig will repair itself, as far as it is able,' Kayne replied, surprised by the rush of gratitude he felt upon hearing Vex's offer. A profound sense of his own exhaustion had settled about him like an iron cloak.

'All it needs - all I need - is time.'

* * *

Until his last day at Hope's End, Kayne had seen no more of Vex. The priest gave the hunter the use of his quarters; Kane had no idea where Vex slept. Never much of a reader, Vex's meagre library - two shelves of battered print volumes - offered no escape from the boredom that settled over him. After seeing the Underhivers' barely concealed hostility during his first tour of the settlement - without his rig, wearing borrowed rags over his skin-tight undersuit - Kayne decided that to leave the meeting hall again would be to invite a blade between the ribs.

Twice a day, two armed members of what Kayne took to be Vex's personal retinue delivered a bowl of slops to his room. The food's appearance and consistency reminded Kayne of something he would more usually expect to flush down a waste disposal unit - it occurred to him that Vex's foot-soldiers might be trying to infect him with some kind of fatal disease. When at last he summoned the courage to try a spoonful, he invariably found that it tasted like oil scooped from the bottom of a

tractor's sump but, no longer sustained by the Orrus rig's intravenous feeding system, he was always too hungry to set the bowl aside.

When he wasn't eating he would pace the room, listening to the sounds of activity outside the hall: shouts, the congested wheeze of a tractor, the sounds of construction. He wondered whether the gate towers had been completed - and how long the jerry built structures would stay upright.

When he wasn't eating or pacing, he would sleep. Unsupported by his suit's bio-boosters, his body seemed to sag beneath the accumulated weight of every step of the hunt, from the moment he, Bael and the others left the Spire, to the moment he pitched into the dirt at Vex's feet. He felt hollow, weak, barely able to lift himself from Vex's hard metal cot. Like a clockwork bird whose mechanism had wound down.

He slept heavily, like a baby. And when he slept, he dreamed - and the dream was always the same.

They had invaded the Spire. Their inhuman chittering filled the corridors of the Helios family apartments as they moved from room to room, searching. Searching for him.

He ran from them, through deserted halls and galleries, the insectile nonsense growing louder as they gained on him.

Daring not to look back, he fled the Helios apartments, racing through deserted halls and minor galleries, lungs burning, breath coming in gasps. He knew that, should he try to call out, his voice would be little more than a whisper.

His flight always brought him to the same place: the Great Gallery, where the others were waiting for him to pin the hunt. Bael, Pitar, Volk, Aidor, Georgi and Meela. Alive. And every time he saw them, he felt the same rush of relief.

Until, smiling, they opened their mouths and greeted him with a stream of high-pitched clicks and squeals.

He would wake screaming, eyes wide, staring up at the Orrus rig which stood impassively against the wall at the foot of the cot. He would lay there a moment, allowing his panicked breathing to slow, letting the sounds of the settlement reassert themselves over the ghostly chittering that still echoed in his mind. Then he would ease himself up off the cot

and move over to the suit to check on the progress of the rig's self-repair systems. The visor read-out's estimate of how many cycles were required before the rig would be anything like combat-ready counted down with agonising slowness. Kayne reckoned his time by this clock, rather than the alternating periods of activity and quiescence that he heard through the wall.

The ratskins tell stories about a creature called a khalem! Kayne hadn't heard Vex enter the room. He spun round from his rig, helmet held in one hand. How long had Vex been standing in the open doorway, watching him check the suit's functions? All but a number of minor systems had been returned to operating efficiency. Kayne had been considering when would be the best time to leave Hope's End. And, as if hearing his thoughts, Vex had appeared.

'What?'

'According to the stories, the khalem is a man-like creature, made from a hollow shell of mud and sticks, baked in a fire, then filled with a jumble of machine parts. A shaman creates it, then, through some blasphemous ritual, breathes life into his creation, magically sets in motion the machinery within, then sends it out to do his bidding. Seeing your armour standing there reminded me of the story.'

Kayne looked down at the helmet, then up at the suit. A hollow man? The description seemed appropriate somehow.

'Micc tells me that you have recovered your strength. I came to tell you that, should you wish, you are welcome to stay. The people here will get used to your presence. They are already aware of my feelings on the matter. You would come to no harm.

'If you decide to stay, you should be aware that life here is hard, much harder than the life I imagine you are used to, but it does have its rewards. Also, I should tell you that times are changing. Though I am no favourite among my former brethren, their attempts to disturb the peace of this settlement have, until now, been few.'

Looking at Vex standing there, all but filling the doorway, and listening to his deceptively gentle voice, Kayne had a pretty good idea why.

'Recently, however, their attacks upon our working parties have increased. New arrivals at Hope's End speak of raids on smaller, less well defended settlements, forced conversions and purges. I fear that the Arch-

Zealot has declared a crusade. If that is so, I can think of at least one of my brothers who would welcome the chance to lead it to Hope's End.'

'Why are you telling me this?' Kayne asked. 'I'm a Spyrer. A hunter of those you call your people. I came here to win honour and glory for myself, my family and my House; that is all.'

'All are welcome here. There is no man who cannot find redemption if he is willing to look for it,' Vex smiled ruefully. Though my brethren might argue that the only true path to salvation is through fire. But there is another reason: should the crusade come to Hope's End, a man wearing an offworld combat rig would be a useful addition to our defences. And even if my fears of a crusade prove groundless, there are the rumours.'

What rumours?' Kayne couldn't help but ask, though he was far from sure that he wanted to hear the answer.

There are some who say the Hive has given birth to a new kind of creature, that looks like a man, but speaks like a machine. That is growing in number. That it may, at some point in the future, rise up and overwhelm us all.'

They're not rumours,' Kayne said quietly. Vex stared at him, saying nothing. The silence stretched between them.

They attacked us,' Kayne continued, suddenly anxious to say anything to break the silence. 'An ambush. We were unprepared. I was the only survivor.'

Vex held Kayne's gaze for a moment longer, then nodded, giving Kayne the uncomfortable impression that he had told the priest far more than he had intended - far more than his words alone had conveyed.

Then perhaps the khalem is not merely a story after all,' Vex said. 'My offer stands,' he continued, stepping back through the doorway, turning to go.

'I will consider it,' Kayne replied, already knowing that he had made his decision.

The rig welcomed him back into its embrace like a long lost lover. His spine tingled with feedback from the bio-booster. Flexing his hands inside the massive gloves, he felt he could tear the building down around him,

uproot the whole settlement without breaking sweat. He felt like a hunter once again.

He opened the meeting hall's double doors slowly, looked out across the deserted square. He had waited until the sounds of activity from outside had subsided before donning his rig, easing out through the narrow doorway of Vex's room, and moving quietly to the building's main doors.

The gate towers had been completed. A guard stood atop the tower to the left of the gate. His visor's photo-enhancers showed Kayne that the guard was facing outwards, away from the settlement. If he moved swiftly, the guard would not notice him until he was already through the gates. The gates were closed, but he felt confident in his ability to tear them aside if he had to.

'Y'leaving?' Micc stepped around the corner of the meeting hall. Kayne, no more that four or five steps from the doors, turned. The stocky scavvy with the lopsided face cradled a stub gun in his arms. He appeared relaxed, unafraid.

'I like to swing by here when things are quiet,' Micc continued. 'Make sure there's no trouble.'

'No trouble,' Kayne repeated, feeling like a flat-footed idiot.

That's good,' Micc nodded. 'Come on. Let's see you on y'way.'

The track rose up to the lip of the depression in which Hope's End sat. Standing at the top of the incline, Kayne looked back at the settlement. The gates had been closed behind him and he had moved swiftly out of range of the tower guard's autogun. The figure of the guard was visible to Kayne's enhanced vision, but he was facing in another direction, paying him no heed. There was no sign of Micc.

The scavvy had given Kayne a set of directions, which, he said, would enable him to pass unseen, up through the next ten levels. Kayne had considered the possibility that they were intended to lead him to some Helmawr-forsaken dead end, inhabited by creatures, human or otherwise, who did not share Vex's attitude to unexpected visitors, but discounted it. Micc, he decided, simply wanted to see the back of him.

By now, Kayne imagined, Vex would have heard of his departure. There was no reason why he - a son of a family of one of the Ruling Houses of

Hive Primus - should care a whit for the opinions of a broken down apostate priest living in the squalor of the deep Underhive. But that did nothing to ease the nagging sense that he had disappointed Vex - by doing exactly what the priest had expected of him.

Turning his back on Hope's End, Kayne shrugged these thoughts aside, forced himself to focus on the journey that still lay ahead. Far above him rose the Spire, his home. By the time he got there, he would have his story prepared. They were attacked, his fellow hunters and he. The others died fighting against their attackers who were, of course, heavily armed. The tide of battle swept him away from them. He killed those who sought to kill him but, by then, the others were dead. He could do nothing to help them - at least that was true. And there was something else. The most important thing of all: he did not run.

So why was it that, as he marched away from the settlement, that one thought filled his mind - that he was running still?

Eleven

Now Kayne stood on the edge of the depression and looked down at the killing ground Hope's End had become.

Much of the scene was obscured by the thick smoke from the burning remains of the shacks. It hung low in the still air, turning much of the battle into a shadow play. Groups of indistinct figures clashed; brief muzzle-flashes sparked like fireflies in the gloom, counterpointed by the deeper reports of grenades. By setting fire to the shanties, the attackers had unwittingly offered a helping hand to the defenders. Under cover of the smoke,

Vex's men slipped out through the gates in small teams, striking at the Redemptionists, harrying them, sowing confusion among their ranks before withdrawing.

Kayne stepped back as a group of the attackers returned to the rise, carrying between them a number of wounded. He bowed his head, anxious that the folds of his newly acquired deacon's robes should hide his Onus rig. The deacon had been a generously proportioned man, his voice surprisingly high-pitched for one of his size as he stood at the rear of a column of Redemptionists, urging them forwards with wild cries and

exhortations. Kayne had waited until he paused for breath before stepping out from behind an irregular pile of rock fragments - perhaps some of the long-discarded remains of the excavation which had formed the depression in which Hope's End sat - and wrapped an oversized hand around his face.

Fastening the robe about him, pulling the hood around his face, Kayne had joined the tide of people that was moving through the ragged, slag-strewn landscape of this level. Though he had managed to outdistance the hunters and their Delaque cohorts among the ash-dunes before tumbling down a series of connected ramps, he knew that they would not give up their pursuit of him. For the hunters from House Ulanti it would be a matter of honour. For Mot it would be a matter of survival: if Kayne were to return to the Spire and expose his treachery, Mot would be condemned to end his days in one of the House Ty oubliettes. Sealed in a cell barely tall enough for a man to stand, fed increasingly rarely, left to waste away, knowing that his name had been struck from the records of his family and his House. Forgotten. Removed.

Kayne had intended to lose himself in the throng, whose members were all well-armed, their faces alight with religious fervour, long enough to enable him to get his bearings and strike out along one of the trails that led to Hope's End. He had not imagined that Vex's settlement would be the destination of this savage carnival.

I fear that the Arch-Zealot has declared a crusade.

Vex's words came back to him as he watched the wounded zealots scramble past, the light of righteous bloodlust gone from their eyes. They didn't spare him a glance as they passed.

Kayne coughed. The dune ash had clogged his mouth and nose as he fell away from the hunters' gunfire. As he had hauled himself to his feet at the bottom of the steep slope, anxious to put some distance between himself and his would-be killers. He found it virtually impossible to breathe. The fine ash grains had clogged his nasal plugs, rendering them worse than useless. It took valuable moments to remove them, the operation hampered by the cumbersome Onus gloves. With every heartbeat that passed, he had expected gunfire to rain down on him from above. He wondered whether Maas and Schular might have put up a last fight, delaying the Ulanti, then forced the thought from his mind. He should have been there with them.

But, once again, he was alone. Alone and running.

Shaking the unwelcome memory from his mind, Kayne looked along the curving lip of the depression. For every member of the crusade who returned injured or did not return at all, there seemed to be three more eager to rush down into the smoke-clogged amphitheatre. The priest who led them had assembled an enormous force, drawn, it seemed, from every section of Underhive society. Eventually the fires would die down, the smoke would clear and sheer weight of numbers would win the day.

Kayne noted that the priest and his retinue had remained atop the rise, well clear of weapons' range. As he watched, the black-hooded priest appeared to be in conference with his advisors. Arms were pointed in his direction and, for a moment, Kayne feared that his disguise had been penetrated. But they were pointing above him, out across the depression, towards the crag that hung menacingly over the rear of the settlement. The pointing arms moved, tracing a series of ledges that led to the base of the crag. The priest was nodding now, issuing orders. A number of Cawdor gangers followed a deacon away from the main group, disappearing into the jostling throng.

Kayne thought of Vex, his calm acceptance of what he believed to be a lost cause, and found that he was still unable to decide whether he was a hero or the worst kind of fool. He would die here, Kayne was sure. Perhaps he was already dead, taking with him the information Kayne had hoped to acquire.

Time to move on.

'I don't need to tell you what they'll have in those bags, right?'

'Explosives,' Vex replied, eye still pressed to the macro-glass. He had been helping a wounded mutant to the infirmary when

Micc caught up with him, handed him the metal-and-glass tube and pointed towards the crag.

There were eight of them, Vex saw. The deacon who led them and one of the gangers carried a heavy leather bag slung over their shoulders.

'Mining gear, most likely,' Micc told him. 'Excavation charges. They're looking to bring the whole thing down on top of us. Must've got sick of chewing smoke.'

'Do you think they could do it?' Vex asked, lowering the glass and looking down at the squat scavvy.

'Who knows?' Micc replied, blinking away the blood that ran down one side of his face from a fresh head wound. Me had led three teams out through the gates to strike at the attackers, each time returning with fewer men. 'We got lucky with the smoke. Maybe that's all the good luck we're gonna get.'

As if in confirmation of this, a deafening, explosive crack resounded across the settlement. Instinctively, Vex and Micc ducked, then turned towards the source of the noise. The platform set atop the tower to the right of the gates had gone. The salvaged building spars that formed the tower jabbed upwards into the smoke-clogged air.

'Krak grenade,' Micc muttered. 'Good shot, too. Square on.'

Not for the first time Vex wondered about Micc's life before they had met. He had appeared to be just another itinerant trader, down on his luck after one too many bad deals, but his knowledge of weapons and tactics had always indicated another, more military past. Micc had never seemed interested in talking about it, so Vex had never asked. Now it seemed he would not get the chance.

'Give me as many of your best as you can spare,' Vex shouted, ears still ringing from the explosion.

'No!' Micc shouted back, alarmed. That's my job.'

'I recognise the deacon who's leading them. He was one of my brethren. It seems he has advanced himself under Zydo,' Vex smiled down at Micc. 'It would be a shame not to take this opportunity to renew our acquaintance.'

The smoke was beginning to clear when the gates opened and Vex and Micc led their men out of Hope's End. A rain of gunfire and the remainder of the settlement's small cache of grenades had cleared a space directly in front of the gates, which were slammed shut behind the last of the strike force. The Redemptionists had retreated across the corpse-strewn and crater-pocked ground, seeking shelter behind the burnt out ruins of the shanty dwellings, expecting a full-scale counterattack to follow the vicious bombardment.

When they saw that only twenty-five men had stepped beyond the gates, they rose up and charged.

Vex didn't wait for them to close in. He and the nine men assigned to follow him sprinted away, staying close to the settlement's wall. The defenders positioned along the wall gave a smattering of covering fire but it was up to Micc's contingent to provide the greater diversion.

Stub gun in one hand, auto rifle in the other, Micc led the charge to meet the Redemptionists. His stub round blew an axe-wielding zealot off his feet. Micc then swung the empty stubber across the face of a ganger who rushed at him from the side. The ganger went down flailing in a spray of blood and teeth, but clawed the stubber from Micc's grasp as he fell. Something sang past Micc's ear and he spun on his heel, steadied his autogun with his free hand and returned fire, dropping another ganger.

'Keep moving!' he yelled to his men. 'We buy the pastor enough time to get clear, then head back to the gates!'

He glanced over his shoulder to check on Vex's progress and so didn't see the bullet that slammed into the side of his head. He stumbled sideways, then dropped to his knees. He seemed to be falling forward, but the ground had disappeared. In its place was a vast, yawning darkness. With nothing beneath him to arrest his descent, he fell - and the falling seemed to last forever.

Corveq stumbled, clutched his leg and went down. Hearing his cry, Vex turned. Beyond the fallen man he saw a line of Redemptionists, racing towards him. Evidently, Micc's men had not managed to draw their attention away from Vex's team as they made for a set of steps carved, centuries ago, by those unknown miners who excavated this part of the Underhive.

Corveq squirmed round in the dirt, levelled his rifle at the oncoming group and fired. The pain of his wound spoiled his aim; the shots went wide.

'Pastor?' Goresh called. Kayne turned and saw that the rest of his team had halted a short way ahead of him. He waved them on towards the steps.

'Go!' he ordered. They hesitated, eyes flickering from Vex to the injured Corveq.

'We'll be along in a moment!' Vex shouted. 'Now go!'

This time they moved, running towards the rock wall that loomed above them. Vex ran in the opposite direction -towards the fallen Corveq.

'I... I'm sorry, pastor,' Corveq gasped as Vex dropped to one knee beside him. Corveq was a young man, though his mottled, sagging skin gave the impression of great age. Below one knee, the fabric of his trousers was already soaked with blood. It was a bad wound; he would have to be carried.

'Let's not worry about apologising right now,' Vex replied before depressing his bolter's trigger. One of the approaching gangers flew backwards, his chest a ruin. The pace of the attackers' run faltered momentarily, until one of their number levelled his rifle and fired.

Corveq's head snapped back, then dropped forward into the dirt. The exit wound in the back of his skull gaped wetly up at Vex as he returned fire, hitting another ganger low in the body and vaporising a hip and the upper section of his leg. This time, however, the rest of them didn't slow down. They came on faster than before, raking the area with auto-fire.

Something that sounded like an angry insect whipped over Vex's head as he dropped to a prone firing position beside Corveq's body, which jerked as two more rounds punched into it. Firing as they ran, the Redemptionists' marksmanship was erratic. Soon they would be too close to miss.

Kayne drew a bead on a member of the approaching line, only to see the man stumble as if he had been shoved hard from behind. There was something wrong with his chest: most of it wasn't there any more.

As Kayne's original target fell forwards into the dirt, the ganger to his right was flung violently aside, one of his arms parting company from the rest of him and spinning away on its own trajectory. The others' headlong rush faltered again as half their remaining number turned to meet the new, unexpected threat. Another ganger and a scavvy were punched backwards into oblivion before they could bring their weapons to bear.

As he selected another target, Kayne couldn't help but smile. Micc had disobeyed yet another of his instructions. Instead of leading his men back behind the settlement's gates he had brought them to protect the rear of Vex's team.

Kayne fired. Headless, his target spun round, finger clamped in a death-grip around the trigger of his rifle. The arc of his auto-fire cut down two of his fellows. At the edge of his vision, Kayne saw another of his attackers turn and run. Shuffling round in the dirt, he sought a target among those who had turned to meet Micc and his men.

The corpses of the gangers lay strewn across the ground, a hulking robed figure looming over them. The sleeves of its robe were ragged and singed. Thin trails of smoke rose from the nozzles fixed along the knuckles of the oversized gloves that jutted from the sleeves. The robe's hood had fallen back, revealing a skullcap helmet and visor. Not Micc.

Vex climbed to his feet, cradling his bolter in what appeared to be a relaxed, non-threatening posture, but which would allow him to bring it to bear in a heartbeat. The hulking figure moved towards him, stripping off the robe as it approached.

'Pastor Vex,' it said.

'Ah, Kayne,' the pastor replied.

TWELVE

The charges had been set. Mylec, a ganger with some experience of working with explosives, had checked the fuses and connected them to the detonator. He turned the crank handle that protruded from the side of the detonator - a battered black box - then stepped back and nodded to the deacon. All set, worship,' he grunted.

Deacon Fek stepped past him - there was barely enough room on the ledge for two men to stand side-by-side - and, intoning a prayer to the Emperor and his representative on this world, the Arch-Zealot, knelt before the detonator.

That simple action saved his life.

The bolt hit the rock wall above Fek's head, showering him in sharp-edged fragments. He recoiled in shock and fear and almost pitched himself off the ledge. All around him shouts erupted, accompanied by the harsh ratcheting of autogun fire and the deeper concussive reports of bolters.

Something heavy landed across his legs. Twisting round and kicking out to free himself, he saw it was Mylec, missing half his face.

Looking back along the ledge, he saw that a number of the unholy mongrels from the settlement had somehow made their way onto the ledge and were attacking his demolition team from the rear. In the confusion, Fek's men struggled to turn and face their attackers, but surprise and the width of the ledge were against them. A hulking figure, clad in some kind of armour, stood to the rear of the attackers, pumping bolts into the midst of his men as the unarmoured scum rushed forward. Fully half of his men had already fallen but, Fek saw with satisfaction, those who remained cut down one of the unclean scum, bisecting him with a close-range volley.

Turning away from the fight, Fek hauled himself to his knees and shuffled towards the detonator. Vex's hybrid abominations might claim the lives of he and his men, but, Fek swore to himself, the crag would fall like the Arch-Zealot's fist, crushing the settlement beneath it.

Gripping the plunger handle set into the top of the detonator, Fek pulled. The handle rose smoothly, then stopped with a click. Fek paused. One last prayer and he would bring damnation to all those Vex claimed blasphemously were worthy of salvation.

Then it felt as if a giant had seized him by the shoulder, shook him once, then tossed him aside. There was a moment of surprise, then searing pain. And blackness.

'Pull the fuses,' Vex ordered as he yanked the wires from the contacts on the top of the detonator box. 'Collect the charges - I'm sure we can find a better use for them.' The five remaining members of his team hurried along the ledge, ducking under the overhang.

He looked down at Fek, whose hand had been clamped around the detonator's plunger at the moment Vex's bolt had severed his arm at the shoulder. His hand and a short length of forearm still dangled grotesquely from the handle.

Vex?' Fek's voice was barely a whisper. Blinking slowly, the deacon stared up at Vex with rolling, unfocused eyes. His face was deathly pale, his robe soaked in blood. Vex knelt beside him, remembering the young trader's son who had presented himself after a rally held among the ruins

of a mutant settlement, recently purged of those Vex had then truly believed to be unclean. Fek had begged to be allowed to join his retinue, to become an instrument of the Redemption. Vex had recognised the fire in the young man's eyes and welcomed him into the fold. He had been an apt pupil, hungry to learn, his fervour growing as Vex's began to falter.

'So this is what we brought you to, Zydo and I.' Vex felt an immense sadness as he looked down into Fek's face. The fire still burned in the deacon's eyes.

'My faith is still strong, apostate!' Fek croaked defiantly. His eyes were beginning to glaze over. Vex was amazed that he still had the strength to speak. 'I go to my reward.'

'For your sake, I hope you're right,' Vex replied softly, but Fek could no longer hear him.

'Vex.' Kayne stood over him, smoke trails still rising from the barrels of his bolters. We had an agreement'

Vex straightened, looked away from Kayne, along the ledge that ran under the crag. His men were on their way towards him, explosives cradled carefully in their arms. Turning back to Kayne, he nodded.

'You wanted information,' he said. 'I was in the middle of something. I'm grateful you decided to help us. Now ask.'

Kayne regarded Vex for a moment, still unable to decide whether he was a hero or a madman. Had he not spotted Vex running with his team away from the settlement, towards the rock wall, the priest would be dead now, lying in the dust beside the scavvy he had sought to save. His borrowed robes had enabled him to move unmolested through the press of bodies at the fringes of the killing ground, before sprinting into bolter range of the gangers who were bearing down on Vex. And, when he stood before the priest, surrounded by the Cawdor dead, what did he say to Kayne's demand?

'Later.'

Vex returned Kayne's gaze, saying nothing. The first of his team edged past them, heading for the steps by which they had climbed to the ledge.

'Well?' Vex asked.

'I told you, we were ambushed,' Kayne began. 'That I was the only survivor. I was wrong. The others are still alive. I have come back for them. I had hoped you could tell me the way'

Kayne described the landscape of refuse in which he, Bael and the others had been attacked. Vex listened, eyes flicking to one side as he counted each of his men as they passed.

'I have no memory of how I got to where I... met you,' Kayne concluded, surprised by the sense of relief that washed over him as he spoke, the feeling that he was at last unburdening himself of a poisonous secret. 'I had been running and climbing for, well, I don't know how long. I was lost. By rights, I should have died.

'By rights, you should have killed me.'

Vex said nothing. Goresh, the last of his men, edged past. Goresh paused, looked at Vex then glanced questioningly at Kayne. Vex nodded in answer to Goresh's unspoken question, motioned for him to carry on along the ledge.

'Do you know the way? Will you help me?' Kayne asked, more pleadingly than he had intended. Suddenly he doubted the wisdom of coming back to Hope's End, of the whole descent. Why was he here? For Bael and the others? For honour and glory? For himself? Whatever the reason, it had already cost too much.

The level you describe is still some way below us,' Vex replied at last. 'A couple of salvage teams went down that far, but didn't find much we could use. I think we can see you on your way' Vex's last words reminded Kayne of the scavvy with the lopsided face who had confronted him when he last left Hope's End. For some reason he now felt the Same mixture of embarrassment and shame that he had felt then.

Vex looked out across the battlefield below. The smoke had all but cleared. Zydo's horde was gathering for another assault on Hope's End. For all the casualties that had been inflicted upon them, there still looked to be more than enough of them to overwhelm the settlement.

'After all,' he added, looking back at Kayne, 'you'd be mad to stay here.'

'Pastor!'

Vex and Kayne both turned in the direction of Goresh's shout in time to see the scavvy standing a few steps ahead of him slammed against the rock wall by a volley of gunfire. A group of Redemptionists - brethren backed up by a contingent of gangers - was creeping along the ledge towards them. As the ledge curved, following the rock wall, it gave the attackers at the rear of the group a clear shot at Vex's men as those at the front of the

group advanced. Goresh and the others returned fire. The first of the carved steps was agonisingly close, but they would have to shoulder their weapons in order to make the climb.

'Time you were going, I think,' Vex told Kayne as he checked the load in his bolter's magazine. Spitting a very un-priestly oath, he threw the empty weapon aside. He bent to kneel once again beside Fek then straightened, the deacon's autopistol in one hand, his chainsword in the other.

'No,' Kayne said firmly. 'I have the better range and the armour. Just the sight of me might buy you some time. Get your men on the ground, then cover me.'

Vex stared at him for a heartbeat, then nodded. Moving quickly ahead of Kayne along the ledge, he barked orders to his men. Turning, Goresh shot a puzzled look at Vex, then Kayne. The hunter came to a stop a short way back from Vex and the others, raised both fists and fired a volley of bolts over their heads. The first line of the advancing Redemptionists dissolved in a confusion of blood and bone. A shower of rock shrapnel cut into those behind them. Their advance faltered in a chorus of screams.

Autogun fire pattered against his armour like hard rain. A ricochet scored a hot trail across one cheek. Switching his aim to the rear of the attackers' column, he fired again. More screams. More ruined bodies. In a desperate attempt to escape the bolts, several gangers threw themselves off the ledge.

Kayne risked a glance towards the steps. Goresh's head was just disappearing from view. Only Vex remained on the ledge, emptying the autopistol at the milling Redemptionists at the front of the column. His other arm hung limply. Kayne saw fresh blood staining his robe.

'Go!' Kayne shouted. Vex glanced at him, then, tossing the empty pistol aside, lowered himself awkwardly over the edge.

Maybe it was his rig's bio-boosters kicking in, or perhaps it was the example of Vex and his men, who had nothing more to live for than an idea but who were still willing to die in its defence, but Kayne felt a wild exhilaration thrill through him. There would be no more running, no matter what the odds. He was Ty Helios Kayne and he would make his stand here.

He triggered his bolters again, prompting nothing more than a chorus of dry clicks. In his visor display, two red lights flashed. Empty. A fusillade

from the Redemptionists caused him to half turn, taking the impacts on the thick armour across his shoulders. Another warning light blinked into life. A bullet had nicked an actuator line.

None of this mattered, he decided as he turned back to face the Redemptionists. The front of the column was only metres from him, too close for those at the rear to risk firing on their own. The two brethren at the head of the column were bringing their weapons to bear, but none of this mattered, because...

No one hunts like House Ty!

A savage, howling laugh escaped his throat as he charged at the brethren, arms outstretched.

THIRTEEN

'For a moment I thought you had changed your mind,' Vex told him as they ran at a fast trot towards Hope's End. The open ground around the settlement's wall was eerily deserted but for the ruined shanties and numberless corpses. Zydo's horde had drawn back to the top of the rise. There was to be one more assault, it was clear, and this one would not stop until the wall had been breached.

Kayne's ears still rang from the detonation that had brought down the section of the ledge upon which he had been standing minutes ago. The first of the men at the head of the column had already been reduced to a smear on the rock wall, and the other had been punched, screaming off the ledge, when a volley of gunfire had cut into the Redemptionists, claiming two lives and driving the others back from him. A shout from Vex had reminded him of the plan. Head buzzing, limbs trembling almost uncontrollably, he had clambered unsteadily down the carved steps; halfway down he had slipped, lost his footing and landed heavily at the priest's feet.

Goresh had set one of the excavation charges at the foot of the steps and paid out a length of fuse. Several paces away from the wall he crouched beside the detonator. Standing in front of him, the remainder of Vex's team

provided covering fire as Kayne and the priest raced away from the steps. As they ran past him, Goresh depressed the plunger.

'For a moment I had no mind,' Kayne told the priest. 'No thoughts. Do you understand?'

'Only too well,' Vex replied. He slowed, came to a stop. 'You have my thanks. It's time you were on your way.' He beckoned to Goresh, who was bringing up the rear.

'Our friend here needs a guide,' Vex told him. 'The Wasted Land. What is it, five levels down? Take Filep with you.'

Goresh looked as if he was about to argue, but Vex waved away any objections he might have.

'You saw what he was willing to do for us. We had an agreement, he and I. I need you to honour my side of the bargain.'

Goresh nodded, shot Kayne an unhappy, resentful look, then called to the others, who had run on ahead. He jogged towards them, handed the detonator to one and beckoned another to follow him.

They didn't stop as they passed Kayne and Vex. Looking past them at the apparently featureless wall of rock, cast into shadow by the overhanging crag, Kayne's visor-enhanced sight managed to pick out an area of deeper shadow: a tunnel mouth.

'If you have a way out, why in Helmawr's name don't you take it?' he asked.

'You must have some idea of how many people there are in Hope's End,' Vex explained. It would take days for them to get through that hole.' He gestured towards the massed ranks of Zydo's crusade. 'And I don't think they're going to give us more than a few minutes, do you?'

Then come with me,' Kayne suggested. 'It makes no sense for you to stay. You've already done more for these creat- I mean, these people - than they ever had a right to expect.'

'I stay because it's right,' Vex replied. 'Because everything that I believe means that this is where I must be. Redemption has its price. Mine is atonement for those things I did while I followed the Arch-Zealot. If you didn't feel the same, why did you come back?'

Kayne stared at him dumbly, struggling to find an answer.

'Come on, Spyrer!' Goresh stood at the edge of the crag's shadow, beckoning.

'Go,' Vex told him, nodding in Goresh's direction. 'Whether you know it or not, you are seeking redemption. I hope you find it - and that the price is not too high.'

Kayne opened his mouth to speak but Vex had already turned away. Kayne watched him run towards the remaining members of his team. He shouted something, the words of which Kayne didn't catch, and they ran ahead of him towards the settlement.

Goresh shouted again and Kayne turned his back on Vex, on the doomed settlement of Hope's End, and sprinted off towards him.

The tunnel mouth was wide enough to allow two men to enter side-by-side, but soon narrowed. There was barely enough room for Kayne to move between the heavy metal struts that supported the irregular rock ceiling. Goresh unclipped a small battery-powered lantern from his belt and led the way; Filep brought up the rear. Both were silent and sullen, clearly unhappy at leaving Vex.

They reached a junction, the tunnel splitting. One passage widened and led upwards. Goresh led them along the second branch, which angled sharply downwards and remained as cramped as the tunnel they had left.

The tunnel floor was rough and unfinished. Several times Kayne stumbled, foot skidding away from him on a jumble of loose fragments, shoulder slamming into one of the roof supports. The first time this happened, Goresh stopped and turned to regard him with a sneer.

'Want to bring the Hive down on us?' Goresh growled. 'Watch where you're puttin' your feet.'

The tunnel branched again and again. Even when all the alternatives led downwards, Goresh seemed to choose the most cramped. Kayne began to wonder if, now they were clear of Vex's influence, his guides planned to lead him into a tunnel so narrow that he would become wedged, stuck fast, and where they might leave him to starve.

The tunnel opened halfway up the wall of a high gallery. Goresh turned, lowered himself over the lip of the opening and, after hanging by his fingertips for a moment, dropped lightly to the floor.

Kayne had no choice but to jump. He landed heavily but stayed on his feet. A dry, mechanical clack came from one of his suit's knee joints and

the warning light in his visor display flashed more urgently - the jump had done nothing to help his rig's already damaged actuator system.

Filep dropped easily from the opening and Goresh led the way across the gallery floor. Ranged around the walls were huge machines, equipped with devices for drilling, others with jaws that looked capable of grinding rock to paste, mobile conveyors and flatbed wagons. Kayne's attention was caught by a splash of colour revealed by the beam of Goresh's lantern. Focusing his visor's enhancer, he saw that it was a yellow helmet, perched jauntily atop the engine grill of one of the gargantuan steam-powered earthmovers. Kayne wondered how many centuries it had been since its owner had left it there.

There were six or seven possible exits, wide and high enough to accommodate the forgotten monsters that slept in the gallery. Goresh led them towards the furthest from the opening through which they had arrived. Kayne discovered with relief that its floor had been covered with plates of ridged metal, to aid the progress of the machines up and down its slope. Bizarrely, a number of the lighting panels bolted to the high ceiling still shone down, dotting the tunnel floor with broad pools of yellowish light. The ramp led down to another, as wide as one of the processional thoroughfares through the Spire, that spiralled through the rock above and below them.

There were more machines on the level below, together with long-disused workers' quarters - tall prefabricated rookeries which might accommodate upwards of a thousand people. Kayne glimpsed them as they passed the wide gallery entrance, as Goresh impatiently led them on down the spiral thoroughfare.

A rock fall had sealed the entrance to the next level. Kayne surprised himself by hoping that the collapse had occurred after the gallery had been abandoned. Why should he care whether hundreds of nameless, House-less drones had been crushed beneath a million tonnes of rock?

Goresh stopped at a wide, oval opening in one wall.

'Down there,' he said, pointing into the darkness.

'Garbage chute,' Filep added, with more than a trace of amusement in his voice.

The Wasted Land is down there?' Kayne wanted to be sure. Goresh nodded.

This is as far as we go. The Pastor asked us to show you the way. Here it is.' He nodded at Filep and the pair of them turned, ready to retrace their steps.

'I know that you wanted to stay with Vex,' Kayne said. Goresh and Filep paused, looked back at him. Kayne suddenly had no idea why he had opened his mouth, but could only think of one more thing to say.

'I'm sorry.'

Filep snorted - whether in amusement, derision or surprise, Kayne couldn't tell.

'A Spyrer, sorry?' Goresh replied. There was no mistaking the mocking tone in his voice. That'll be the day'

'I hope Vex survives. I hope there's a future for Hope's End,' Kayne said, stung by Goresh's words, but Goresh and Filep had turned their backs on him and were already moving quickly up the slope. Kayne watched them for a moment, then turned to the oval mouth of the chute and cautiously stepped inside.

'So what are we gonna do?'

Goresh looked at Filep, but didn't slacken his pace. They were marching through the darkness between two pools of light, two levels above where they had left the Spyrer and he didn't want to waste any more time on this fool's errand.

'What?' he asked.

'I mean, it'll all be over, right? You saw it - the Redemptionists were getting ready for a big one. Hope's End'll be in pieces by the time we get back.'

'So you figure we should cut and run?' Goresh stopped suddenly, turned to face Filep squarely. 'You figure we should leave the pastor an' everybody else to burn?'

'The pastor knew what was gonna happen,' Filep reasoned. 'He wouldn't want us to go back to that.'

'You do what you like,' Goresh sneered dismissively. 'I'm going back. If I can take a few more of the scripture-spoutin' scumbags with me, that'll be

my redemption.'

'Your reward is closer than you think, Underhiver.'

Goresh and Filep spun round, trying to locate the source of the voice. Goresh brought his autogun to bear, the rifle braced across the hand in which he held the lantern.

He felt a light tap on the barrel of his gun, then a sudden numbness in his arm. The lantern beam jumped, spun crazily then stabbed upwards as it hit the floor. For a moment, the thought it had slipped from his fingers.

Filep's yelp of alarm made him look down at the lantern - and the hand that was still clamped around it. His hand.

There was still no pain, even as he dropped his rifle and clutched to his chest the fresh stump of his wrist. Eyes wide with surprise, he thought he saw something flash towards him through the lantern beam.

Goresh's body remained standing, its neck gouting blood, for several heartbeats after his head hit the floor. Its knees buckled, slowly at first, then, as if to make up for lost time, it hit the floor like a heavy sack dropped form a great height.

His killer stepped into the light. It wore some kind of form-fitting armour. The small circular shield attached to one forearm sparkled as if inlaid with precious gems. In the other hand it held a slim sword.

It was not alone.

Filep turned a full stumbling circle as the others stepped towards him. Five of them - six, counting Goresh's killer. Two wore the same bulky armour as the Spyrer he and Goresh had recently left, two wore close-fitting suits of what might have been some kind of polished leather, from the bulbous forearms of which long, wicked-looking claws extended. The last of them was the hardest to make out; it seemed to be wearing some kind of cloak that blurred the outline of its body.

'We thought we'd lost you in the tunnels,' one of the heavily armoured Spyrers said.

Filep knew that he should raise his own rifle, at least try to take a couple of them with him, but found that he couldn't move. Something was pinning his arms to his sides. Looking down, he saw that some kind of wire had wrapped itself around him.

'I am Mordecai Gyre of House Ulanti,' the Spyrer continued, ignoring Filep's vain attempts to break free of the ironsilk. 'My fellow hunters and I

seek the one, like ourselves, whom you were escorting through these levels. If you wish to spare yourself some pain, you will tell us where to find him. Should you choose to resist, the pain shall be greater than is strictly necessary.

'But, believe me, Underhiver, you will tell us.'

FOURTEEN

Kayne's Descent was more rapid that he had planned. The curving metal floor of the garbage chute was slick with the rotten remains of ages-old refuse. He had only taken three or four precarious steps down its sharp incline before losing his footing and sliding the rest of the way on his back, arms and legs kicking up a spray of the grey-green filth.

His fall was arrested by a mass of slightly more solid waste that plugged almost half of the chute's exit. His arms and legs sank into the semi-congealed mass as he clambered over it and emerged, on hands and knees, into a landscape of memories.

The surface fell away from the chute. As he climbed to his feet, Kayne found himself looking out across the undulating dunes. Unbidden images from his first visit to this place flooded his mind: climbing over dunes in the company of Bael and the others; the boy fishing in the pool of effluent; laying proximity alarms and positioning sentry units around the defile in which they had chosen to spend the next rest cycle; and, inevitably, the ambush.

As if pursued by the memory of the insane chattering of their attackers, Kayne hurried down the slope, liquid filth collected during his slide down the chute squirting from the joints of his rig as he moved.

'We're stile there, where you left us.'

Bael's last words ran through his mind again as he plodded up the side of yet another dune. Reaching its top, he scanned the landscape, searching for some sign of Pitar, Aidor and the others, though he had little enough idea of what form such a sign might take. Smoke from a cooking fire, perhaps, or some kind of encampment? If they had been unable to accompany Bael

on his final, fatal journey back to the Spire, then their suits must have been disabled during the ambush, or perhaps they were themselves too badly injured to risk making the trip. Perhaps they had spent the intervening time eking out an existence down here, reduced to the level of the pitiful creatures that lived out their entire lives among the refuse.

And, even if he should find them, how would they greet him? How pleased would they be to see the man who abandoned them to the cluttering horde of their attackers?

And what might he find to say to them? Should he beg for their forgiveness, or invent some fiction to cover his cowardice? Should he tell them that he had come to lead them home - but that they would have to face the Ulanti hunters, their Delaque cohorts and his own treacherous brother if they wanted to see the Spire again? Alone, his bolters empty and his suit damaged, they would surely consider him a sorry-looking rescuer.

The cave mouth was small, easily missed. At first, Kayne thought it was just a shadow cast by a slight overhang on the lower slope of the next dune along. He had already encountered two such pathetic dwellings, both of which had been empty. Peering cautiously in through the openings, he had noticed how the floors had been levelled, how salvaged artefacts had been arranged around the low, cramped spaces according to patterns that would have made sense only to the occupiers. At the rear of each cave there had been a reeking pile of what he imagined to be bedding materials. The thought of Meela and the others living under such conditions made him shudder and burn with shame.

A cooking fire sat in the centre of the first cave he had explored, its embers still glowing dully. Had the cave dwellers seen him coming? Perhaps they were hiding behind a neighbouring dune, waiting for him to move on - or lurking until he was fully inside the cave, without an escape route, before they attacked.

Kayne had backed hurriedly out of the cave, straightened and, senses suddenly alert, scanned the area. Nothing. Moving on across the dunes, he had seen no sign of the activity that he remembered from his first visit, no sign of what passed for life this far down in the Underhive.

This new cave was probably empty, too, but he had to be sure. He took a first step - then spun round as a las-bolt hit the impacted garbage to his right.

At first he saw nothing, then looked up. A shape wheeled in the air, metres above. Kayne recognised the shape of the wings: Yeld. Instinctively, he raised a fist, before the blinking red lights in his visor display reminded him that his bolters were empty. Two more ruby beams flashed downwards, hitting the dune to his left. Something on the loose surface ignited with a pop. Kayne spun round again and broke into an uneven run down the dune's slope, heading for the cave.

A volley of las-fire hit the ground ahead of him, forcing him to turn sharply away from the cave. The beams' after-images glowed in his vision as he ran.

He didn't remember seeing a Yeld among the Ulanti hunters, though the robes they had worn would have disguised the rig's outline. That the airborne hunter had not led the ambush among the ash dunes confirmed what Kayne already suspected about Gyre: that he was not one to settle for a long-distance kill. He liked to get close to his prey, close enough to watch the life fade from its eyes.

The next volley from above must have hit a pocket of gas. A column of blue flame jetted out of the ground in front of Kayne, who cut right, then right again, heading back towards the cave in the hope that, as well as offering cover, it might contain something he could use as a missile. Though he would have little hope of bringing the Yeld hunter down, he might at least force him to back off, give him a chance to think. Having come this far, Kayne was determined not to die meekly, like some cornered animal.

As if sensing his intention, the Yeld hunter's next shot seared through his left knee. Pitching forward, he cried out, as much in frustration as pain. The sickening scent of cooked meat leaked from the wound as he rolled over onto his back and leant forward to grasp the ruined joint.

The Yeld wheeled, swooped low, then turned again, finally coming to rest halfway up the slope of the dune upon which he has been standing when he first spotted the cave.

'He's not going anywhere,' Kayne overheard the Yeld report into her comm-link. Her voice was soft, well educated. 'He awaits your pleasure.'

Nerve-endings cauterised by the las-beam, Kayne's leg below the knee had gone mercifully numb. As he sat there, staring at the Yeld, he raged at himself. To stand atop one of the tallest dunes for kilometres around - how

could he have been so stupid? He might as well have erected a sign, sent up a flare to tell the Ulanti where to find him!

'Hello, brother.'

Kayne lifted his gaze to the top of the dune. Mot stood there, evidently enjoying the scene, flanked by the Ulanti, all of whom had divested themselves of their robes.

'What happened to your Delaque lapdogs?' Kayne shouted up at Gyre. 'Without them at your back, are you sure there are enough of you to handle a single, crippled quarry? I'd not expect any help from my brother, if I were you.'

'Come now, Kayne, where's your pride?' Mot sneered. 'Surely you can face your destiny, however distasteful, without resorting to childish insults.'

'The Delaques were no longer necessary,' Gyre called down to Kayne. You were our prime target. Your companions were merely unfortunate witnesses who could not be allowed to live. It seemed appropriate that we end this hunt without their involvement.'

Gyre led the hunters down the slope. Kayne watched them come - until a sudden noise made him look up, over their heads, to the top of the dune. A line of ragged figures stood there, pressed shoulder-to-shoulder and swaying slightly as if with barely restrained excitement. As he watched, more figures joined the line, rising up from the far side of the dune, and the noise that had alerted him to their arrival grew in volume: a dry, insectile chittering.

Mot was the first to notice them. He turned, let out a startled shout and, losing his footing, stumbled into Gyre. The others turned, got their first glimpse of the new arrivals and opened fire. Bolter fire and las-beams tore into the line, but the gaps it made were quickly filled. The chattering grew yet louder and the line began to advance down the slope, revealing itself to be a vast, ragged tide.

At the foot of the slope, Kayne smiled. His hunt was over. He would die here, as he should have done months ago.

And, this time, there would be no running.

FIFTEEN

'Kayne!'

The name drifted like a phantom through the clicks and squeals, the background chatter of the creatures that carried him through the tunnels beneath the dunes. Kayne didn't know what he found more surprising: that someone had bored these narrow, twisting passageways down through the compacted, millennia-old detritus that lay beneath the rolling dunes, or that these no-longer-human creatures were still capable of uttering a recognisable word.

He was sure, however, of what he found the most surprising of all: that he was still alive.

It had felt as if he had become a spectator at his own nightmare as the chittering tide had rushed down the slope of the dune, their cries growing wilder, punctuated by the Ulanti hunters' gunfire. Their man in the Malcadon gear had been the first to disappear, still slashing wildly with his long claws, beneath the wave of misshapen bodies. Like Pitar, the Yeld had tried to take to the air, only to be brought down by the grasping hands of the throng. For every body that the hunter wearing the Jakara rig carved into bloody pieces, three more would take its place, hands reaching for her, faces twisted in the same ecstatic rictus.

Kayne watched with a dark satisfaction as Mot tried to bolt, racing down the slope then turning sharply in an attempt to outflank the oncoming tide, only to find that those at the ends of the line had moved past the hunters' position and were now swinging round to encircle them. Seeing this, Mot stumbled to a halt - and, in a moment, was gone.

Gyre and the other Orrus-clad Ulanti held out the longest. Kayne was irresistibly reminded of Bael's last stand, though, oddly, he felt no guilt at the memory. The sight of the throng, the realisation that his life had only heartbeats left to run, had purged him of all emotion, leaving only a vague yearning for the peace of the grave.

By the time their bolters fell silent, they were already hidden from Kayne's sight. He was surrounded.

'Well?' he asked. What are you waiting for?' Their frenzy seemed to have subsided. The faces that returned his gaze had slackened. One of their

number bent down to get a closer look, her cheek twitching. No, Kayne realised, not twitching.

Something was moving beneath her skin.

'Kayne!'

The word didn't come from the woman. It seemed to resolve itself out of the unintelligible warbling of all those who stood over him. Kayne thought he had imagined it, but then it came again, like a snatch of conversation overheard through the murmur of a vast crowd.

Others bent to join the woman. Reaching out, they began to unfasten his suit, lifted away his helmet. He knew that he should try to stop them, but discovered that he no longer had the energy or the desire. Only when they removed the plates around his ruined knee did he cry out and thrash against their grasp, using up the last of his energy. Those working on his leg paused until he stopped struggling and then, almost tenderly, completed their task.

Once free of the rig, they had lifted him gently between them and, like a hero fallen in battle, bore him across the dunes.

When darkness closed about him, he assumed they had brought him to a cave, though for what purpose he had no idea, but they kept moving. The angle of the floor changed abruptly, leading downwards. Kayne felt as if he was being swallowed by the Hive itself. The darkness was total, blotting out all sense of time and direction. Kayne wondered whether he was, in fact, already dead, his body lying in pieces at the foot of the dune. Perhaps this journey was one last hallucination, or the path taken by all cowards and failures to a special hell reserved for them by the Emperor.

Redemption? He thought of Vex as he continued his slide through the darkness. I doubt it.

Kayne opened his eyes to the sound of water. He had no memory of his eyes closing, nor any idea of how long he had been unconscious.

He opened his eyes slowly and eased his head up off his chest. He was standing, supported under each shoulder by one of those who had borne him through the tunnels, on the rocky bank of what appeared to be a wide, open sewer. The stench was appalling; the water moved slowly, as if weighed down by the effluent it carried. Looking around him, he saw that

a crowd had gathered at the water's edge, some carrying primitive torches. A low, unintelligible murmuring ran through their ranks as they stood, swaying gently as if engaged in some form of communal prayer.

Kayne recalled stories he had heard of forces that existed beyond the warp, the unseen interstellar ocean that stretched between worlds and through which the ships of the Imperium travelled to do the bidding of the Emperor. These forces could twist the minds and bodies of men, he had heard, bending them to their perverse will. Entire worlds had been lost to the Imperium when their inhabitants had turned to the worship of these forces. With a sudden rush of fear, it occurred to him that he might have fallen into the clutches of just such an unholy cabal, here in Hive Primus, and that he had been brought here to witness one of their blasphemous rituals. Such a ritual, he imagined, would require a sacrifice.

Ripples had begun to spread across the water. Bubbles rose from its depths in greater and greater numbers. The slick, iridescent surface seemed to boil.

Kayne sagged against the arms that supported him, almost overcome with relief when he saw that what had emerged from the depths was a machine, not some unspeakable abomination summoned from beyond. A long, tapering metal teardrop, topped by a stubby tower, it wallowed for a moment in the wake of its own emergence. The water ran slickly over the riveted plates of its hull. A hatch towards the rear of the vessel clanged open. Figures appeared through the hatch and set about loosening the ropes that secured one of a number of smaller craft to the hull. The skiff was set down in the water and a number of the figures climbed aboard. An engine coughed into life and its crew steered it towards the shore.

Kayne found himself moving closer to the water's edge. For a moment, he dug in his heels, tried to halt his progress, but those who supported him merely lifted him off his feet. He was delivered to the narrow beach as the skiffs prow ran aground and three of the boat's crew jumped ashore. One of them was a huge specimen, built like a pit-fighter, but, like his two companions, he wore the same slack expression as all those who had gathered on the shore to greet them.

Kayne was handed over into their care. The pit-fighter grasped him under the shoulders while one of the others lifted his feet. Any hope of escape evaporated the moment Kayne felt the power in the larger man's

hands. The third member of the skiffs crew to come ashore aided them as they carried him aboard the boat, then pushed the prow away from the beach, jumping lightly aboard as the engine coughed into life once again. The fourth member of the crew steered the boat towards the waiting submersible.

As the skiff came alongside its mother ship, Kayne noticed a brass plate riveted to the side of the stubby tower. Etched into it was a single word: Queequeg.

Kayne was lifted aboard the submersible with as much ceremony as a sack of meal. The pit-fighter held him at arms' length, as one might hold a new born child, and lowered him through the hatch to waiting hands below while the rest of the skiffs crew secured the boat. As he was manhandled along a cramped corridor leading to the wider end of the vessel, Kayne heard the hatch slam shut behind him. The ship vibrated as the engines powered-up and the deck over which he limped began to dip.

The incline of the deck had steepened by the time he reached the control room. A low, continuous hum filled the slightly less cramped space - a sound which, Kayne was sure, did not originate from the ship's machinery. The room was lined with a tangle of pipes and gauges; cables hung in thick bunches from the ceiling. In the dim, red-tinged light it appeared that yet more cables hung between the various workstations and those who occupied them.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, Kayne saw that these cables were thicker and paler than those that ran across the ceiling. And they were alive. Tendrils of flesh connected each crewmember to their controls. These pale extrusions flexed and swayed as, without any recognisable command being given, they brought the Queequeg to a level course.

A member of the crew stood in the centre of the control room, eye pressed to the viewing glass set into a thick pipe that entered the control room through the ceiling - some kind of viewing scope, Kayne decided. The figure wore a heavy jacket of thick animal hide, still covered with a layer of its previous owner's short coarse fur. He turned away from the pipe to glance at Kayne, a reassuringly human gesture of curiosity, Kayne thought - until he saw the tendril that snaked from around from the far side of the pipe, terminating at his temple. Kayne watched, appalled, as a ripple ran the length of the tendril's flesh. Something was moving beneath its

skin, using it as a fleshy tunnel to travel from the vessel's machine parts, to the organic haven of the crewman's skull.

At that moment he knew what, standing on the shoreline, he had only feared: that fate had delivered him into the hands of the damned.

The figure by the viewing scope had emitted a short series of clicks and those who still supported Kayne had conveyed him to a tiny cabin in the mid-section of the vessel. The room was furnished with a small bunk, a metal table and chair. The cabin had a neglected, disused look, as had the threadbare hammocks he had glimpsed, hanging forlornly between the submersible's bulkheads. Evidently, the creatures that manned this vessel had once required sleep, like any other human beings. Lying on the cramped bunk after his handlers had departed, Kayne wondered whether mercy was another human trait that had been lost in their transformation.

Kayne awoke with a start, first wondering when his eyes had closed, how long he had been asleep. Then he noted that the engines' dull, monotonous throb had changed pitch. The deck, the walls of the cabin were canted up at an acute angle. The ship was surfacing. They would be coming for him soon.

He swung his legs off the bunk - and cried out at the excruciating pain that exploded in his damaged knee, erasing all hope of a last-minute escape attempt. Whatever fate had in store for him, he would have no choice but to face it.

The cabin door opened. Two crewmembers he had not seen before stepped into the room, arms outstretched, reaching for him.

Kayne was carried, unresisting, to the rear of the submersible, then lifted up towards the already-open hatch. The crewman Kayne had decided might once have been a pit-fighter stood over the opening, reached down with his massive arms and lifted him easily into the reeking air. A skiff had already been set in the water beside the Queequeg. Kayne was manhandled aboard the swaying boat and the pit-fighter followed him aboard.

The submersible had surfaced in a wide, dome-roofed cave. Some kind of light-producing fungus hung in ribbons from the ceiling. The skiff sped

towards a wide ledge that ran around part of the curved wall. Shadows hung in drapes over the rear of the rock platform.

There were figures standing on the ledge, awaiting the skiffs arrival. The boat's helmsman kept the engine running, holding the craft tight against the vertical rock as Kayne was lifted - by the pit-fighter, yet again - to the waiting hands above. The hunter looked down at the pit-fighter, expecting him to follow, but he remained aboard the skiff. His job, it seemed, was done.

Though he would not have believed it possible, those into whose hands he had been passed were an even more unsettling sight than either the horde of chittering idiots who had carried him to the shoreline or the crew of the Queequeg. Tendrils of flesh hung between them, their surfaces in constant motion, as if a flurry of activity was going on beneath their skin. One of them appeared to be the product of a fusion of two bodies. It scuttled sideways on four legs, grinned slackly at him with two mouths. Four eyes gleamed wetly at him in the pale light.

Kayne was conveyed away from the edge, towards the shadows and what appeared to be a large rock that protruded from the ledge's uneven surface. No, not a rock, Kayne decided: some kind of sculpture. Had he been brought to be sacrificed before a representation of these creatures' blasphemous god? Metal gleamed dully in the diffuse light. Kayne made out curved plates, the outline of which reminded him of something.

Kayne's handlers came to a halt and, as he watched, the sculpture began to move, breaking apart along invisible seams. The single monolithic shape became five, six separate figures, connected by the now all-too-familiar tendrils of flesh. The fleshy tunnels also broke apart, withdrawing quickly, sliding out of sight through self-sealing slits in the figures' armour.

Panic welled up within Kayne. He struggled against the hands that held him, kicked uselessly at the air. He knew what he was about to see - and wished with all his heart that he would be hurled into the poisonous murk at the foot of the ledge before he was forced to see it.

One of the figures stepped forward, oversized gloves reaching up, unfastening the helmet that obscured its eyes. When it lifted the helmet away, Kayne found himself staring looking into a face that he had last seen, lying dead on the floor of the Great Gallery.

'Greetings, Kayne,' Bael said, apparently having some difficulty with the words. 'We have so missed you.'

SIXTEEN

'If only you hadn't run,' Bael told him, 'you would already know our joy'

For long moments, Kayne had been unable to speak as his mind struggled to comprehend what he saw. Bael was dead, yet here he stood, together with Meela, Pitar, Volk, Georgi and laughing Aidor, all of them looking as they did the day they left the Spire, all of them wearing the same slack smile.

Bael's mention of his cowardice broke the spell and words tumbled out of him in a torrent: stammered apologies, half-formed excuses, attempts to explain why he had returned. Then finally, despairingly: What have they done to you?'

They have set us free,' Bael replied. 'Free of the bonds of individuality. Free of the lonely confines of a single body, the narrow limits of a single mind.'

Kayne shook his head violently. He would have pressed his hands to his ears to shut out Bael's words - and the inhuman clicking that accompanied them - but his handlers maintained their iron grip on his arms.

'This is madness!' he gasped. 'Blasphemy.'

'This is science,' Bael replied. 'Lost, long forgotten knowledge, buried among the roots of the Hive.

The Underhivers call such knowledge archaeotech - lost examples of the massive, world-shaping technologies our forebears used to spread the human race across the galaxy, to colonise the worlds they found, to raise this and the other hive-cities of Necromunda. But not all archaeotech exists on such a scale. Some of it is minute, designed not to manipulate base materials such as metal and rock, but blood and flesh and bone. To move within us and between us, to make mind and body one and to bring all minds together.' Bael swept his arm in a gesture that included the other hunters and those monstrosities that still held Kayne, mind reeling, in their grip.

That is what flows through us now,' Bael continued. 'Its creation is lost in time, but we believe it was created to ease the process by which worlds might be re-modelled, made more suitable for human habitation - or else to alter the bodies of colonists to fit the world on which they chose to live. Once lost, it must have lain dormant for centuries until it was found, its cracked containment vessel salvaged from among the debris of a hive-quake. We know this because we share the memories of the first one who found it - an outcast, a scavenger named Drell. Free at last, it entered the body of its first host, then moved quickly among his associates.

They were the first to know the joy of connection, their minds and memories co-mingled, and, in their joy, they wished to share it with others.'

'This isn't freedom!' Kayne shouted. This is mind-control! You've become the slaves of this unholy nonsense!'

Bael regarded Kayne calmly. The idiot grin didn't fade.

'Is it madness to know that you will never feel lonely again?' asked Bael. To never again live in fear of your fellows, to know that they share your thoughts and feelings? That is a gift. That is freedom.

Those who found us among the waste dunes wished only to share this gift with us. The destruction of a body means nothing since the mind survives. Should it be desired, another body can be constructed from any organic material. We created such a body in my image, to call you back to us. We knew you would come. You are our brother.'

As he spoke, Bael stepped closer and raised his hand. The Orrus glove peeled back, like the petals of some impossible metal and ceramite flower, revealing the pale, long-fingered hand beneath.

As his brother reached out towards him, Kayne saw that something was moving beneath the skin of the man's palm. A seam appeared, running from the base of his thumb to that of his fourth finger.

Kayne whipped his head desperately from side to side. From behind him, a pair of hands clamped themselves around his head, forcing him to stare, wide-eyed with fear, at his brother's hand as it covered his face, stifling his last human scream.

They rose through bands of light, the elevator car clattering and jolting around them as it carried them up the shaft. Kayne stood, clad once again in his Orrus rig, flanked by Aidor and Mot. His brother had joined them, chattering with joy and wonder at his new, liberated state, as they had journeyed up through the Hive, past the deserted, smoking ruin that had once been Hope's End and onwards, upwards, towards the Spire.

'Whether you know it or not, you are seeking redemption.' Kayne remembered Vex's last words to the man he had once been. 'I hope you find it - and that the price is not too high.'

The only price had been to shed a lifetime of loneliness, fear and isolation - and that had been no price at all. Now he looked forward to sharing his redemption with the rest of his family, his House, with every inhabitant of Hive Primus, of Necromunda itself. Imagine it - no more need for petty politicking between Houses, between hives! No more fear. No more lies.

A smile hung loosely about his lips as his mind hummed and buzzed with the lives of everyone he had communicated with during his ascent - and the lives of all those they had communicated with. Distance was no obstacle; the language produced and translated by the minute machines that now flowed through him could convey unbelievable amounts of information across vast distances, beyond the range of human perception. Words now seemed so slow, so clumsy, but he would have to use them again soon, when the elevator arrived at the Ty House apartments.

He would tell the members of his House what they wanted to hear: that he and Mot had found the lost hunters, though at the cost of their own companions. He and Mot would return to the bosom of the Helios clan, Meela, Aidor and the others to their own. Then, when they were safe and secure, they would begin to share the gift they had already received. The deception was regrettable, but the end - the glorious vision of a united hive, a united world! - would justify the means.

The elevator rattled one last time as it reached the top of the shaft. Through the grille of the car door, Kayne saw the assembled honour guard that always greeted returning hunters. One of the ornately uniformed House Guard opened the door and saluted. Two ranks of the guard lined the corridor, at the end of which stood Lord Ty himself, resplendent in the robes he reserved for high ceremonies. Beside Lord Ty stood Kayne's

father, Ty Helios Cal, face pale with the illness that had dogged him for so long, supported by two of his personal guard. Kayne was surprised to see them here - normally, the formal greetings would take place in the Great Gallery.

'We return in honour and glory,' Kayne announced, according to the long-established ritual, as he led the hunters between the ranks of the honour guard.

'And you are welcome,' Lord Ty gave the ritual reply, then turned, leading the way through the corridors. Kayne's father tottered unsteadily in his wake. The hunters, escorted by the honour guard, followed.

As was the usual practice, the corridors had been cleared of House servants. The procession moved in silence until it reached the doors which led to the Great Gallery. Two members of Lord Ty's retinue hurried forward to open the doors. As Lord Ty, Kayne's father and the others stepped through into the gallery, Lord Ty's chamberlain turned to face the honour guard holding up his hand to bring them to a halt.

'You will wait here a moment,' he announced, 'to allow our Lord to take his place.'

The chamberlain then disappeared through the doors. Kayne noticed that the guard to his right seemed to be shuffling nervously. Normally these ceremonial warriors were the very model of correctness. Before he could give the matter any more thought, the doors swung open again and the guard moved forward, escorting the hunters into the gallery.

The sound of heavy bolts slamming home across the doors echoed briefly around the almost-deserted gallery, rapidly followed by the sound of running feet as the honour guard sprinted away from the hunters. Kayne stared in incomprehension at the group of massively armoured figures that stood facing them, weapons trained on Kayne and his companions. There were fifteen of them, Kayne counted. Half as tall again as a man, their armour was midnight black, but for unit markings on their shoulder plates and a grey heart emblazoned on their chest plates. Half their number carried bolters, etched with the two-headed Imperial eagle; the rest carried more bulky-looking weapons: meltas.

'Welcome home, Ty Helios Kayne - if that is truly who you are.' A black-robed figure stood to one side of the armoured figures, flanked by his similarly attired retinue. Cinar, Kayne remembered: the inquisitor. Then

Kayne remembered something else: among Cinar's retinue there had been a tech-adept. Had the adept probed the remains of the simulacrum that had been sent to call him? Had he found something?

Kayne looked past Cinar, to where Lord Ty and his retinue stood. Desperately, he searched for a face.

'Father?' he called.

The only answer he received was the dull roar of a melta being triggered.

Ty Helios Cal looked down at the remains of his son. The old man felt grief, of course, but he also knew the pain that came with the certain knowledge that his family's disgrace would last for generations. His reputation, honed and crafted over the decade of his long life, the services he had performed for this Lord Ty and his father before him, would count for nothing. He would be known to history as the father of not one, but three, sons who consorted with blasphemy.

'Your sons' example shall stand as a warning to all who would seek after forbidden knowledge.' The inquisitor stood beside him. 'Had my tech-adept not examined the corpse of your first-born, had he not uncovered the unclean creatures

within him, think of the horrors that might have been unleashed throughout the Hive.' Cinar did not mention that these creatures were now safely stowed aboard the Thunderhawk that rested on one of the Spire's larger landing pads, ready for transport to the distant laboratories of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

'I have no sons!' Cal spat weakly. The eerie, inhuman squealing that erupted from the throats of Kayne and the others as they died still rang in his ears. 'I disown them!'

That is as it should be,' Cinar nodded, then turned to address Sergeant Lycidius of the Iron Hearts, whose men, under the supervision of Cinar's tech-adept, were busy collecting the still-smouldering remains of the other hunters. 'As planned, I shall depart on the Blessed Redemption and make my report to my Ordo's superiors. I have informed Lord Ty that your unit will remain here, held ready in case any more of these creatures attempt to enter the Spire. Should this occur, you have been given full authority to deal with them. Lord Helmawr has been made aware of the situation.'

The massive Space Marine nodded, then strode back into formation. Cinar turned back to the old man, who was still staring down at his son.

'Emperor be blessed that the Blessed Redemption arrived on schedule. It can only have been divine providence that a Chapter of the Emperor's finest warriors were aboard. The campaign on Livius Nine went well, they tell me.'

Cai nodded.

'Emperor be blessed,' he repeated quietly.

NINETEEN

The man who had once been Ty Helios Bael stood on the ledge, flanked by his brothers and fellow hunters. It had been a small thing to create new bodies for them to house the copies of their intelligences that were stored in the archaeotech which swam through his veins. It was not necessary, of course. The personalities of the men and women who had been Kayne, Mot, Volk, Pitar, Aidor, Meela and Georgi could have remained within him for eternity, but he found their physical presence somehow comforting.

Together they watched as the Queequeg slipped beneath the water of the pool, where the vessel and its crew would remain, dormant, until it was needed again. Waiting at the bottom of the elevator shaft, Bael had received Kayne's last communication from the Great Gallery. Moving swiftly back down through the Hive, Bael had broadcast the news: an ambush.

Somehow their strategy had been uncovered, but it did not matter. Time was on their side. Given time, their kind would become mere rumour once again. Given time, these rumours would fade, become half-forgotten stories. No one posted guards against stories.

But he knew: one day, decades, perhaps centuries from now, they would rise. And Necromunda would be theirs.