NECROMUNDA
OMNIBUS TWO

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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.*

A NECROMUNDA NOVEL

FLESHWORKS

LUCIEN SOULBAN

PROLOGUE

SOREN WAS a dead man, each step a countdown to his own execution, but that didn't stop him from running faster. He no longer cared that his calves were numb or that his ribs ached hard and stabbed him in the gut with every stride.

In the mad, wild panic to escape his pursuers, Soren had taken too many side corridors, too many unfamiliar passages. Left, right, left again before he lost his bearings. He was lost, running blind past endless walls of rivet-punched plates the colour of dull metal. Soren stumbled down flights of grated stairs, their ceilings pressed down by the crushing weight often miles worth of aging city.

Finally, fatigue robbed Soren of his footing; he slipped on a greasy patch of pooling machine oil that leaked from the braided intestines of ceiling pipes and tubes. His ears roared from the surge of pounding blood and the piston-hiss of the servos in his augmented arm. The sounds of gunfire that had hounded him through the warrens of the Underhive had stopped. It was silent, his heart beating as if from behind his eardrums.

Soren wiped the black oil from his face and stood with a steadying hand against the wall. His legs quivered with fatigue and his artificial eyes strained to detect thermal variants in his surroundings, but to no avail. He was near a smelting plant and the heat from all that molten metal bled through the walls' multiple skins. The casing protecting his implants grew warmer against the connective tissues of his flesh, and while not painful, it would be uncomfortable soon. The air felt thick with humidity; the walls perspired. It was several degrees hotter than the human body. That rendered his pursuers invisible to thermal optics, and Soren's normal sight couldn't see much better in the corridor.

Soren hadn't escaped. He felt it and it found voice in his panicked whimpers. Fate wouldn't let go that easily, if at all. Fate was patient; fate

was hungry; and fate seemed blessed with an endless supply of ammunition. Shots rang out in the corridor; a round punched a dent in the wall above Soren's head. He turned and ran, catching a fleeting glimpse of someone in the dark, a thermal ghost washed out by the surrounding heat.

Soren continued running, until the last shot rang out; until he staggered to a drunken, sloppy halt; until he looked down at the wet, crimson flower blossoming on his shirt, the flesh petals of a blackened, scorched hole in his chest that sizzled; until he quietly wondered if his heart had burst or if getting shot normally hurt this much...

CHAPTER ONE

A good falsehood is more comforting than the truth.

— *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

THE EAR-POPPING crack of gunshots and the hiss of lasfire was almost deafening; it echoed off the walls, amplified to storm's pitch by the thick, pockmarked plascrete. Uriah Storm ignored the racket. He focused on his target, both hands wrapped around the bolt pistol's grip, and angled down to the floor. His blue eyes drifted, as though lost to some silent conundrum.

Suddenly, with an experienced snap, he brought the pistol up - one hand to aim, the other to steady - and squeezed off four shots, his finger barely tapping the hair trigger. The untamed weapon kicked in his hand with each shot; four of four rounds found their target. A fleeting smile escaped his lips and Uriah chuckled. He felt like a child with a new toy.

The firing range was crowded today, a line of twenty men and women unleashing a blistering array of punishment. Uriah didn't look at them. Instead, he watched the steel-alloy targets scattered at various intervals along the range, hidden behind collapsed walls and blasted archways. That the targets all bore some semblance to the thick-necked, low-browed members of House Orlock was mere coincidence, or so the Delaque agents claimed with a smile. Still, too many of their shots were errant. Too many House members believed that filling the air with a steady hail of death was equal to being a crack shot.

Uriah clucked and smiled at his own sudden mischievous inspiration. He pivoted and fired another four shots into the other targets along the range, hitting the ones others had missed. A few people stopped firing and craned their heads to look in his direction. Most of the shooters scowled at him, though a couple returned his easy grin. Those of poor humour, Uriah decided, were likely to be equally poor shots.

Pleased with himself, Uriah ejected the pistol's clip and cleared the round in the chamber. He mouthed a quick 'thank you' to the Machine Spirit empowering the weapon. It was only when he turned the gun over to the weapons master standing next to him that he noticed the man had been talking.

'She is loud, isn't she?' Uriah said, removing the earplugs. 'You were saying?'

'What were you mumbling?' weapons master Coryin replied.

'Nothing,' Uriah said with a grin before waving dis-missively 'A mantra, I suppose, actually. *Hail to me,* or something to that effect.'

Coryin grunted. "Your shots are drifting,' he said. 'Kept hitting other targets.'

'Yes, surprising that,' Uriah said, admiring the engraved handle, 'but she has spirit. I like the gun. She's untamed.'

Too much for the likes of you, I suspect,' Coryin said. 'And too loud for your line of work.'

'Perhaps,' Uriah replied, taking a moment to unfurl the braid in his hair before tying it up into a simple ponytail. He noticed the bald Delaque man studying his crop of brown hair - a rarity among the Delaque, but necessary to someone in his position. There are times when the only proper response is a loud one,' Uriah said. 'I want her.'

'Get the requisition forms signed and she's yours. Oh, and Uriah, no forgeries this time. I'm double-checking every signature with Percal. Understood?'

'Coryin,' Uriah said, slapping the other man's shoulder, 'I'd never use the same trick twice on you.'

Coryin scowled as Uriah walked away with a laugh.

THE CORRIDORS were dark, the lights dimmed by half. The Delaque preferred their illumination on the darker side of grey; less harsh on their normally sensitive eyes. And they whispered while they spoke - even in passing conversation. The Delaque stronghold of Shadow-strohm was typical of the House's other assets throughout Hive Primus, all plascrete walls and endurasteel floors, their sky low, dark and lined with pipes. The walls bled history in dulled stains, the collected moisture of centuries and the occasional spatter of blood from days when the Houses waged their wars more openly. It did not share the opulence of the main House compound several miles above their heads, but Shadowstrohm was among the more active listening posts. It was closer to IIIe streets, and thus nearer to the action and bustle. It was also considered part of the trenches, the first line of defence against the other Houses.

To Uriah it was home in an unfriendly household. Several Delaque gangs made their residence in Shadowstrohm, at the insistence of the House's masters. It was a ploy against outsiders, making House Delaque seem larger and more organized than any of the other Houses, but behind the walls, Uriah belonged to one of several factions, and surviving meant knowing how to navigate the other groups.

Fortunately, Uriah was good at his game. Despite the youthful mien that cast his age some years short of thirty, in his line of work, that meant he was a veteran of 'the game', the same game that killed Delaque spies with facile routine. Still, if the game's mortality rate ever bothered Uriah, it didn't show. He walked through the hallways, annoying the serious-minded Information Cullers with his smile and mystifying the Seductresses as to the motivation behind his grin. Uriah flashed teeth to disarm the unwary and to unhinge those who knew better. Why serve one purpose when an action can serve two?

Uriah navigated the labyrinthine corridors without a second thought, ignoring engraved markers that pointed him in wrong directions, official-looking hallways that suddenly dead-ended and doors that opened to plascrete walls and gunports. The Delaque believed that a proper defence was a good deception, and that axiom reflected itself in the very architecture of their bases. That is what brought Uriah to the plain door hidden deep in the shadows of a thin, seemingly ignored corridor.

Uriah knocked five times in erratic fashion, mentally counting between each knock. On me final tap, something clicked on the other side. What that sound entailed, Uriah never knew, only that it was a bad idea walking through before hearing it. That said, Uriah entered carefully.

The room was small, but served the needs of the bald man sitting behind the desk, with some comfort to spare. It was surprisingly clean, with a metal desk, two chairs and a black pict screen to adorn the otherwise austere space.

Well actually, there was also that thin seam in the wall extending from floor to ceiling that Uriah suspected was a hidden door. He never asked about it or volunteered his suspicions mat something was there. It was to his advantage to pretend he knew nothing.

The only personable touch to the otherwise basic room was a thick regicide board with bronze and silver tiles set upon a small stand in the corner. Upon the surface flickered low-rez holographic pieces caught in the middle of a match's static ballet. How the bald man managed to procure such a piece of archeotech was a mystery, but whenever Uriah visited, the pieces had been moved around. It was never the same game on the table.

Percal, the man sitting behind the desk, was bald and stout in all his proportions, thick of chest, arms, legs and neck. He might have been like any other venerable, but relatively indistinguishable agent in House Delaque, but a knife scar hooked his lip into a scowl and two slits rested where an Orlock knife had claimed his nose. He was proof ffiat surviving the game had its costs, costs Uriah never intended to willingly pay.

Most men couldn't stare into Percal's beady black eyes, one partially clouded by white, but Uriah had no qualms maintaining eye contact wifh his superior, and he did so wim a smile.

'Sit,' Percal instructed, reading a data-slate in his hands.

Uriah closed the door behind him, and heard the familiar whiz-dick-whir. Apparently they weren't to be disturbed. He sat in one of the unyielding metal chairs, instantly uncomfortable. The trick, was not looking bothered. This is how the game between Percal and Uriah always began.

'Comfortable?' Percal asked, putting the data-slate down. He studied Uriah, his eyes that of a carrion eater seeking the prize morsels of meat on

his subordinate.

'Indeed,' Uriah said, acting half-distracted. 'I requisitioned the very same chairs for my quarters.'

'Did you now?'

Yes, I wanted my guests to experience the same comfort that you offer your visitors.'

Percal offered a thin smile. 'I can't abide company either.'

'Then to what do I owe the pleasure of your invitation?' Uriah asked.

'Work.'

'Same as always.'

'Not quite this time,' Percal said with a purr. 'You know the target.'

Uriah was instantly aware that Percal was studying him, waiting to gauge his reaction to *something*. He said nothing. Even asking questions surrendered too much information, at least in theory.

Better Percal volunteer the information, Uriah thought, but a piece of him clamoured to know. It scrabbled at his chest and dried his throat; he couldn't swallow. He knew Percal was toying with him, but the old man only did so when it was an unpleasant piece of work.

All of Uriah's previous assignments as Handler demanded distance, perspective. The Delaque preferred their Handlers to act for the strict benefit of the House; any personal stake in the matter was considered a threat to that interest. This was different, however, and Uriah had too many skeletons in his closet not to worry that he'd just been caught holding one of them.

To his credit Uriah said nothing, even though he prepared himself to hear a battery of potentially damning news. Instead he smiled with practiced ease and asked, 'Who is it?'

Percal nodded to the pict screen. A grainy, black and white picture appeared, at eye level, showing a man moving down an oil stained and industrial-looking corridor, towards the camera. He wore a lab frock, fairly typical to the researchers of House Van Saar. His visible implants, two eyes and an arm, were likewise of superior quality, while pinching his chin and mouth was a goatee that matched the colour of his hair. He nodded with a congenial smile before leaving the frame. The picture looped back, repeating the same four seconds over and over again.

Uriah recognized the shot. He'd filmed it over two years ago while deep undercover behind enemy lines.

'Soren?' Uriah asked Percal. 'What happened to him?'

'Our little mole has vanished.'

Vanished.'

'He was carrying new Van Saar implants for us to examine. He never arrived at the rendezvous point.'

'Perhaps the Van Saar discovered his dealings with us. Maybe they captured him,' Uriah said, trying to maintain his professional facade. He was fighting a battering array of emotions that besieged him on all sides. On the one hand, he was relieved. This was not the secret he feared had come to light, the one that would rain him. On the other, he was concerned. Soren was an asset, certainly, but in the process of recruiting Soren into Delaque's service, Uriah had grown to like the man. He was quirky, sharing the darker elements of Uriah's humour. Uriah would even hazard calling him a friend, despite the fact he couldn't fraternize with members of other Houses except in the pursuit of his duties as Handler.

Use anyone and everyone to further the glory of the house...

That ranked among the most cherished of Delaque commandments, and currently, Uriah was betraying that oath through his friendship with Soren.

'Captured him? Perhaps,' Percal said, 'though I have my doubts. That's where we need your skills. Locate

Soren and the implants he promised us. I need this done quietly. You mustn't alert the Van Saar about the operation. They cannot know we have a mole in their midst lest you endanger our other assets in their camp.'

Why me?' Uriah asked. 'Doesn't this conflict with Delaque policy: no personal involvement in the assignment?'

'Soren was your mole. You befriended him. You brought him over to our side. If anyone knows how to find him, you do. If he trusts anyone, it's you.'

Uriah nodded. Very well. I'll find him. Anything else I need know?'

Percal shook his head. With that, Uriah stood, prepared to leave; he waited to hear the door unlock, but nothing happened. He tamed and shot a questioning look at Percal.

'Forgotten something?' Percal asked, a sly grin on his face.

'Have I?' Uriah said, growing tired of this constant duelling.

'Aren't you going to ask me for something? A certain bolt pistol from the firing range? I thought you would take the opportunity to requisition the weapon from me?'

Weapons master Coryin told you.' Uriah cursed himself for becoming so obviously disttacted by the news. Perhaps he couldn't anticipate everything that was thrown his way, but in his ttade, it was a cardinal sin to act surprised.

'He wounds me with his distrust,' Uriah said, adopting a cavalier attitude. 'Besides, I didn't want to disturb you with such petty details as requisition forms.'

'Requisition forms,' Percal said slowly, picking up his personal data-slate, 'of course. Nevertheless, I've granted your request for the bolt pistol. You might need it. Pick it up from the weapons master.' With that, Percal went back to examining his recorder.

The door unlocked.

Uriah left the office, a soft curse under his breath. He was already beginning the game at a disadvantage, and he didn't like feeling uncertain.

PERCAL WAITED FOR Uriah to finally leave the room before setting down the data-slate. He turned to the wall and waited for the hidden panel to slide aside on well-oiled tumblers. Standing at the secret door was a young man, no older than Uriah, perhaps in his mid-twenties. He was well dressed, his black trench coat clean and pressed; his face and scalp were Delaque smooth, while his features were sharp and angular. He wore rectangular glare-shades with wire rims.

The man stepped out of the small and surprisingly empty room and glanced at the panel sliding back into place.

'Did you miss anything, Kaden?' Percal asked.

'Caught every word,' Kaden said.

'Good, because I'd hate to think I made a mistake using you.'

'No,' said Kaden. 'And again, thanks for the opportunity. I've been-'

Thank me by succeeding,' Percal said, interrupting the young man.

Kaden said nothing and merely nodded.

The door unlocked again, and Kaden left Percal alone in his chamber.

THE ARMOURY CHIEF was well acquainted with battle, his scars, marble eye and bolted skin plates a testament to his years in the trenches of the Underhive. They were also the cost of working in back-alley chop-shop medicine, where so-called doctors disposed of severed limbs in garbage pails and used them for unsavoury experiments - or worse. Uriah didn't care to know what exactly.

Uriah wondered whether he would one day face some disfiguring treatment; skull pump tubing, exposed steel plate for bone, pseudo-articulated gears for joints; the horrifying list of disfigurements was endless. The thought chilled Uriah, both the prospect of such pain and the physical cost.

After dutifully studying Uriah's requisition list for equipment, the armoury chief limped into the rear storerooms with their low ceilings and tightly packed shelving units, leaving Uriah to his thoughts. He was worried about Soren, but thinking about his own injuries was a sobering, and frankly welcome, distraction. He'd come close to enduring such mutilation at the hands of street surgeons, but had eventually managed to find someone with enough skill to avoid permanent disfigurement. That would have spelt the end of his career as a Handler. Uriah relied on his ability to blend into crowds and to move about unnoticed. Undercover work was crucial to his livelihood, as was the ability to alter his appearance. Any permanent fixtures upon his body would ruin one of the principle tools of his trade. He would become useless to his gang, the Handlers, and to their leader, his leader, Percal. But then, it was skirting the edge of that danger that provided the job with its thrills.

Uriah thrived on the notion of peril and he had a nose for it. In fact, Soren's disappearance promised more than was stated. Uriah had worked with Percal long enough to know there was always something more to his superior's assignments.

The armoury chief returned moments later with the standard assignment pack, the equipment satchel still flecked with dried blood from someone else's unfortunate outing. Uriah picked up the satchel and smiled at the armoury chief.

'Amateur?' Uriah asked.

'We're all amateurs when it comes to getting shot,' the Chief said.

'Not me,' Uriah said. 'I plan on bleeding like a professional Handler. All my forms signed and approved by my Overseer before one drop of blood strikes the ground.'

The Chief smirked and returned to his paperwork. Uriah checked the tools sheathed inside the heavy leather fabric, the satchel a tool belt of sorts for his crafts. More than just thieving supplies, lock picks, acid ampoules and protean metal keys, the satchel also carried small telescopes, eavesdropping equipment and other accoutrements for carrying out his role as spy.

Uriah nodded in satisfaction, at which the armoury chief deposited extra ammunition clips on the table.

'Tough assignment?' the armoury chief asked, more polite than interested.

'Subtle assignment,' Uriah answered, taking the supplies, 'but then it's the subtle ones that will cost you.'

Something in the statement attracted the armoury chiefs attention. His expression changing from civil to concerned.

'Percal's boy, right?' the armoury chief asked.

'Well, not *boy,* but Percal is my Overseer, yes,' Uriah said, uncertain of the Chiefs shifting interest.

'Careful with that one,' the Chief said with a casual whisper. He pointed to his marble eye with the clawed finger on his rusting metal hand. 'He cost me dearly. My first assignment too.'

'You're a Handler?' Uriah asked, shoving the ammo clips into the satchel. 'I didn't know.'

'Was a Handler,' the armoury chief said, a little pained at his own admission before he relaxed again. 'Now I'm with the Requisitioners, but then that's the nature of our craft. Nobody will ever know how good you are and they'll certainly never remember you once you're gone.'

Uriah smiled. 'In truth, that sounds glorious. I would welcome a chance to step away from it all.'

'It is glorious if you leave on your own terms,' the armoury chief said, shuffling back into the storerooms. 'But in our business, retirement is never expected or pleasant, and it often comes far too early for anyone to prepare for it.'

THERE WAS ONE last step to the process before Uriah launched into his investigation, something that fell well beyond Delaque operational protocol. The district was strictly low-ceiling and crammed with warehouses and containers. The buildings and storage cabins were mostly forgotten in the Underhive, their contents abandoned by their former owners. Still, enough were booby trapped that scavengers didn't bother pillaging the lots. Too many died in their attempts to loot, the containers electrified or coughing out some noxious gas that melted skin.

No official streets ran through here, only lot numbers belonging to the seemingly endless grid of corrugated and rusted storage units. Uriah drifted through the alleys, the rumble from his dark green bike echoing off the thin metal container walls.

Uriah turned several times, ignoring the lot numbers that were frequently switched around to lure unsuspecting travelers into ambushes. Instead, his circuit was memorized to the point of casual familiarity, and he never deviated from the path. Finally, Uriah arrived at the right section. He stopped in front of a storage container emblazoned with colourful profanities, but remained on his bike. He was centimetres from the wall. He left the engine running; he wasn't leaving its side.

There was a vox grille next to the heavy door, but no buttons, not that Uriah needed to press anything.

'State your business!' a woman's voice demanded through the scratchy vox feed.

'It's Jester,' Uriah said, using his operating handle.

'Stop revving your damn engine!' the woman shouted. 'Who is it?'

'Jester!' Uriah said, letting the engine idle. 'Or are your cameras broken again, Voice?'

'You know the drill,' the woman said.

Uriah disembarked from the cycle and turned around slowly, allowing whatever cameras that were hidden throughout the area to register his face and profile. He faced the intercom again and straddled the bike

'Happy?' he asked.

'Can you meet my price?'

'No, I came for the pleasant company, Voice.'

'Not in the mood for games, Jester.'

'Yes I can meet your price,' he said with a sigh.

'Then I'm very happy,' Voice replied, the tone more casual now. 'What can I do for you, Jester?'

'I'm on assignment and something about the mission bothers me.'

'You? Bothered? Care to share?'

'Since when do I share?' he asked, spreading his hands in feigned innocence.

'Fair enough. Same as before, then? You run your operation and I dispense my sage advice?'

'I'd appreciate that. Your understanding of the Machine Spirit is-'

'Oh, please! Not this crap again. There is no Machine Spirit. Just machine. Wires, tubes, chips and the occasional attitude. But no Machine Spirit!'

'Fine, fine,' Uriah said. 'Forget I mentioned it, Voice. I'll be in contact.'

Uriah tore through the streets, eager to reach his next objective, but his mind was still on Voice. He rarely relied on help; the nature of his business demanded self-sufficiency and it was also rife with the possibility of betrayal. Still, Voice came highly recommended from some acquaintances and she'd proven extremely useful in the past, almost trustworthy were Uriah comfortable with that sentiment. Still, it bothered him that he'd never met her face-to-face, but that was die condition of her services.

Regardless, the thought that Voice was now helping him did much to settle Uriah's mind. She was good at what she did, and she could keep up with Uriah's cavalier attitudes and humour.

Uriah reached a small tunnel barely high enough to let him through on his bike. He rode through several tunnels, taking different turns along the way, before finally reaching a locked grate against the wall. He opened the grate with a key and steered the bike deep inside the dark side tunnel, around a bend and against the dead end. Upon exiting, he locked the gate and looked back inside. He couldn't see his bike. Not the safest storage, but it served its purpose well when Uriah needed to tear through the Underhive.

Uriah made his way through the tunnels on foot and headed for a long-forgotten elevator shaft. It was going to be a long day.

CHAPTER TWO

> Lies work best when enforced by some measure of truth...
> ...just remember which parts are the lies and which parts are the truth.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

THE CEILING for the Saint Vibeau District was three storeys high, but the stacked hab block containers crammed beneath were stacked four high with uncomfortably low roofs. Locals claimed that millennia ago, the district rested near the top of Hive Primus; in those days Saint Vibeau was an affluent district that enjoyed the patronage of the principle Houses. Hive Primus continued growing, however, and the high ceilings slowly sagged under the weight of the construction above.

The last of the prosperous families moved away centuries ago, when a forgotten sump pipe burst between two heavy load-bearing, thick-plated walls. It was impossible to reach, so to this day the walls of Saint Vibeau cried trickles of pollutants that afflicted many local children with mutation and deformity. Few of those so touched survived into adulthood between the Goliath and Orlock gangs that occasionally swept through on 'join-or-die' recruitment drives and the fatal nature of certain birth defects. It was also a district where nobody meddled in the affairs of their neighbours and where nobody made eye contact. It was safer that way.

The original hab blocks were sumptuous affairs until the district's principle employer, the Munitorum and its ammunition stockpiles, moved

in to the district. The Munitorum administrators split the size of each hab block twice before allowing its workers to move in to the cramped quarters.

Uriah kept to the shadows of the streets, which was relatively easy considering the street lights had long burnt out and the fluorescent lichen-paint had calcified. Nobody paid him heed, but given his stained trench coat and heavy hood, he could have been a resident or another addict looking for somewhere to sleep.

Before Uriah reached the corner of a two-lane, trash-strewn street, a woman darted in front of him, her head down, her stride just short of panic as she pulled a small boy by the hand. Uriah reached the corner and peered around. Sure enough, idling on the curb were three ganger bikes with red Orlock flags hanging off heavy antennae. The bikes were nothing more than engines with large exhausts and two thick wheels; strapped on each was a heavy saddle. The bikes purred with a throaty rumble; one Orlock ganger with enough facial scars to have seen a few gang wars guarded them.

Uriah cursed softly. He knew an Orlock gang called Bleeding Iron was strong in the district. If he wasn't careful, he could easily draw the entire gang down upon his head. Uriah retraced his steps, returning back the way he had come before reaching a rubble-strewn alley. He detoured through the small corridor, finally reaching a hab block tower with a side entrance. The fortunate residents faced the outside street. The unlucky ones faced the dilapidated buildings and rusting support wall behind the block.

Uriah made his way up the rear grated stairs, up to the third floor landing. He made his way around to the building's plated front and paused momentarily to examine the street below. The Orlock ganger had yet to budge, allowing Uriah to make his way quietly to hab block #324.

The hab block's sliding door was open by a considerable gap, but the resident scavengers were nowhere to be seen despite the looting to be had through an open door. In any other situation, Uriah knew, the scavengers would have carried off anything they could carry. Peering through the half-open door, Uriah saw that the interior to his safe-house was smashed up and that whoever had made the mess was still inside, making a lot of noise.

Uriah sighed. He'd paid a foreman at the Slaughter House a considerable amount to secure this hab block for his own private use and to keep quiet. Only employees were given hab blocks, but it wasn't unusual for highly placed members of a business to profit on the side. In this case by selling Uriah the home of a dead employee who was still listed as alive.

Money lost, Uriah thought to himself as he pulled his newly acquired bolt pistol from its holster and muttered a small prayer to the weapon's Machine Spirit. The weight felt right in his hand, the engraving comfortable in his palm. He withdrew a small rectangular device from the pouch hidden inside the interior pocket of his trench coat and offered it a quick prayer as well.

Breathing slow, measured breaths, Uriah slipped through the open door and into the darkness of his safe-house. He lightly stepped over the broken glass in the entrance and ignored the frag holes in the thin metal walls. A voice, harsh and guttural, drifted from beyond the arched doorway. A woman responded. Uriah's heart skipped two beats, and he fought the urge to charge in.

Morgane is inside, he thought, but instead of rushing to her rescue and his death, he forced himself to listen to the number of voices.

'...last chance. I won't ask again,' one man said.

'Good,' the woman replied, 'I was getting tired of smelling your breath.'

Uriah grimaced, anticipating the sound of flesh slapping flesh. Sure enough, a sharp smack followed. Morgane, whom Uriah was sure had received the blow, did not sound out in pain, but neither did she say anything further.

'What?' the man's voice asked, 'nothing smart to say now?'

Morgane remained silent. Uriah knew it was time to act. He knelt down and attached the rectangular device to the power outlet. A small red light clicked on and began to blink slowly in a quickly accelerating cadence.

Uriah had thirty seconds. He remained kneeling and cleared his throat.

Who's there?' the man in the other room demanded.

You first,' Uriah said, congenial.

Twenty seconds and counting. The wall above his head exploded into metal shards, punched with several loud shots from heavy guns.

That jog your memory?' the man asked with a laugh.

'Much,' Uriah said, 'thanks, but I didn't get your name over the gunfire.'

Fifteen seconds left.

'Enough with the jokes! Get out here or this woman dies.'

'What woman?'

Another shot punched through the wall, caking his jacket and hair in flakes of rust, paint and metal.

'All right, all right,' Uriah said, shaking the debris from his hair. 'Don't shoot.'

Ten seconds left. Uriah stood and entered the open archway with his arms outstretched to his sides. He held his gun in plain view. There were four men in the living room, Orlocks judging by the red bandanas, the half-plate armour and the billowing tunics that covered their compact frames. They were smaller than Goliaths, but stout nonetheless. And there were more men than Uriah had counted on, all of whom were pointing guns at him. A woman with raven black hair and bloodied lips, Morgane, sat quietly on the couch, her hands bound at the wrists, resting on her lap.

'Drop the pistol!' the ganger with multiple piercings in his nose and along his eyebrows said.

Very well,' Uriah replied with a shrug, 'but it's not the gun you should be worried about.'

The rectangular device on the wall emitted an electrical surge that shot through the hab block's conduits, disrupting the power flow of the building's generators. The lights died instantly, but would return within moments. The last thing Uriah saw was the surprised expressions on the four men's faces. Laughing to himself, he dived to one side and fired into the darkness where he remembered the men standing. Four quick shots, each trying to score home on four different targets. The first two shots found their marks, rewarding Uriah with two grunts and the sound of someone hitting the floor. The other two shots missed, hitting wall and furniture instead. Within seconds, gunfire raked the area, illuminating the room in punched flashes of still life. Three Orlocks were firing wildly, trying to hit everything in the hopes of hitting something.

Uriah crouched near the floor, ducking behind the furniture and taking his time in firing back. He waited patiently, focusing on the muzzle flares before squeezing off another shot on the Orlock with the heavy chain pulling at his nose ring. Uriah caught a quick glimpse of dark arterial spray, the shot striking the ganger in the neck and jerking his gun upward.

The remaining two gangers fired at Uriah's muzzle flash, stinging him with hot debris; he was already repositioning himself in another part of the room.

White-hot beams of green las-fire erupted from another part of the room, announcing that a new shooter had just entered the fray. Uriah caught quick glimpses of Morgane, her back against the wall, her backside on the floor, firing one of three weapons hidden throughout the safe-house. The las-beam cooked the arm of one shooter, forcing him to drop his weapon. He howled in pain and bolted for the door. Uriah, ignoring the fleeing Orlock, focused on the last gunman who was drawing his sights on Morgane. He emptied his clip into the ganger, knocking him off his feet.

Uriah raced for the hab block door, reloading a new clip into his pistol. He'd barely stepped onto the lit landing when heavy gunfire from a bolter shredded the railing wall and doorway. The Orlock attending to the bikes below was suppressing the area with cover fire. Uriah hit the ground hard, bouncing his chin off the iron floor. By the time his head stopped ringing, bike engines were revving with an angry roar - the gunfire had stopped. Uriah peered over the shredded rail in time to see the wounded Orlock and his compatriot tearing down the street. Uriah fired a handful of shots at them, more in frustration than from any real hope of hitting them.

The Orlocks had escaped.

Uriah muttered a quick curse and wandered back into the hab block through the blast-eaten doorway. Lights were returning, the device no longer disrupting the power flow. His jaw felt numb, but he was grateful to see Morgane in the living room, hunkered down behind a steel-plated sofa with her sights firmly trained on the door. She looked relieved to see Uriah, and lowered her weapon.

The others?' Uriah asked, referring to the three bodies.

'Corpses,' she replied. 'I saw to that.'

Uriah noticed the blackened, cracked burn marks on the temples of each of the three men. 'That's a bit much,' he said. 'I could have sworn I killed at least two of them, already'

'I guess we'll never know,' Morgane replied with a small grin. 'I'm sorry, my love. Did I steal your thunder?'

He shook his head. 'Not enough to matter,' With that he embraced her and gave her a gentle kiss. 'And thanks,' he said. 'That juicer you gave me

came in handy. Are you all right?'

'As soon as you get these restraints off of me,' Morgane said.

Uriah admired the iron bindings for a moment with a devilish smile. 'Certain you don't want to keep them on?' he asked with a wink.

'Now, Uriah!' Morgane said, poking him with the las pistol. She offered him her outstretched hands, palms up.

After sheathing the pistol and removing something from his interior jacket pocket, Uriah covered the lock with his hands, his fingers moving almost imperceptibly. A second passed and a light click followed. The restraints fell away.

'One of these days,' Morgane said, massaging her reddened wrists, 'you'll have to show me how you do that.'

'And where would that leave me?' Uriah asked.

'Oh, knowing you,' she replied, drawing in close enough that he smelt the cloves on her breath, 'with still more tricks than any Handler in your industry.'

"Yes, well...' he said with a shrug, before kissing her gently. He was careful not to brush against her cut. 'What were they doing here?' he finally asked. 'More importantly why were you here?'

'Soren,' she replied. 'The answer to both your questions.'

URIAH MOVED ABOUT the one-room hab block, collecting the few knick knacks that were valuable enough to take and shoving them into a cloth sack. They only took what they could carry. The furniture would remain, given that most of it was already bolted to the floor. Morgane sat on the couch, facing the doorway and firing above the head of the occasional scavenger that stuck his greedy nose into the hab block.

'And the Bleeding Iron gangers didn't say why they were looking for Soren?' Uriah asked.

'I didn't ask, considering I lied about not knowing him in the first place.'

'Hm. So the Orlocks didn't realise you were Van Saar. That's fortunate,' Uriah said. 'And the Van Saar only know that he's missing.'

'Correct,' Morgane replied, 'but then I'm only an inter-House diplomat. I'm not in Soren's group. They wouldn't tell me if there was more to it. I only know that they issued an Injunctus saying that he was missing, and to

report his whereabouts. Since he knew about the safe-house, I came here hoping to find him.'

Uriah shrugged. 'The only people who knew about the safe-house were you and Soren. I saw to that. Unfortunately, it's compromised, so we must leave it behind.'

'Pity,' Morgane replied. 'We've made many fond memories here.'

Til find us a new hole,' Uriah said. 'We'll make new memories there.'

'Until then,' Morgane said, 'I must return to my duties.'

Uriah's face pinched into a small scowl. He didn't like the idea. 'Are you certain that's safe?' he asked. 'If they find out about us, your life's at risk.'

4Ve share that risk,' Morgane said. She stood and walked over to Uriah. 'If your Delaque masters ever realised you were in love with a Van Saar diplomat.

'Actually, they'd try to use that to their advantage first,' Uriah said. 'I understand what you mean though. You're certain that you haven't been compromised?'

'Compromised by you? Maybe,' Morgane said with a tantalizing smile. 'Otherwise, no. I'm fairly certain. My house would have arrested me by now if they suspected anything, and the Orlocks don't know who I am.'

Uriah sighed. 'But they know me.'

You can't be certain of that,' she said.

'I'm seventh on their most hunted list and I didn't arrive here in disguise.'

'Seventh?' Morgane asked. 'You're slipping.'

'Not after tonight,' Uriah replied. 'If the Bleeding Irons report to the House itself and they manage to connect this incident to me, you-know-who will come after me again.'

He must have looked worried, Uriah realized, because Morgane's features softened; she caressed his face. You don't know that,' she said, 'and if he does, you'll be ready.'

'One can hope,' Uriah said. His legs still ached at night, the pins somehow vibrating at some distant memory of his shattered bones. Slag's face darted into his mind's eye and Uriah felt the blood slip from his face.

Morgane kissed him on the lips, obviously trying to liberate him from his painful memories. 'Thank you for saving me,' she said.

'Always,' he replied, grateful for the beautiful distraction. He looked at her puffed lips. 'How are you going to explain the injuries?'

'I fell,' she said. That's all they'll need to know. What about you? What is your next step?'

'I have to find, Soren.'

'But?'

'But, I'm worried about House Orlock's sudden involvement. I have to find out why they want Soren.'

They didn't seem to know very much,' Morgane said.

They'll know enough to launch me in the right direction. You better go,' he said with a sigh. 'It won't take long before the Bleeding Irons return in greater numbers.'

"What about you?' Morgane asked, drawing a hood over her head.

'I'll escape in a moment, but I'm leaving the Orlocks a nasty surprise.'

'And the scavengers?'

They won't have many bones left to pick clean. Now go-'

Uriah waited for Morgane to leave before activating the booby ttap and slipping out of the hab block. In ten seconds, laser tripwires would activate and the explosives would desttoy anyone and anything inside. The damage to the adjoining hab blocks would be minimal, but just the same, Uriah knocked on the neighbouring door.

Nobody answered, though Uriah was certain he heard movement inside. 'Hello there and well met,' he called through the door. Though I've never had occasion to speak to you previously, I would advise you don't go into my hab block. It's booby ttapped. Big explosion awaits the interloper. Hello?'

Uriah walked away from the hab block door. 'Suit yourself,' he mumbled under his breath.

* * *

'WELL, IF IT isn't my favourite Handler!' almond-eyed Bok said with a green-toothed smile.

Uriah navigated past the five other desks crammed into the small room. 'Bok,' Uriah said, returning the smile. 'How's my favourite Cartographer?'

'Well,' Bok said, 'just returned from a mapping expedition into the Underhive. Nasty foul place, too unpleasant for a Handler's delicate sensibilities.'

'Of course,' Uriah said. 'I can still smell the stench of the place on you. Or is that endemic to all members of the Cartographers?'

Bok's smile wavered a touch, but it held. 'What can I do for you, Uriah?'

'I need to break into a location, an Orlock facility. How current are your maps?'

Very current. Over half of our section's resources are dedicated to probing and testing Orlock assets. What do you need?' Bok asked, his smile turning into a casual, easy grin.

'Ah,' Uriah said. 'It's more like what you need?'

The marker,' Bok said, dropping his voice into a whisper. 'I want my marker with you wiped clean.'

'I don't know,' Uriah said, rubbing his chin. He lowered his voice as well. That's a hefty price considering the evidence I have against you. Your taste in Escher prostitutes poses a security risk to Delaque interests. I saved you once from your pillow chats and an unfortunate slip of the tongue... though whose tongue slipped where, I'd prefer not knowing.'

'Yes, yes,' Bok replied, glancing around to ensure nobody was listening, 'but I'm a changed man. I no longer frequent the Escher's stables. And I can provide you with full schematics to one facility, a foundry, including its patrol routes and the best ways in and out.'

Uriah smiled and shrugged. Then who am I to stand in the way of someone's evolution into betterment. Get me the maps and, if they're as good as you claim, then your marker is wiped clean and the evidence I hold is yours.'

'Deal,' Bok said, and immediately set off to retrieve the proper maps.

'WELL, IF IT isn't my favourite Handler!' almond-eyed Bok said with a green-toothed smile.

Kaden navigated past the five other desks crammed into the small room. 'Bok,' Kaden said, returning the smile. 'How's my favourite map-boy?'

'Well,' Bok said, 'just returned from a mapping expedition into the Underhive. Nasty foul place. You'd like it there.'

'Funny, but don't you figure that's a little risky, considering what I've got on you?' Kaden said, sitting on the edge of Bok's desk.

'What can I do for you, Kaden?' Bok asked with a sigh.

Where was Uriah heading? Which map did he want? And don't leave out any juicy details.'

'And in exchange for helping you?' Bok asked with a whisper.

We'll call it even, and all that nasty evidence involving you and those prostitutes gets wiped.'

'Deal,' Bok said, and immediately set off to retrieve the proper maps.

CHAPTER THREE

> Harden your heart... everyone is an asset. If you don't use
> them to your advantage, someone else will use them to theirs
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

THE FOUNDRY FILLED the large chamber's interior. The ceiling was domed some fifteen storeys high with support struts that swept up into the shadows. Inset into the ceiling were noisy, cowled turbofans that cried a steady stream of precipitation - stained with oil - to the cement floor below. The foundry itself was a rusted block of steel, the few windows and open hangar doors lit with the magma glow of molten ores. The only entry into the dome chamber was a rolling vault door; it was three storeys high and guarded by the Steel Sentinels, an Orlock gang of considerable standing, and manned gun emplacements. Entry was strictly prohibited except to those on House Orlock business.

Uriah was sweating hard, his black clothing plastered to his skin. Despite the discomfort, he waited patiently, trying to ignore the oppressive heat that the turbofans sucked up from the main chamber into the ductwork where he sat. The heat flattened his breath, pressing his chest with its palm; it hurt to inhale, so instead Uriah swallowed shallower breaths and dreamed of cooler places. He imagined himself inside a chilled Van Saar lab, refrigerated to optimize the usage of electronics and

to prevent them from overheating. It seemed that the Machine Spirits preferred the cold.

He also imagined the scrubbed, sterile environment of the Van Saar facility he'd infiltrated so many years ago. It contrasted sharply with the smelly, mildew-soft and cramped interior of the ducts that Uriah crawled through to reach this point. He admired the Van Saar and its satellite gangs; to them personal hygiene was more than an afterthought or alien principle. Certainly, House Delaque consisted of clean and well-groomed agents, unlike the zealots of House Cawdor, the muscle-ripped Goliaths or the sweaty apes of House Orlock.

Admittedly, Uriah relished his undercover work at the Van Saar labs for more reasons than their enhanced quality of life. On one mission into the Tech-Artificer Gang, Uriah had befriended Soren and scored a potential coup by convincing the disenfranchised engineer to sell secrets to the Delaque. On another, into the Van Saar's Arbiter's Guild, Uriah had met Morgane. Even now, their tryst still felt new, passionate and dangerous, their romance unsanctioned.

Uriah let his thoughts wander to those intimate encounters in the biolabs, where the air was frozen; Morgane's breath warmed his mouth. At the time, he didn't expect much to come of their encounters. He'd seduced women throughout his assignments - except for House Escher women who scared the living hell out of him - either in the course of retrieving something valuable, or because an easy assignment needed some additional element to spice up the challenge.

Morgane was different. Different enough that Uriah divulged his role as spy to her. Different enough that while initially outraged, she never betrayed his secret. They were apart for a few agonizing weeks. He returned to see her one last time and discovered she wasn't willing to let him go again so easily. She continued loving him. That was years ago.

Uriah's and Morgane's romance continued despite the physical distance between them, the physical distance they willingly imposed. Uriah could no more surrender his job or leave his house than she could hers. They both understood that revealing their relationship to either house would entail the end of their love, their careers, their lives. The Van Saar and Delaque were too ruthless and goal driven not to use Uriah's and Morgane's affair to their advantage. They would kill both parties simply

because the two lovers had humiliated the houses by carrying on a relationship for four years under meir very noses. Nobody liked being proven the fool.

That thought brought everything back to today's predicament and Uriah's sweltering cubby hole inside the dome's ductwork. Soren's disappearance was one thing, but that the Orlocks were also looking for the Van Saar engineer and that they had endangered Morgane's life was an entirely different beast. Uriah could not abide their actions. In nearly every previous assignment, Uriah had kept the upper hand; had remained outside the situation; the job was just a job. That was no longer the case. Uriah did not control these circumstances, he was reacting to them, trying to roll with the punches from an invisible opponent.

Uriah checked his timepiece; it was counting down to zero with a minute to spare. He opened his mouth in a mock yawn to equalize the pressure in his ears. That activated the receiver hidden in his ear and the sub-vocalizer currently lodged inside his throat. It was irritating, but he'd grow accustomed to the sensation soon enough.

'About to descend,' he said.

'Understood,' Voice responded. 'Good luck.'

Unable to stand or hunch properly in the ducts, Uriah shifted position till he was on his padded knees. He scuttled towards the noisy turbofan and steady stream of hot air. His fingers centimetres from the whirling blades, he searched the lining of the cowled turbofan; after a moment, he found a proper finger-hold. Uriah wedged a grappling hook into the small space; it was tethered with a chord that was hidden inside his belt. He pulled hard to ensure the hook held well.

The countdown on Uriah's timepiece reached zero and a collective sigh echoed through the ducts. The tur-bofans shut off for a few moments to cool down - the blades facing Uriah whirred to a halt. He pulled an acid ampoule from his pouch and quickly wedged it between the teeth of a large cog that connected with an adjoining gear, their teeth interlinking. They turned the fan and, the cogs still rotating slowly, bit down on the ampoule, breaking it. A sharp acrid smell filled the air, acid stripping the gear of its teeth. When the turbofans would eventually start up again, this one would remain silent and still, the toothless gears spinning, but not catching.

Testing the hook one last time, Uriah slipped backwards between two large and pitted fan blades, his feet secured against the bottom lip of the cowl, his behind dangling over the void of the long drop down. One gloved hand on the rope and the other on the vice-brake, Uriah pushed off; he fast-roped down through the steaming darkness, aiming for the foundry rooftop below. He doubted anyone could see him in the darkness of the dome, but better to be safe. The descent took seconds, Uriah on the edge of freefall, the building rooftop rushing up to meet him at an alarming rate. At the last moment, he gripped the vice to slow himself, coming to a slightly jarring, but otherwise perfect stop.

The furnaces and melted ores below radiated through the ceiling and heated the air; Uriah's feet felt hot. The smell, however, was even more uncomfortable. Smoke stacks and vents poured a noxious mix of gases and solvents into the dome, filling Uriah's mouth with an acrid medley of tastes. Worse, Uriah was light-headed, disconnected from his environment, his head feeling fixed to his body by a mere string. He fumbled for one of his pouches and withdrew a filter-cup affixed with two metallic cylinders. Uriah covered his mouth and nose with a small rebreather, grateful for the brief injections of oxygen. It wouldn't last more than a few minutes -just long enough for Uriah to act.

Untethering himself from the rappelling cord, Uriah left it hanging there for his return. From the edge of the roof, the foundry's walls were seven-storey cliffs, straight drops to the ground. No heavy-footed Orlock ever had a chance of climbing these walls unassisted, but then, Uriah was no Orlock. He was lighter of frame, nimble and blessed with quick fingers. Uriah lowered himself over the roofs edge and quickly made his way down. Hand over hand, foot over foot, he scaled down the wall, grabbing inch-wide ledges and drain pipes. Within moments, he was on the main floor in the shadow of the building, alert to all the noise around him.

It was cooler on die ground - not by much, but enough to be a small blessing. Uriah hid in a small alcove that forced him to a knee. He was draped in darkness, though he hoped the ambient heat blinded anyone with thermal vision. Uriah waited patiently, taking in all the surrounding noise, trying to familiarize himself with what passed for background noise. He needed to understand this cacophony intimately so that he wasn't leaping for cover at every clang and discharged hiss of the great machines,

conveyor belts and supply Lorries. He needed to distinguish someone's voice from the hiss of molten metal, and footfalls from the piston gait of aged devices.

Uriah checked the timepiece strapped to his wrist; it was almost time; about thirty seconds, give or take a minute. He focused more intently on the sounds, trying to move past the surrounding din. It was hard work sifting through the clatter and thunder, but Uriah listened for one thing alone in the sea of noise. Sure enough, he heard voices, then footsteps in the seconds before they appeared. A patrol that he'd spotted earlier from the tur-bofan vent marched by, on schedule. They were armed with chainsaw blades and mean scowls on their wide-jawed, stubble-eaten faces. Their circuit took them around the building, their orbit bringing them close to Uriah's hiding hole. They didn't linger, however, and within a minute, had vanished around a corner.

They were gone and Uriah relaxed enough to curse under his breath. He only heard them in the seconds before they appeared. Not nearly enough time to react, but maybe enough time to kill someone before they could raise the alarm or pull their own weapon. That would have to suffice.

Uriah checked his timepiece again and thanked the Machine Spirit for its precision.

'Check one,' Uriah said.

'On time,' Voice said. 'Not bad. You have another ten minutes before that patrol returns.'

'Let's call it at nine minutes, just to be safe,' Uriah responded. By then he hoped, he'd be inside the building where avoiding guards would prove trickier. While the schematics on the foundry that House Delaque provided offered Uriah some crucial intelligence, it didn't offer him enemy positions or patrol circuits. Once inside, Uriah was effectively blind and on wits' edge. Then again, that was exactly how he liked it.

Certain there was nobody around, Uriah slipped out from the alcove. He padded his way to his next target, a small vent grate some ten metres along the same wall as the alcove. Upon reaching it, he pulled out a small screwdriver and worked the grille's screws, grimacing at every twisting screech and groan. It wasn't loud enough to draw attention, however, and Uriah pushed into the small hole, feet first and on his back. Not the

preferred method for entering a duct, but Uriah needed to close the grate behind him.

The channel was a tight fit, the dust and soot-coated ceiling centimetres from the tip of his nose, the walls wide enough for Uriah to extend his arms over his head. He craned his head back and used a small magnetic clamp to keep the grille in place with the metal duct. Satisfied that it would hold, Uriah dug the soft heel of his boots into the floor and shimmied along while pulling with his hands. According to the building schematics, it would open up soon, but then a centimetre on the blueprints might well be a kilometre in reality.

'Uf,' Uriah grunted. 'This is tight.'

'Told you,' Voice said. 'If you get stuck, I'm not coming to help.'

'Duly noted,' Uriah said. At the very least, Uriah was thankful that he wasn't claustrophobic, though he did have to push away persistent thoughts of the passage narrowing and him getting stuck. Instead, he focused on Morgane's face until the duct widened at a large, relatively spacious junction where it split with another channel that went straight up. He switched positions, turning face forward and rolling over to his stomach so he could push forward with his legs. He continued on his way head first and proceeded to the next vent, grateful that his escape lay only metres away.

THE FOUNDRY'S INTERIOR was a honeycomb of interconnected caverns, each five to seven storeys in height. While expansive, the interior was still cramped. Huge heating engines and generators sat shoulder to shoulder with barely the room to slip through the gaps between them. Some of the equipment was rusted and useless, having died years ago; others coughed black smoke and functioned as though seized by spasms. Three-storey vats containing pools of magma-like metal bled thick ropes of steam upwards while conveyor belts carried various moulds or cooled ore ingots from one section to the next. The sky above it all was a network of catwalks and footbridges, designed around the steam columns and connected to the few offices suspended well above the foundry floor.

'I'm inside,' Uriah said. 'I see the offices, but the walkways above are well travelled and too visible for my tastes.'

'Stay on the ground,' Voice said. 'No need to climb just yet, according to the map.'

Uriah remained on the ground, hiding between the legs of gigantic engines of unfathomable purpose, darting from one shadow to the next. Traffic along the ground was light, and for good reason. The vats above rained irregular showers of molten sparks that quickly sizzled, sputtered and cooled on the pitted floors. From his vantage, Uriah could see those individuals who survived the scarring touch of the lethal rains, their skin marked and discoloured by droplets of ore. He took extra care to navigate clear of the vats when he could.

After an eternity of hiding in darkness and slowly making his way through the various chambers, Uriah reached his destination.

'Finally here,' he said.

'And only an hour to get there,' Voice replied.

Aren't you happy you charge by the hour?'

'It depends,' Voice replied, a hint of mischief to her voice. 'Most men don't last the hour.'

Before Uriah could reply, Voice segued into: You see the chief foreman's office?'

'I'm standing directly below it. Or rather, it's six storeys above me.'

The chief foreman's office was a rectangular container, lined with filthy windows on its four sides, all of them dark. Only one wall connected to the catwalks; the other walls were virtually inaccessible. Virtually.

Uriah crouched in the shadow of a trestle that helped support the network of low walkways. He studied his surroundings, checking for patrols and lookouts. Most of the Orlocks were on the lower catwalks, though a few maintenance workers ran their rounds on the ground. It was his best shot, the graveyard shift running the fewest workers.

After taking a deep breath, Uriah mounted the trestle and clambered up a girder that angled upward at forty-five degrees. His foot slipped twice on the grimy beam, but he held tight despite the growing ache in his fingers. He reached the junction between the beam and the strut supporting the catwalk itself, and switched position -his fingers gripping the strut on either side and his back and feet planted firmly against the beam.

Metallic footsteps clanged directly over Uriah's head; there was an Orlock on the catwalk above. Uriah waited, acutely aware of his feet

slowly slipping along the girder's greasy slope. He held on tighter, trying to remain anchored, but his fingers grew numb. The footsteps continued their slow, plodding pace, the Orlock in no hurry to move past. Uriah cursed silently and focused on his breathing.

The dull ache in his fingers turned his hands into arthritic claws, and Uriah wondered if he'd be able to unlock them or even pull his way up through the bars of the catwalk's rails. Still, he held on and waited for the slow Orlock to walk past. Another eternity passed, and another, bringing Uriah to the edge of letting go and sliding all the way back down to the ground in a hard tumble. The footsteps above his head moved on. Within moments, the sounds of heavily booted feet against the catwalk faded away. Uriah was no longer certain if there was anyone on the footbridge above his head, but he had no choice now.

With singular effort, Uriah used the last of his guttering strength to pull himself up. He grabbed the rail's horizontal bars and slipped under the lowest one; he lay flat on the catwalk, breathing hard. His fingers now screamed in pain and it hurt just trying to unlock them from the daw-like rigour. He massaged both hands against his trousers and craned his head to look around. There were no Orlocks anywhere near him or his stretch of walkway, including the one who had delayed his ascent.

Uriah muttered a small curse against the Steel Sentinel Orlock that had pained him so, and took the extra moment to curse the Orlock's entire lineage and whatever pet he possessed. Then again, he doubted the Orlock was domesticated enough to attract a pet in the first place.

'What was that?' Voice asked.

Uriah grimaced; he'd have to remember diat his throat microphone was overly sensitive. No more mouthing his silent conversations. 'Noming,' he said. 'Just resting a moment before continuing.'

With sensation returning to his fingers, Uriah stood and carefully made his way along the catwalk. His head swivelled from side to side like a predator on the hunt and he loped close to the ground. His hand remained on the railing in case he needed to swing over the side at a moment's notice; though truthfully, his fingers ached in protest at the mere notion of repeating their last performance. Thankfully, the lower catwalks weren't as frequently patrolled as the network several metres above his head, and they remained hidden in larger patches of shadow.

Uriah was now below the chief foreman's cabin by some three storeys. Reaching the front door would require making his way up to the upper set of catwalks where the lighting was more prevalent and where more Orlocks laboured and toiled. That was not an option. Instead, he steeled himself to the inevitable climb up the adjacent support trestle of the upper walkways; with skillful navigation mat would bring him eye-to-eye with one of the cabin's dark windows. After that, it would be a matter of finding a way inside, not that Uriah was worried.

Waiting until the walkway above his was clear, Uriah clambered onto the angled trestle and shimmied his way upwards again. This time, speed took precedence, and within a few seconds, he'd reached the upper catwalk precisely when nobody was close enough to see him. After confirming through the windows that the chief foreman's office was dark and unoccupied, Uriah mounted the rail and leapt for the cabin's roof ledge. Almost silently, he pulled himself up on top of the cabin and rolled away to remain hidden. With the network of hanging walkways below him, Uriah felt confident that nobody could spy on him from above. He peered over the edge of each side, trying to find the best, most discreet, way into the cabin.

KADEN SUPPRESSED a cough borne from the dusty, oily interior of the duct. The turbofans had flared to life moments ago, dragging polluted air out of the foundry dome, all except the one in Kaden's duct. He approached the silent fan and immediately noted the coppery acid smell in the air. Sure enough, two gears had been stripped of their teeth. They spun effortlessly, the fan blades remaining still. Kaden saw the grappling claw hooked into the side of turbofan's cowl and the cord that dropped down into the darkness. With a smile, Kaden pulled Uriah's rappelling rope back up through the blades.

URIAH DROPPED INTO the room from the vent in the ceiling and quickly surveyed his surroundings. The cabin was a single room except for the privy, and surprisingly neat for an Orlock's den. Still messy by Uriah's standards, but at the very least, he didn't feel like scrubbing himself clean from proximity.

Patches of dust and corner cobwebs coated the room. The dusk was a clutter of work order bundles made from recycled vellum, while a couch and small kitchen attested to many a double and triple shift that the Orlocks likely inflicted upon the Steel Sentinels foundry. In one corner, piles of stripped innards belonging to various machines sat next to a small work bench. Central to the room and thus, Uriah's attentions, was a large work desk overflowing with data pads and piles of parchments.

Nearly lost in the junk heap of the desk sat an Orlock logic hub. It was an ancient device and looked too jury-rigged to have been touched by a Van Saar engineer. It was also one of the few logic devices throughout the facility, if the Orlocks remained true to form. While the foreman likely used it for accounting and other orders of business required to run the foundry, the device was also connected to the primitive network shared by most Orlock facilities. How they maintained technology of that sophistication was a mystery to Uriah, but they must have done something right to appease the Machine Spirit.

'I found the logic hub,' Uriah said.

'Is it two cans connected together with string?'

Uriah chuckled softly. 'I see we share an appreciation of Orlock technology.'

'Cawdor, Goliath, Orlocks... they're all the same smelly breed.'

'I see,' Uriah said. 'No, the hub appears to be more sophisticated than that.'

'AH right then. Start her up. I'll walk you through this.'

With little time to lose, Uriah activated the machine and prayed for a simple encryption code. The computer hissed to life, sounding as though it was on its final legs, mechanical hiccups and heavy whirrs threatening to choke it. Uriah waited for the prompt screen to begin his assault.

KADEN WORE AN ear-splitting grin as he heaved the last of the rappelling rope up through the turbofan. A click and piston sigh behind him brought Kaden to his next task. He turned to face the tiny drone, a floating child's skull with a pict-grabber in one eye socket. It hovered behind Kaden in the duct, obediently awaiting its next orders.

'Stir up some trouble, will you?' Kaden said.

The drone floated past Kaden, buoyed up by a tiny anti-grav generator, and dropped into the chamber.

And try not to get shot this time,' Kaden whispered after it.

URIAH SLAPPED THE side of the logic device in frustration and set about coaxing it to life. It was slow, and from what Uriah could see, the Orlock's sad attempt at a user interface was a clutter of scattered files listed with no apparent rhyme or reason.

'Did you hit the machine?' Voice asked.

'Maybe,' Uriah said, puzzled. 'If I did, how would you know?'

'Tsk,' Voice replied, 'I know all. And what would your precious Machine Spirit say to such callous treatment.'

'"Thank you for awakening me" perhaps?'

'I doubt it. Keep searching for the directory.'

Uriah sighed and set about searching through the network. Finally, he found the directory he was looking for, the one that accessed the Orlock network. The logic device awaited input of a password.

'Found it!'

'Be grateful the Orlocks don't rely on Van Saar protocols,' Voice said. 'Passwords must be input within a set number of seconds. Only three mistakes are allowed before the terminal shuts down. Then the alert goes out.'

Uriah nodded. 'I know the Orlocks possess nothing of that sophistication, though its more cunning members do booby-trap their hardware.'

'Is that experience talking?'

'Perhaps,' Uriah said. 'It's certainly not ignorance speaking its mind,' Looking at this terminal with its dried lubricant tubes and exposed wiring, Uriah doubted the hub was booby-trapped.

Uriah accessed the root files, hoping to find some way to bypass the password system. His fingers danced across the input device at Voice's behest, but the system was well protected, far better then his last incursion.

With a jolting abruptness, alarms rang out across the entire facility and sent Uriah's heart straight into his throat.

'Jester, what is it?' Voice asked.

'Don't know yet. Stand by,' Uriah scrambled to the window to see outside; Orlocks were running in different directions across the catwalks. A voice boomed over the foundry's loudspeakers:

'Intruders outside. There may be more inside. Search the entire facility!'

Uriah cursed, an avalanche of questions on his lips. Did they spot his rope? Is it another intruder? What are the chances there's another thief out here, tonight? How long will it take for them to reach this office? He shook his head, trying to dislodge the cacophony of questions addling his thoughts, and returned to the computer terminal.

The foundry's on alert. I have to move fast.'

'Pull out?' Voice asked.

'No. We continue but hurry.'

Fingers typing with furious pitch, Uriah flew through the different directories, trying to find a way past the password blockade. Voices filtered in and out of the cabin as Orlocks drifted close to, then away from it. It was only a matter of time, but that was enough to prompt Uriah to work more quickly.

Footsteps approached the catwalk closest to the cabin's windows. Uriah killed the pict screen attached to the logic hub and slid out of the chair and under the desk. The footsteps stopped and Uriah held his breath, trying to hear the conversation outside.

'Jester,' Voice asked.

There was no reply.

'Don't look like there's anyone inside,' a woman's voice said from outside the foreman's office.

'Check *inside,'* her male compatriot said.

'I haven't got the key.'

Then get the key,' he replied.

'But it's at the security post,' she said, impatience lacing her voice.

'Good thing you've got legs, then,' he said, ending the argument.

The footsteps moved away, and Uriah braved a glimpse. The catwalks outside were empty, again, but that also meant Uriah had a few minutes at most before they returned.

Uriah was about to lift himself back up when something caught his eye. Scratched into the edge of the desk itself was a sequence of numbers:

38452.

'It can't be this easy,' Uriah mumbled to himself before setting himself back into the chair.

'What?'

'I think I found the code.' He brought the screen back to life and returned to the password prompt. Sure enough, 38452 did the trick, and the Orlock network opened. Uriah searched for the keyword 'Soren,' and was rewarded with a single entry complete with Soren's picture:

Attention all Orlock Facilities:
WANTED! Dead or Alive
Soren Kaar, House Van Saar: Tech-Artificers
Bounty: Dependent on conditions mentioned below.
Kaar is a traitor. He has been selling technology to
House Delaque and House Orlock. He must pay for that insult.
IMPORTANT! Bring Kaar in alive OR bring his implants back undamaged! Bounty is dependent on condition of implants!

'Soren,' Uriah muttered to himself. 'You idiot. What were you doing?'

'Did you get it?'

'Yes.'

'Then leave!'

'Not yet! I'll contact you later!' Uriah said. Lost to the revelation that Soren was also selling secrets to the Orlocks, Uriah raced through more files, trying to find tidbits of information. The bounty certainly explained why the Orlocks were after Soren, but, the fact it was still active meant the Orlocks were no closer to finding the Tech-Artificer's whereabouts than Uriah was. Unfortunately, if the Orlocks knew anything further, it wasn't on their network.

Voices outside the cabin grew louder. The two Orlocks were returning with the key and headed straight for the door. Uriah quickly killed the power to the terminal and raced to the hole in the ceiling where he'd removed the grate. He jumped as the voices approached the door, and caught the lips of me vent. He pulled himself up, but his chest snagged the edges.

Uriah exhaled, forcing all the air from his lungs and contracting his chest and torso by the necessary centimetres.

The key scratched the door before dropping into the lock.

Uriah pulled himself up, scrapping his body through the opening. His belt caught on the edge.

The door lock clicked open.

Uriah pushed his belt in to clear the opening and pulled his way up.

Not fast enough! he realized when he heard the Orlocks in the cabin below shout.

'Intruder!'

Uriah cursed. They'd likely seen his legs vanish up through the hole.

A second later, as Uriah scrambled up, gunshots tore open the ceiling and shredded the rooftop beneath his feet. Wild shots hissed past him and more shouts echoed throughout the complex. It was time to move.

Uriah leapt from the roof down onto the upper-level catwalks, landing lightly on his feet. He barely caught sight of the two overeager Orlocks inside the cabin before ducking; errant shots peppered the walls and windows of the cabin, whining above Uriah's head. New shots whizzed by, pinging off metal rails and I-beams. More Orlocks were joining the battle and firing with wild abandon.

Too many bullets! Run, run, run,' Uriah muttered to himself. Like a cat, he dived over the railing and grabbed it with both hands as he passed. He swung like a pendulum, slamming his back into the walkway with a jarring thud. He twisted to face the catwalk, and then dropped again, swiftly catching its bottom lip. The sloped trestle was centimetres from his outstretched toes, his head below the catwalk's floor, just enough to see the flurry of movement on the lower walkways and on the ground.

More shots rang out, clanging against the metal around him; Uriah nudged himself into a swing below the catwalk, towards the trestle that was angled down forty-five degrees. He let go again and fell the few centimetres to the girder. He slid down the beam, first on his feet, before falling to his backside; he grunted at the rivets that punched him on the pelvic bone and in the soft flesh of his posterior during his downward slide.

Uriah slid down toward the floor, where his angled trestle met with a vertical I-beam that shot straight up. He grabbed the edge of the girder

with both gloved hands, trying to slow himself down from the near-terminal velocity slide and inevitable crash. The metal shredded the glove's padding and drew some blood from his much abused fingers, but Uriah managed to decelerate in time. His feet slammed into the I-beam at speeds less than deadly, and momentum pushed him off his ass. He struck the girder with his shoulder, the sickening pop followed by a rapier-sharp pain.

Barely functioning through the pain-laced fog of a dislocated shoulder, but reacting on instinct, Uriah slammed his shoulder into the girder again. He set his shoulder back in its joint and collapsed to the ground after nearly fainting from the effort.

Uriah fought to stay conscious, fought to remain aloft on the black waters that threatened to drown him. Somewhere in the great distance, gunshots rang out and a tiny thought nestled itself well in the back of his mind. *That's nice* he thought. *They're shooting at someone else.*

Only when one of the shots struck the concrete and peppered him with biting shards did Uriah realize he was still the prey. He rolled away, reacting on instinct, but more focused now, and scrambled to his feet. By the time sense had returned to him, Uriah was already running, darting between large pieces of equipment, none of which was spared the punishing salvoes of the pursuing Orlocks. Their indiscriminant manner brought Uriah to the mocking conclusion that the Orlocks were deliberately missing him to damage the foundry thus sparing themselves further drudgery.

As the chase continued, Uriah gained more footing with his senses; the stabbing pain in his shoulder subsided to a dull throb, but it promised plenty of aches tomorrow. For now, it diminished enough for Uriah to plan strategy.

Can't run forever, Uriah thought as the occasional round tried finding its mark. *Have to throw them off.*

The shooting stopped and Uriah realized he'd lost the pursuing Orlocks at the last jumble of machinery. It was a short reprieve. The Orlocks on the catwalks would spot him soon enough. Uriah quickly studied his surroundings, his eyes dancing over the heavy pieces of equipment, the conveyor belts, the smelting vats and the catwalks, considering every possibility.

Then he saw it.

Not the smelting vats themselves, but the suspension arms that held them in place; the same arms that tilted the vats to pour out their molten content when the ore was of sufficient purity. Uriah needed to reach a control panel despite his pursuers dogging him.

Fortunately, this time Uriah didn't need to scale trestles to reach his prize. The ceiling was covered in a network of rail tracks where hydraulic bogies fitted with spools of heavy-duty chains could lift and transport heavy equipment around the foundry. Several of the chains were long enough to scrape the floor.

Uriah kept to the shadows until he was close enough to one set of chains to make his run. He expected shots to ring out again, but neither the Orlocks in the catwalks nor those on the ground had spotted him. Uriah grabbed four chains that were almost braided together and climbed with every ounce of his strength. His shoulder and fingers protested at the burden, but Uriah had little time to lose.

He was three storeys up when a series of single shots rang out. One eager Orlock had spotted Uriah and his attention was drawing tiie other Orlocks into the area.

Good, Uriah thought. Makes it easier when they're all in one convenient location. Uriah was four storeys up when more shots rang out and the area became decidedly dangerous; the Orlocks, while rarely sharpshooters, believed volume was a good substitute for skill.

After nudging the chain-bundle forward, Uriah brought himself from a slow swing into a faster arc. More shots joined the chorus, a few pinging off the chains, but Uriah was focused on leaping onto the adjoining catwalk before anyone got there first. When the catwalk swung into view below his feet, Uriah let go of the chains and landed with a steady foot. He was already running before he had his bearings, shouts and shots erupting all around him. Uriah was near where he needed to be, running along the reinforced catwalks overlooking the vats.

While the heat chewed through Uriah, the vats also produced columns of steam that masked his flight across the catwalk. The barrage of shots shredded the air, diis time far wilder then tliey had been. Uriah searched for a control panel or emergency work station. He stumbled upon one a moment later, being manned by a shirtless Orlock behemoth with as much

fat as muscle. An autogun lay flat on the panel; the Orlock was obviously aware of the danger and ready for action, diough the steam hid Uriah's approach. Only in the last possible second did the Orlock catch movement from the corner of his eye. By then, Uriah was already taking a running aim. He fired a shot, catching the Orlock in the face. The shot resonated with a metallic echo.

The Orlock stumbled to one knee, his face a masticated red pulp except where steel plates were riveted to his skull. His arm shot out, stumbling for the gun on the panel. 'Kill you!' the behemoth roared.

'I'm certain of that,' Uriah said, surprised at the Orlock's tenacity. 'Say, why aren't you dead? Oh never mind,' Uriah fired two more shots into the Orlock's skull, collapsing him.

'I hate Orlocks,' Uriah muttered, studying the panel. 'Seriously, who rivets plates to their skulls? Orlocks, that's who.'

On first blush, it appeared as though the five large levers on the panel controlled tlie five gigantic vats adjacent to the catwalk. The levers were marked in increments of three degrees, presumably for the tilt of each vat.

'Only one way to find out,' Uriah said to himself, and pulled the levers down to one hundred and eighty degrees. Giant chains affixed from the bottom of the vats to motorized chain spools on the ceiling groaned in protest as they wound back up. In the process, they pulled and tilted tlie vats slowly. At first a small stream of molten ore poured from the mouth of each vat. Then, glowing orange and yellow waterfalls of molten ore cascaded down, flowing over the empty conveyor belts below, warping them under their heat. The ore turned into a deadly river that ran between equipment and support beams, flooding the floor with instant death. Whatever screams of pain Uriah heard were instantly cut short. What lingered was the panicked yells of the escaping survivors.

As Uriah turned to leave, he heard metal groan and one section of catwalk across the way collapsed with a loud crash. He quickly studied the carnage below him and realized the folly of his plan.

It's only folly, he thought, if it catches me as well. The molten metal was filled with impurities. While the pure ore merely flowed until it congealed and cooled, the impurities were sticking to everything they touched. They melted the already rusting support struts and ground equipment like globules of acid. And while they didn't remain hot for long enough to eat

their way completely through their surroundings, it was enough that weight and age took their toll.

Still, distraction was distraction, and Uriah used the momentum to his benefit. He ran, faster now lest his section of catwalk fall too. The plan worked; the Orlocks were too busy panicking or trying to contain the damage to pursue him. Uriah used the trestles again, jumped to the lower catwalks, and from there, to the ground and his exit from the building.

THERE WERE FEW occasions that actually left Uriah dumbfounded, but this was one such event. The rap-pelling cord he'd left behind for his swift escape was gone. Looking up, he saw no sign of any rope, much less the open turbofan he'd left behind; it was too dark.

The dome itself was alive with noise of machines and the screams of enraged Orlocks. The molten rivers had done their damage, collapsing catwalks and a portion of the ceiling, and partially crippling the foundry. If the Orlocks caught Uriah, he knew they would rip him apart. Now the rope was mysteriously missing, stranding him on the roof and suggesting that something more was at play. Well, nearly stranding him at any rate. There was always the chance during this mission that someone would discover the rope, or that Uriah would be cut off from the roof for whatever reason. So, as with any of his plans, there were always contingencies. In this case, two remaining exits, one of which was convenient, if not pleasant. It was an old sewer-pipe access, and while reaching it was not an issue, travelling through the stink of Orlock waste was a hazard in itself.

Uriah shook his head at the prospect and headed out.

THE ORLOCKS SWEPT through the dome numerous times, but there was no sign of the intruder. Part of the building was ruined and at least five men were dead. The Orlocks did not accept defeat well and fistfights broke out among the search parties over puerile matters or simple misunderstandings. Still, four Orlocks had seen the intruder proper, and one could even identify him from the wanted list. The name Uriah Storm went out to all Orlock strongholds and gangs, and within an hour, the bounty on his head increased by a handsome figure. So too did his ranking.

More importantly, it also drew the attention of Slag.

Slag's arrival was like that of a flood that silenced all conversation in his presence, and it spread outward. Soon, the only words spoken were whispered, and they echoed the same words: *Slag's here.*

The strong Orlocks, not easily cowed, stepped aside as Slag approached; they made eye contact and nodded to show their respect. Slag, however, rarely returned the courtesy. Still, the foundry workers could not help but stare at the impressive, bald man. Wide shelves for shoulders, muscle fibres stitched in perfect detail against his skin, black jagged tattoos that spi-raled up each massive arm and cradled his thick neck, all these were impressive, but not the most telling of Slag's features. It was his face that was unmistakable, the wash of heat from a foundry accident twisting his flesh into a waxen parody; the splash of metal droplets that burnt through skin and muscle to fuse to his skull; the spherical eye-implant riveted roughly into the bone surrounding the socket. And still, Slag's reputation was beyond that of stature or features. His reputation was made in the displays of his ruthless cunning. He was among the smartest of the Orlocks in the way they respected most.

Slag was their saint and their devil, and he walked among them tonight.

A few Orlocks tried offering Slag a summary of the evening's events, but he seemed more interested in where Uriah had been rather than the damage he'd caused. That led him to the office, where a nervous Steel Sentinel foreman plinked away at the logic hub.

'I have it,' the Foreman said, grateful that he'd found the information. 'The intruder called up this file'

Slag leaned in close to study the screen. 'The Van Saar engineer? You after him too, Uriah? ' he asked, mumbling. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder to one of his own men. 'Firefight earlier today,' Slag said. 'The boys were lookin' for Soren at some hab block. Someone dropped in unannounced. I'm thinking Uriah Storm. See if the survivors can confirm that.'

'Do you need to see anything else?' the foreman asked, indicating the screen.

Yes. Remove Uriah from the hunted list. Here's the authorization,' Slag said, leaning in to type the password himself.

'But-'

'Now,' was all Slag said. Without a further word of thanks or otherwise, he turned from the office and walked outside to the catwalks. He surveyed the damage below him, waiting for the foreman to rejoin him.

'I've done as you asked,' the foreman reported.

'How many dead?'

'Nine, likely more. Three men are still missing. A dozen burned, but we know how he came in. A turbo-fan was-'

'I don't care,' Slag said. 'Security was pitiful. Hundreds of Orlocks and one Delaque. The odds were in your favour, not his.'

'I know,' the foreman said, his voice betraying a slight tremble. And I will take full responsibility for-'

Slag was already walking away, already planning his next steps. His entourage of five, well-armed and beefy Orlocks quickly fell in line. The foreman caught up with the rearmost Orlock and slowed him down enough to ask a whispered question.

'Why did Slag have me remove Uriah Storm from the hunted list?'

A smirk crept up on the Orlock's lip. 'Because,' he responded, 'he wants no interference when he goes after Uriah himself

SLAG AND HIS FIVE men had barely exited the dome when he turned to face them. 'Find Storm,' is all he said.

'We'll put out word for Uriah's head-' one Orlock said before he noticed Slag's almost spite-riddled scowl directed at him.

'Anyone less stupid want to answer?' Slag asked. 'We find Uriah by going after the Van Saar engineer?' another Orlock offered. 'That way, Uriah comes to us,' 'Smart man,' Slag said, walking away.

CHAPTER FOUR

> Plan your strategies in advance and consider all outcomes,
> no matter how unlikely. The game should he won before
> you ever set foot on the field.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

'UGH! YOU SMELL!'

Uriah smiled and nodded to the female Delaque clerk in the hallway. It was hard acting so cavalier about the foul reek when Uriah himself wanted to retch, but he had to admit he was deriving some pleasure from the experience.

Thank you, yes,' Uriah said, walking down the hall and addressing everyone whether they intended to listen or not. 'I discovered the stench recently. It's my newest disguise designed to ingratiate myself with sewer scavengers, Orlock plumbers, Cawdor prisoners, the incontinent as a whole. Tell all your friends. Better yet, let them smell the experience themselves!'

With a sigh, Uriah opened the lock on his door and pushed into his small living quarters. Almost immediately, the itchy, damp clothes came off and found their way into a disposal receptacle, never to be used again. A chemical scrub came next, not exactly normal Delaque procedure, but the ingredients came courtesy of Mor-gane and were designed to eliminate

harmful bacteria. The Van Saar were particularly fussy when it came to hygiene.

Uriah exited the bathroom and went to his desk. He removed the drawer, revealing a false back, and retrieved a small teardrop-shaped pendant. The pendant was a black diamond, cradled in a lattice web of fine gold and hung from a delicate chain. Uriah watched it twirl, and smiled at Morgane's beloved gift. She'd given it to him as a symbol of her love, and Uriah lost himself in that perfect moment where nothing in the world mattered; when everything felt right. He eventually put it away, feeling sore but far better than he had earlier.

The message light blinked on Uriah's pict screen. He punched in his access code, thanked the Machine Spirit for its diligence and replayed the scratchy image. The face that greeted him was familiar, nose crushed flat and beady eyes. He spoke and sucked in air through his mouth, breathing as though drowning on his own congestion.

'Uriah. Heard you lost yourself a Van Saar agent,' the image said with some satisfaction. 'I got the information on his whereabouts if you can meet the price...'

THE RENDEZVOUS SPOT was a Fumes Bar. Situated near an active industrial complex, and often sharing the same owners, the bar was one of several that piped in low concentrations of filtered gases from nearby factories. The fumes produced a cheap high in the bar's clientele, a constant sense of euphoria at the mere expense of one's brain cells.

Uriah avoided such establishments, but business brought him to these places frequently. Fortunately, it wasn't uncommon to see clientele wearing rebreathers for whatever reason, so nobody batted a sluggish eye when Uriah arrived wearing one.

The bar was a small, comfortable affair, with no more than a dozen small tables scattered across the open floor, and a bar set against the back wall. The air was hazy from a noxious cocktail of smoke and various gases. Uriah adjusted his heavy duster and surveyed the bar for any suspicious behaviour before finally making his way to the table nestled in the shadows.

'Hale,' Uriah said, taking a seat.

Hale, the man with the crushed nose, studied Uriah for a moment, as though trying to place him. He blinked twice, his bloodshot eyes heavy with the fumes, his tongue dragging his speech into a numb drawl. "You look different,' Hale said. You cut your hair?'

You ask me that every time we meet. It's the mask. I look different because of the mask.'

That can't be it.'

'Fine,' Uriah said, 'I cut my hair.'

That must be it,' Hale said before he returned to his drink.

Uriah waited a few moments before sighing. 'You called me?' Uriah said, trying to prompt the conversation.

'Oh, yeah. Soren, I know what happened to your Van Saar spy.'

'And how did you know I was looking for him?'

'C'mon!' Hale said, his eyes sober for a moment.

Til admit,' Uriah said, 'that despite your choice of diversions, you are surprisingly sharp. How you manage to function in this environment is beyond me.'

Think of it as a test of will,' Hale said with a smile. 'If I can operate in this environment, just think how dangerous I am when completely lucid. I'm so dangerous that I keep myself in this state for the safety of everyone around me,' Hale said, sweeping his hand to indicate the whole room.

Uriah shook his head. 'Magnanimous of you, but your logic is entirely suspect. That made no sense!' he said with a laugh.

'True enough,' Hale admitted and returned to nursing what was now his dry tankard.

'So what about Soren?' Uriah asked.

'My throat,' Hale said, squeezing his oesophagus for good effect. 'Terribly parched. Couldn't possibly talk.'

Uriah turned to the bar and nodded to the thin man with a full face gasmask tending drinks. The bartender walked over with another tankard and a bottle of Ratbile.

'Leave the bottle,' Uriah said, dropping coins into his hand and sending him back to the bar. The Jester poured a glass for himself and Hale, offered a silent toast and lifted his rebreather before downing the searing rotgut in a shot. 'Better?' Uriah asked, his throat torn.

'Oh yes,' Hale said with a grimace. 'And for that, you get this little tidbit of information. Soren's dead. They found his corpse somewhere deep inside the metal guts of the Underhive.'

THE BOTTLE OF RATBILE was nearly empty before Uriah finally spoke. 'So what is it you're holding back?'

'You brought me my merchandise?'

Uriah reached into his duster and slid the small black cloth packet across the table. 'Careful,' he said before Hale could examine the contents. 'That's enough to stupefy an entire gang.'

Hale opened the cloth flap and counted the forty green pills. He smiled at the sharp smell that they produced and was about to pocket them when Uriah placed his hand on Hale's wrist.

'The information, what is it I'm buying?'

'Soren wasn't just shot, y'know. He was savaged, butchered!'

That buys you ten pills,' Uriah said, never releasing his grip.

'All right, then. Someone stripped him clean of his pretty implants.'

At best that's another five pills,' Uriah said. 'Scavengers steal implants off corpses all the time.'

'Scavengers don't remove implants with surgical precision, do they? The wounds were cut with real skill.'

'All right, that's worth another ten pills. That's fifteen shy of what I figure is worth the cost.'

'How about this, then?' Hale said, obviously saving the best for last - if Uriah read him correctly. 'I don't know how he got them, but a black-shop bio-surgeon -goes by the name of Cantrall - was selling Soren's implants. Cut-throat rates for premium Van Saar tech.'

THE LEAD WAS THIN, but Cantrall was all Uriah had for the moment. As the tram rumbled along the ceiling track suspended high above the streets, Uriah pondered the matter. He knew Cantrall through reputation only, but that was sufficient to launch him in the proper direction. Why the bio-surgeon would have Soren's implants was a question Uriah was keen to ask Cantrall - followed, of course, with, 'Who murdered Soren?'

The tram coasted along the ceiling rails before ducking into a roof tunnel that separated this district with the one above it. Uriah's stomach lurched as the tram soared on an elevated track angled straight for the ceiling of the next district. It levelled out moments later, slowing at a suspended platform attached to a tall tower. Uriah disembarked at the station and followed the exiting mob to the lifts. Within moments, he was on the street, approaching the area where Cantrall operated. The tram lumbered above his head, gaining speed to its next destination.

The district was a warren of tight alleys and low ceilings that added to the claustrophobia. It was a garment quarter of sorts, the workers living and working in meir one-room hab blocks, each one an independent contractor for a consortium of interests. Here, the House loyalties blurred with several entrepreneurial - but minor - gangs forging a non-aggression pact to ensure the flow of commerce.

As Uriah approached the stretch of road where Cantrall's business lay, he immediately noticed locals fleeing in his direction. The irregular sounds of gunfire rose to meet him. The area was besieged, and Uriah was of the growing suspicion that it was centred on Cantrall's business.

Voice,' Uriah said. 'I need your help.'

Voice here,' Voice responded, crackling in Uriah's ears. 'What's happening? Where are you? This wasn't on your itinerary.'

Ves, yes,' Uriah responded with a chuckle. 'Call it a necessary detour. You're being paid well enough. I have a lead on the assignment. What can you tell me about Cantrall?'

'Cantrall? Hm. Black market surgeon and pricey too. He has an ego to show for it.'

'So he isn't one to normally offer discounts?' Uriah asked.

'Normally? Try never.'

Thank you. Can you stay with me in case I need help? I think I'm walking into a firefight.'

'Hold your hand, as it were?'

'If mat means finally meeting you face to face, why not?' Uriah replied. After checking his bolter and rounds, Uriah headed towards die sound of gunfire. He paused long enough to grab one mousy looking man by the arm as he tried running past.

"What's happening?' Uriah asked.

What d'ya think! Orlocks and Cawdor blastin' each other ta bits!' With that, the man wrestled free and continued his mad scramble to safety.

Uriah continued on his way, hugging the building's shadows closely and ducking behind bits of cover on his approach to a T-junction. The sounds of gunfire grew more heated, more furious. It was an all-out battle, with screams, curses and endless volleys the punctuation of the fight, and it was growing worse. Angry and armed neighbours poked their heads out from windows long enough to contribute to the skirmish. They threw objects or fired the occasional shot with autoguns. Uriah could not see the main combatants.

'Unbelievable,' Uriah said with a mutter.

What?' Voice asked.

'It's like trying to get someone to shut up by yelling louder than them.'

The firefight was unfolding right around the corner, though Uriah saw the occasional local denizen chance a shot from a window. A ricochet punched a hole in the plascrete wall above his head. Uriah ducked and approached the building corner while throwing the occasional glance to the neighbours. He peered around the corner, and sure enough, amid the dead and dying who littered the streets, a gang of Orlocks had entrenched themselves behind all available cover. They shot at a facing building, exchanging heated fire with the Cawdor hidden inside.

Uriah was in the process of assessing fhe situation when one figure caught his eye. Slag was directing fire and issuing orders in his usually clipped manner. Uriah froze, the bones in his legs suddenly aware of the cold pins that held them together. He could still hear the sound...

...the crisp snaps... bones broken... blinding anguish... vision warped by the delirium of agony.

Cold sweat washed over Uriah, soaking him in seconds. He ducked back around the corner, muttering a soft curse.

'What was that?' Voice asked. 'I didn't catch it.'

'Slag,' Uriah said, feeling punched in the chest. 'Slag's here?'

The Orlock ganger. What's his gang called?'

'Soulsplitters, and he's more like a butcher.'

'Encountered him, have you? Does he know you're there?'

'No,' Uriah said. 'He hasn't seen me yet.'

'If he bothers you that much, maybe it's time to pay him an ill courtesy. You're a good shot. A bullet to the back of the head should do it.'

'Right,' Uriah said, trying to clear the painful memories from his head enough to function. 'You're right.'

'Of course I am.'

Uriah peered back around the corner. The fight was nowhere near abating, not with both groups so well entrenched. Uriah took careful aim, lining up the iron sights of his bolt pistol with the back of Slag's head...

. ..bones broke, heavy boots pressed down on his femur and tibia, snapping them under casual weight...

He could still hear the crack and the screams that followed, his own screams. The memories of the past were too powerful to reconcile here and now. His iron sights danced, unable to remain fixed on the back of Slag's head. Uriah's vision blurred and the pistol's grip felt greasy in his sweaty palms.

'I can't,' Uriah said, his heart beating so fast that he felt breathless.

'What's wrong, Jester?' Voice asked, concern in her tone.

'I... I don't have a clear shot,' Uriah said.

There was a pause on the other end, as though Voice was stripping the lie apart and weighing it. 'Is there a way around him?' she asked.

'I don't know yet,' Uriah said, grateful that Voice didn't challenge him further. 'Likely.'

'More than likely,' Voice said. 'Under the best conditions, surgery isn't a certainty. Patients die or are frequently disfigured.'

'Right,' Uriah said, trying to focus on other matters. 'So Cantrall, like all experienced surgeons, likely has a rabbit hole to escape through.'

'Sewers?' Voice asked.

'No,' Uriah responded. 'A little beneath someone of Cantrall's standing, I'd warrant. Too much like groveling for a man who holds himself so highly. I'm checking the adjoining building.'

'WHERE TO START?' Uriah said, navigating the pockmarked hallways of the building. The metal sliding doors to the various hab blocks were closed, the heated battle still being waged outside.

For Uriah, it felt good to have that distance between him and Slag. Each wall between them felt like another world removed, though Uriah knew Slag. The Orlock was tenacious, determined. He would find his way into Cantrall's business sooner or later, and knowing Slag, it would be sooner.

'Jester,' Voice said, 'if Cantrall has an escape route through this building, then he likely owns property here.'

'Or,' Uriah added, 'he knows the building prefect. In eimer case, the prefect is the one we want.'

'But...' Voice hesitated. What if he's escaped already?'

'We'll see when we get there.'

The building prefect was easy enough to locate; they generally chose the most defensible position in the building, which was the basement in this case. The basement looked like a secured bomb shelter with heavily barred windows looking out. It could likely shoulder the building's collapse - a frequent occurrence in Hive Prime - with no damage to the occupants. Uriah knelt in front of the prefect's door, so marked by the obscenities scrawled across its face, and fidgeted with an open security panel with all the earmarks of jury-rigging.

'What do you see?' Voice asked.

Thirteen wires leading to the number pad,' Uriah whispered. Three are burnt at the contacts. Looks like a poor soldering job.'

'Aren't they all? The thirteenth wire is the problem. It should lead to a small bank of capacitors.'

'Right it does. Booby-trap?'

'Electric discharge. Enough to shock you and possibly burn a few implants. Clip the wire and strip the insulation.'

Uriah followed Voice's lead, but offered the Machine Spirit a silent apology for the intrusion. 'Done,' Uriah said.

'Use the capacitor wire to short out the security panel itself but be ready to move.'

Sparks of electricity erupted when Uriah dabbed the live wire across the contacts. An acrid, burning smell filled the air and the metal door slid open. Uriah was inside the hab block hall quickly, bolt pistol at the ready. The building prefect was standing at a bedroom doorway, facing into the room with an autogun in hand. The prefect didn't even see Uriah until he

was on top of him, the bolt pistol pressed against the back of his balding head.

'Hello, I'm looking for a friend,' Uriah said with a grin.

That's the best you can come up with?' Voice asked in his ear.

Uriah was grateful that only he heard her.

'Who're you? What d'ya want?' the prefect asked.

'Drop the gun and I'll tell you. Don't drop it and...' Uriah tapped the back of the man's head. A moment later, the autogun hit the floor.

It was then that Uriah realized why the prefect had been staring into the bedroom. Piled against the closet door were stacks of furniture: mattress, bed frame, nightstand and dresser. Beyond the closet and adjoining wall, gunfire continued its stuttered chorus.

Uriah started laughing, and while his gun never wavered, he couldn't stop for a good moment.

What?' Voice asked, crackling in his ear.

'I think I found Cantrall's emergency escape route,' Uriah said, regaining some composure despite the random slip of giggles.

'What's so funny?' Voice asked

'You talkin' to me?' the prefect asked Uriah.

'So let me see if I understand this,' Uriah said for both the prefect's and Voice's benefit. 'Cantrall pays you for an escape route, and at the first sign of trouble, you barricade his only way out?'

'Ahh...' Voice said while the prefect muttered something Uriah couldn't hear. 'I understand, now. That is funny.'

'So Cantrall hasn't escaped?' Uriah asked the prefect. He nudged him with the pistol when the prefect didn't answer.

'No.'

You've actually helped me,' Uriah said, 'and for that, my good man, you get to live... with a headache for your efforts.'

One blow to the back of the head and the prefect slumped to the thinly carpeted floor.

It took a moment for Uriah to dislodge the furniture and shove it to the side. Pistol in hand, he cautiously opened the closet door and peered inside. It looked typical of a bachelor's walk-in closet, with junk piled against the walls and scattered across the floor. The back wall, however, was ajar, revealing a sliver of light from another room beyond.

Somewhere beyond, in the floors above, the gunfire continued, though far more sporadically. The firefight was drawing to a close. Uriah knew he had to act fast.

Beyond the hidden door rested a surgeon's bay - an operating slab with restraints, an assortment of butchering surgical tools, metal cabinets, cold units and waste bins. Despite a decent calibre of equipment, blood and machine-oil spatter still stained the walls and floor. On the operating slab rested the corpse of a Cawdor ganger. Two more corpses, one Cawdor and the other in filthy operating garb, lay on the floor.

Uriah entered the room in time to see someone slip away through the only set of double doors. He followed through, bolt pistol at the ready, and entered into a short hallway ending at a staircase, with doors on either side. The trench-coated quarry was already taking the steps two at a time. Uriah fired again, missing by centimetres.

Up the stairs, Uriah stared down another hallway. He had bare seconds to register the scene; the dead Cawdor gangers in the corridor; his bald-headed prey darting through another door while cradling a machine arm; the Orlock gangers, led by a confident-looking Slag, marching down the hall.

The stranger was quick enough to have avoided the attention of the Soulsplitters.

Uriah wasn't as fortunate.

He stopped in his tracks. Slag locked eyes with Uriah and smiled at the unanticipated gift. In that moment, Uriah realized he was in trouble. Whoever the stranger was, he'd stolen an implant from the surgical bay - likely Soren's implant - and was now beyond pursuit.

Worse yet, Slag had his sights set on Uriah, and that was one bone which he would not release. Uriah practically dived down the stairwell as the walls and ceiling around him disintegrated under a blistering onslaught of bolter and las fire.

Uriah tumbled off a couple of steps before hitting the basement floor. He rolled to his feet and ran for the surgical bay.

'Damn it!'

What is it?' Voice asked.

'Someone stole the implant from under my nose and now Slag's here.' Uriah reached the surgical bay and quickly tossed a round, flat object

down the hallway. 'Oh, and remind me to get more explosives!' he said, diving through the double doors.

'Explosives? Why-?'

Voice's question was answered by the loud explosion. The grenade detonated at the foot of the stairs and shook the building. It was more for effect than actual harm, but the blast was enough to damage the stone stairs and to slow the advance of Slag's men. Uriah was back on his feet and at the secret door. He quickly surveyed the surroundings, but there wasn't much to salvage. He needed to speak with Cantrall and Cantrall was dead. Whoever the thief was who'd stolen the implants, he'd done a professional job of executing all three men.

'Pull out!' Voice said.

'Not yet,' Uriah said, suddenly noticing the spherical ocular implant in Cantrall's left eye. Uriah pulled out his knife and began prying at the edges of the implant, cutting skin and muscle.

"What are you doing?' Voice asked, hearing Uriah's grunts.

'Playing a hunch,' Uriah responded. He removed the implant from the eye socket, ignoring the wet shucking noise it made, and pulled on the ocular cable till it popped loose. He ignored the bits of grey matter stuck to the cable's receptor plugs and shoved the bloody mess into a belt pouch.

The double doors swung open as Uriah came to his feet and he found himself staring down the barrels of a half-dozen guns as well as into the sly stare of Slag.

'Uriah Storm,' Slag said, almost purring.

Uriah's throat went dry, but only for a moment. He wouldn't die here, and he certainly wouldn't give Slag the satisfaction of acting scared in his presence.

'Please,' Uriah said with a smile. 'People I've made fools of call me Jester. I insist you do the same.'

'You're funny. But corpses usually are.'

'Ah!' Uriah said, 'banter from an Orlock that doesn't involve gunfire and granting.'

'You're half right, there,' Slag replied, raising his heavy bolter up into Uriah's face.

'What do you know?' Uriah said, shrugging. 'I was wrong, I *do* have more explosives.'

The Orlocks only noticed the grenade in Uriah's hand when it dropped and hit the floor. Slag's eyes widened. Almost everyone dived behind cover or back through the doors. Uriah, however, was running for the secret exit while Slag threw one of his men atop the puck before diving clear.

The explosives were on a six-second fuse, and Uriah was already counting down from when the grenade left his hand; one second spent in falling; another second lost waiting for the Orlocks to realize they were dealing with an explosive so they didn't shoot Uriah when he ran; three seconds running for the hidden door that was slightly ajar, and pushing through it.

The remaining second evaporated in the blast that shoved the secret door shut, sparing Uriah from the brunt of the explosion. After spending what felt like minutes recovering from the head ringing, Uriah stumbled through the closet door and out of the prefect's hab block. It was only when he reached the street that he heard Voice through his earpiece.

'...all right?'

Tm fine, I'm fine,' Uriah mumbled. He stumbled down the street, losing himself in the crowd of people brave enough to satisfy their curiosity. 'I can't hear you properly. I'll check in with you later.'

Uriah stumbled away on shaky legs.

SLAG ROSE TO his feet in the hallway and ignored the groans of his men. Several looked dead or severely injured, though they were easily replaced. The doors had shielded Slag and a couple of his more able men from the blast, but the operating bay was rained.

'You two. Find the implant,' Slag told his men. The rest of you find Uriah!'

'What about the injured?' a subordinate asked.

Slag pulled his heavy bolter and blasted one of the injured Orlocks lying near his feet. His moans died as quickly as he did.

'Couldn't hear you over his groans,' Slag said, drawing nearer to the man who'd questioned him. 'What about the injured?'

'Nothing, Slag. We'll find the implant.'

'Good idea,' Slag said. He holstered his weapon and examined the wall Uriah had slipped through. A small smile snuck past his lips in

anticipation of a worthy hunt.

CHAPTER FIVE

Choose your fights before your fights choose you.

— *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

URIAH WAS AGAIN disheveled and sporting additional cuts and scrapes from his most recent altercation. His muscles ached from their ordeals, though Uriah knew that age was taking its slow toll on him. Fortunately, he rather enjoyed the soreness that spread through every corner of his body. It made him feel alive and kept his mind sharp.

That was a necessity in his line of work, especially when two men were gunning for Uriah's head. The first was Slag, and the thought of the Soulsplitter bruiser turned Uriah's sweat cold. The second person, however, was perhaps a little more troubling. The second was the man who had stolen the implant.

Uriah walked down the familiar corridors of Shadow-strohm; he came to Percal's plain door. He knocked in code and waited a long moment before the familiar click and whirr sounded from the door's hidden mechanisms. The door opened.

'What is it, Uriah?' Percal asked, not looking up from his data-slate. 'I have work.'

'Then you'll have to accommodate me this once,' Uriah said, entering the room. He touched the uncomfortable metal chairs, feeling the lingering warmth of someone else's presence. You can tell him to come out,' Uriah said.

'Pardon?' Percal asked, looking annoyed as he glanced up from his work.

'Whoever was sitting in this chair. The one who is currently hiding in the little room beyond that hidden door,' Uriah said, nodding to the adjoining wall. 'You know, the *other* Handler you sent on the Soren job. Percal, you trained me better than that.'

'You're quick to accuse,' Percal said.

'But never wrong in my accusations,' Uriah responded.

'We'll see. Never wrong and never *been* wrong are two different issues. What is the basis of your allegations?' Percal asked.

'Please' Uriah responded with a laugh. 'The next time you send a second Handler to ensure the mission's success, send someone who won't get caught as they're escaping with the implant.'

'You saw a face?'

'No, but I'd recognize another Delaque Handler anywhere.'

'That's the basis of your accusation?' Percal asked, the stump of his nose twitching. He went back to studying the datapad. 'I have work, Uriah.'

'I'm surprised at you,' Uriah said. You've never tolerated failure before. Why are you protecting someone who so obviously led me right back to you?'

'Assuming your accusations have merit.'

'Fine,' Uriah said, standing. 'I'll assume you have Soren's arm, then, and continue with my investigation.'

'Soren is dead,' Percal stated while remaining focused on his work. 'Someone stole the implant from under your nose, and yet you accuse me of tolerating failure?'

Who says I failed?' Uriah said, a steady, mean smile cutting across his face.

Percal looked up. 'You have something?'

'Question your second Handler,' Uriah replied, heading for the door. 'And maybe you can figure out what he missed when he stole Soren's implant.'

'Uriah,' Percal said. The implants. I still want them. Find them at all costs.'

THE SECRET PANEL slid open and Kaden stepped out, shaking his head. 'He's lying,' he said, waving his hand through the holograph pieces on the regicide board.

'Is he?' Percal asked. 'He saw you escaping. Be grateful he didn't see your face.'

'Uriah Storm doesn't scare me,' Kaden said, smirking.

'He should. I trained him.'

That drew a momentary, uncomfortable silence from Kaden.

'Did you miss something? At Cantrall's surgical bay?'

'No,' Kaden replied. 'I searched it top to bottom. There was nothing there. Well, other than the arm I took.'

Percal thought on the matter a moment before shaking his head. 'No, you missed something. Uriah is not one for idle boasts.'

'I swear there was nothing there,' Kaden protested.

'Sit down. Recount every detail of your mission. Leave no description vague.'

'All right,' Kaden replied, sitting down. 'But I'm telling you, it's a waste of time. There are more implants that need recovering. Uriah's gaining ground and I'm not there to keep an eye on things.'

Then you'll have some catching up to do,' Percal said, stroking the scar on his lip. 'Now, from the beginning...'

THE WORK BENCH waited, but Uriah was distracted by one thought. He went to the desk and pulled out the small pendant hidden in the drawer. Uriah brought it to his nose and smelled Morgane's sweet perfume that still lingered on the keepsake. It brought a warm smile to Uriah's lips and washed away his recent concerns. Slag grew distant in his thoughts and Soren's death was easier to manage. Uriah missed Morgane, but he was grateful for her gift.

Satisfied with the moment's peace, Uriah kissed the pendant before returning it to its nest. He went over to the work bench.

Uriah surveyed the tools awaiting his touch. The lights in his hab block were dim, the sole illumination a bright circle at his table from an overhead spotlight. Centrepiece to the light was Cantrall's ocular implant, all it biological bits cleaned off. Uriah closed his eyes and muttered a wordless prayer.

"What? I didn't catch that,' Voice said.

Uriah finished his prayer before answering. 'Nothing. I was merely praying to the eye's Machine Spirit to forgive us for the intrusion.'

'You're just like the Van Saar, praying to machines.'

'Given their proficiency with devices, I thank you for the compliment.'

'Not much of a compliment,' Voice said, grousing. 'Has anyone ever accused you of being a Van Saar?'

'How do you know I'm not?' Uriah asked.

'Because no Van Saar would ever ask for outside help - my help - in handling technology. You know there is no Machine Spirit. It's just circuits and relays, nothing more.'

That's heresy to some,' Uriah replied.

'And music to others. The more we treat machinery as mysterious, the less we'll truly understand mechanics. Do you know I actually saw some poor fool praying to a keypad. He forgot his code - he was begging the Machine Spirit to open it up.'

'Some people don't want to understand machines, Voice. They find solace in believing in the spirit of the device. For them, communion and prayer is wearing implants.'

'Ah yes, fleshworks,' Voice responded. 'But that's not really true of you, is it? Certainly, you give the Machine Spirit its undeserved due, but you know your way around the guts of the machines.'

'Enough to stumble. That's why I need your help here.'

'Modesty? From you? How uncharacteristic of the Jester,' Voice replied, chuckling.

'Seriously, Voice. You do know why I stole Cantrall's implant?'

'I do,' Voice replied.

'So you know what I need?'

'Enough to guide you through it. Do you have a pict screen and input device nearby?'

Uriah patted the small black monitor with its bubble screen, sitting at the table's corner. The screen displayed the chaotic spatter of static. Yes, and they're ready.'

Very well, time to walk you through this,' Voice responded, and proceeded to guide Uriah through the process slowly.

The first course of action was to connect the implant's sensory micro-bundles to a data plug that was promptly jacked in to the monitor. The

static fluctuated, but otherwise remained the same.

'I still see static,' Uriah said.

'That's because the data plug can't interpret the implant's signals. It wasn't designed for that.'

'But how-?'

'Have faith,' Voice said.

It took Uriah a moment to understand the joke. 'Funny,' he replied, 'for a heretic...'

'Ah, flattery,' Voice replied before continuing with her instructions.

Delicately, Uriah slowly pried open the implant's outer casing, revealing its innards. Another fine example of Van Saar technology - the implant's lining having prevented vital fluids from leaking into the pristine-looking device. Uriah examined the interior and finally located his quarry, a small circuit board connected to wires. He used tweezers to pinch what Voice called 'optic bundles.'

'Is that it?' Uriah wondered aloud. 'Pinch the bundles?'

'Careful now. Pull the wire out, it's socketed.'

'Now what?'

'Look for a green chip near the circuit board. It's delicate work, but there's an empty socket for the bundle there. Push it in and that should do it.'

'Moving wires around seems a bit crude for Van Saar technology.'

Actually, the Van Saar have machines that do this for them without ever cracking open the implant's casing. We don't have the same luxury. That leaves us to cheat the device into working.'

'Done,' Uriah said after a moment. The screen flickered and displayed a menu system. At the press of two buttons, Uriah was replaying the eye's video-logs. He could see everything that Cantrall had seen through the artificial eye, recorded in scratchy, but otherwise clear, blacks and whites.

'I have it!' Uriah said, practically chirping at his success. He studied the images. 'Is this how Cantrall saw the world? In black and white?'

'For Cantrall, likely no,' Voice replied. 'Only the recordings are in black and white, I suspect. He likely had live colour input. But now you see the first reason why I dislike sensory-implants. It's like living inside a monitor, with screens for eyes.'

'And the second reason?' Uriah asked.

Voice paused to think about the matter. 'Fleshworks,' she said.

You mentioned that before,' Uriah said. 'But what does it mean?'

'It's when the implants, the surgery itself, become more valuable than the individual who uses them. The flesh becomes tool for the machine, not the other way around. It's when we mutilate our flesh to *improve* ourselves, but demean ourselves in the process. Fleshworks.'

You don't approve of implants.'

Voice sighed. 'You are paying me by the hour, Jester,' she replied. 'Don't you want to know something more relevant to your case.'

You're right,' Uriah said, sensing Voice's impatience. 'How many hours of recordings does the device contain.'

Try weeks.'

'Impressive,' Uriah said, focusing on the various files stored by date. 'The Van Saar are crafty spies.'

They are. Van Saar implants sold to outsiders often contain recording devices. That way, they'll never bother interrogating someone for information. They'll just retrieve the implant and take the data they need.'

There was a pause in the conversation as Uriah examined the videos, opening files at random and watching them with a voyeuristic glee. It was Voice who broke the silence.

'Jester, you were right about it being Van Saar tech. How'd you know about their hidden protocols?'

Uriah smiled. 'You're not my only friend with knowledge of such things.'

URIAH PLAYED BACK the recordings, using Soren's missed rendezvous as a rough benchmark for the starting date. Even then, they comprised several days' worth of material. Thankfully, the implant was smart enough to stop recording when Cantrall closed his good eye to sleep, and Uriah ignored the other dead spaces and procedural moments when the bio-surgeon operated on patients or worked on implants. Instead, Uriah searched for faces; faces of those who received Soren's implants; faces of those who sold them.

After several hours of searching, Uriah's lids were growing heavy. His eyes stung from the work and he was ready for a deep, comfortable sleep.

He almost missed the image that flashed across the screen.

The recording was from the day of Soren's disappearance, several hours after his missed rendezvous. Cantrall was working in his office, one likely gutted during the fire-fight, when he answered the door. A young man stood there - black hair, plain face, no gang markings - with several packages strapped into a heavy-frame dolly.

Delivery boy, Uriah realised.

The delivery boy deposited the boxes in Cantrall's office and left. It didn't look like he said much during the exchange.

Cantrall was expecting the delivery, Uriah thought to himself. Which means he received a call or he made the arrangements.

Uriah watched as Cantrall unpacked a total of six implants: Two eyes, an arm, two internal organs of undetermined nature and one leg. All were replacements for body parts that Soren had lost in a lab explosion.

Cantrall began his examination of the implants, cleaning them off in the process, but Uriah had stopped watching. Despite his normally strong constitution, it felt too grisly, even for him.

Instead, Uriah returned to earlier portions of the recordings, searching for more clues.

SEVERAL MORE HOURS passed, but Uriah had assembled some more pieces of the puzzle. Cantrall received several calls in the time of Soren's disappearance, but without an audio-feed, Uriah couldn't be sure if any of them were related to the delivery of the implants. With that lead seemingly dead, Uriah had moved on to the next related task, that of the implants themselves.

Six faces stared back at Uriah from his monitor, six faces in still frame from the video playback. Five men, one woman - each a different client of Cantrall's; each a ganger or street-mover of different affiliation; each earning one of Soren's scavenged implants. The last one Uriah already knew; it was the Cawdor ganger who lay dead on Cantrall's operating table, his promised arm in the hands of his executioner and thief. Thankfully, Uriah recognized another two, one by firsthand experience and one on description alone.

Cantrall had been quick to sell the items, but then most good bio-surgeons had a waiting list of clients and preferred stock. That's when

Uriah slapped himself in the forehead. If Cantrall did keep a list, then it was at his surgical bay. Worse, Uriah had to assume that Slag might have already found the list while searching the office, meaning that they likely shared the same remaining five targets. Whoever possessed the list definitely held the advantage since Uriah only recognized two of the five people who received the implants from the images.

At least he had two new leads to pursue.

But which to pursue first, the implant or the list, which might already be taken? Steal the implant first,

Uriah thought, and I could lose the list - I can't identify the other three gangers. Go after a list, which may not exist or is already gone, and I may lose the only implants whose locations I do know...

Uriah sighed. So much for sleep. He grabbed his trench coat and headed out.

THERE WAS NO decision, really; at least not for Uriah. The two implants, while valuable, were short-term victories; finding the list was critical to the long-term. Unfortunately, while the scavengers had yet to strip Cantrall's operation of its equipment, it was because of the Orlock presence that they stayed their hands.

'Killing Orlocks seems to be a hobby with you, Jester,' Voice had said as he approached the same building where he'd foiled Slag's attempts to kill him.

'It's a job,' Uriah replied. 'I don't derive pleasure from killing them, though I do seem to be killing quite a few of them these days.'

THE GUNFIGHT WAS furious, bolter shots and muzzle bursts imprinting the rooms with quick lightning flashes. Uriah had walked in on the Soulsplitters as they were searching Cantrall's place of business. Maybe Uriah had been encouraged when Slag's heavily armoured bike was nowhere to be seen. Maybe it was just stupidity. All that mattered now was that Uriah had entered the corridors unseen, until turning one corner to find Soulsplitters heading his way with plastic containers filled with data-slates and files.

'Thank you, you shouldn't have,' was all Uriah managed to say before the Soulsplitters dropped their boxes and reached for their weapons. Uriah was faster, however, drawing his bolt pistol with blinding speed, and firing through the brain pan of the lead Orlock. The others dived through adjacent doors, firing and screaming as they leapt. Uriah ducked to his right, back around the corner. Unfortunately, the firefight now raged full pitch.

'Problems?' Voice asked.

'Nothing that a few clips couldn't solve,' Uriah responded before unleashing several rounds down the corridor.

'What's your situation?'

'I have several Soulsplitters trapped down a deadend corridor. That's the bad news,' Uriah said, firing a flurry of shots through the walls in the hopes of hitting an Orlock.

'Is that bad?' Voice asked, her questions being cut off by gun battle.

'Yes, it is,' Uriah said. 'They're trapped, but they're well protected. I can't get to them without charging down the corridor,' Almost in response, a blistering hail of gunfire shredded the corners of Uriah's wall, as well as the wall facing the corridor.

Uriah immediately knew what the Soulsplitters were trying to do, and crouched down. He peeked around the corner and fired two shots into the chest of the red-headed ganger trying to sneak forward under cover fire.

'I neither have the clips nor the patience to hold out in a sustained gunfight,' Uriah said.

'So you're going to retreat? Wait, I forgot, look who I'm talking to. What about the list?'

Still crouching, Uriah peeked back around the corner and eyed the boxes lying in the no man's land between him and the Orlock nest. 'I'm working on that,' he said.

Before Uriah could act, there was movement in the corridor behind him, someone's feet scraping the floor. Uriah spun around and landed on his back. Two shots ripped the air above his head. He fired into an advancing Soulsplitter covered in heavy rags, dropping him.

That settles it,' he said. 'I can't stay. They're advancing on two sides now.'

'Can you escape?'

'Yes,' Uriah said, pausing long enough to fire down both corridors. 'But I'm not terribly happy with what I'm about to do.'

'Which is?' Voice asked, sounding wary.

'It's a surprise,' Uriah said. With that, he tossed a grenade down the corridor, lobbing it straight into an open container. The explosion shredded the boxes and their contents, destroying the data-slates and setting alight the vellum-imprinted files.

'Done!' he said, racing down the remaining corridor. A few shots rang out behind him, but he was already rounding corridors and making his way outside before anyone realized what had happened.

'You destroyed the lead?' Voice asked.

Tsk, tsk. That's the "the glass is half-empty" observation,' Uriah responded. 'I prevented Slag from gaining the advantage. It's half-full to me.'

'How do you know he doesn't have the list?'

'I don't. But if he did, why bother ransacking Cantrall's office?' Uriah asked. He slipped into a room and headed for one of the bullet-shredded windows. 'Slag's men stayed behind to find something, and if they'd found die list, they wouldn't have bothered with the other boxes.'

'Seems plausible. I hope you're right.'

'So do I,' Uriah said, slipping out through the window and into the darkness of the surrounding buildings. 'I suppose I'll find out soon enough.'

'Where to then?'

'My original target. One of the men I recognized from Cantrall's clients. A Goliath thug named Jaffa Hur.'

CHAPTER SIX

> Commit with conviction or prepare for a short life filled with failures.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

THERE WAS A district in this portion of the Underhive once, but the city above grew too heavy. The tallest, warren-like buildings were the first to collapse, buckled under by the crushing ceiling. More buildings followed until the area was half its height and scavengers and gangers had the run of the streets. When a fuel fire finally gutted the major caverns, only scored and blackened rubble remained standing. People couldn't even bother to preserve the name of the place, and that too fell into disuse.

The ceiling continued sinking at the rate of an inch each year, and now rested some three storeys above the ground. That wasn't counting the huge piles of rubble that plugged entire caverns and brought the ceiling within touching distance. Where the pockets remained lay a shanty town of flimsy shacks and tents crammed together shoulder to shoulder. Pathways had been cleared between the different enclaves and tent cities, but even then, some trails required travellers to traverse through them hunched over.

The area was dark, the only lights coming from poles in the ground holding glowing radioactive fluid suspended in thick, filthy glass globes. This marked the Goliath territory of the Lords of Ruin.

URIAH SCRAMBLED UP the rubble slope, far from the lit paths and the Goliath patrols moving from one camp to the next. The darkness enveloped him in anonymous comfort, and his black clothing and thermal cloak added to the camouflage. His goggles amplified the ambient light, allowing him to see more clearly. His feet were light on the ground, but still tripped the occasional trickle of rubble. Uriah paused after each misstep, drawing the cloak'around him tighter to shield him from thermal optics. Nobody investigated the disturbance, however, either because the local boar-rats had heavier feet than Uriah or because the Lords of Ruin didn't care.

Finally, Uriah reached the lip of a debris crater's slope. Below, the crater was shallow - three storeys deep - but wide enough that the outskirts remained hidden in shadow. Covering the surface of the crater was a community of well over one hundred tents of different sizes, colours and fabrics. The largest were pavilions that easily housed a dozen people, while the smallest were intimate affairs for two people. At the centre, the Goliaths had cleaned the rubble down to the district's original floor. The centrepiece was a large ring over a dozen metres in length, lined with a half-wall of rubble. It was well-lit, the wall lined with glow-liquid. Overlooking it was a platform - a huge slab of rock mat was once a building's wall, complete with torn rebars jutting out from the sides.

Uriah recognized die design of the ring. It was a combat circle where the Goliath fought and maimed one another for fun and bragging rights. Tonight it was packed with auctioneers trying to bid on the latest items.

'Wonderful...' Uriah said, mumbling into his radio set.

What?' Voice asked.

'It's a slave auction,' Uriah replied, looking at the line of broken slaves anchored in their chains and wearing rags that threatened to disintegrate at a touch.

'WAIT!' URIAH SAID, watching the different groups. 'This may actually work to my advantage.'

'How?'

'I can blend into the crowd of people gathered for the slave auction. Who'll notice one more buyer moving through the streets?'

'Could be dangerous,' Voice said. 'What if it's invitation only?'

Uriah smiled. 'A risk, admittedly, but a small one. Somehow, I don't see Lords of Ruin slavers printing out invitations for the evening.'

True. Good luck, then.'

Uriah cleared the lip of the crater and slowly moved down to the first clusters of tents. He lifted the goggles over his forehead and pulled his hood tight over his head. Satisfied, he stepped into the light and walked down the sloped, rabble streets. The tents grew thicker around him as Goliath men, women and children cooked, bathed and ate dinner in the open. Some possessed hulking frames ripped with muscles, but most local denizens were of normal stature; they likely paid the Lords of Ruin for protection or provided services like cooking and mending.

A few people watched Uriah walk the streets before other outsiders caught their attention. It was obvious that this lot distrusted strangers, only tolerating them for the auction. Uriah kept his eyes open, trying to distinguish the different makes of the tents. He suspected that those marked with paints belonged to the Lord of Ruin's foot-soldiers, a supposition supported by the well-muscled women and children around the tents.

Uriah continued his slow trek through the crater's streets, growing more comfortable with his surroundings. As he approached the bottom of the crater, he passed a fence of twisted girders pointed outward like pikes. From the two rotting corpses impaled on the girders and painted skulls hanging from the bent metal, Uriah knew it served as a warning. The bottom of the crater was for Lords of Ruin only, a suspicion made likelier by the larger tents and more intricate markings painted on their sides.

The tents at the bottom of the crater served as part of the slavers' compound. Metal pens lined the street with every variety of human misery caged within, and the Goliaths patrolled the area with heavy weapons and mean scowls. The crowds were likewise thicker here, with people bumping into one another to reach the auction. Despite the noise of the crowd, a barker's voice rose above the others, selling a steady stream of slaves to the hungry crowd. Uriah felt a twinge of sadness for the sorry lot on stage, the men bound for back-breaking physical labour and the women for domestic work or to satisfy someone's carnal pleasures.

'Anything?' Voice asked.

'Noming yet,' Uriah said, his voice no stronger than a whisper. He brushed past several wealthy buyers attired in a rich array of clothing. He finally stopped at the edge of the street, near an open sewer trench, and allowed people to rush past him. The smell was horrible; nobody was willing to stop and wait under the weight of the stench. Uriah persevered because hardly anyone paid attention to him as they rushed by. It allowed him a few moments to survey the area.

'I can't locate Jaffa Hur's tent,' Uriah said with a whisper.

'Well? Are you sure it was him in Cantrall's recordings?'

'Yes,' Uriah said. 'He was one of the five who received an implant. I've seen his face before.'

'Has he seen yours?'

'Not this face,' Uriah said with a smile. 'He saw another one. He won't recognize me.'

'One would hope,' Voice replied. 'Actually, I have an idea. Jaffa is likely holding court tonight. To impress all these visitors.'

'And where would that be?' Uriah asked.

'Could be anywhere,' Voice said. 'He could be at the auction. Or in a private tent.'

'So, how does that help me?'

'He'll expect his rich guests to pay their respects.'

'You're saying follow the rich buyers till they gravitate into his orbit.'

'It's an option. Otherwise, stumble around in the dark. Pray for luck.'

'Already did,' Uriah said, scouting the people entering and leaving the noisy auction ring. He chose a cluster of three men and two women, all well-dressed despite their surroundings, and followed them back up the slope until it was obvious they were leaving the crater. Uriah headed back down.

Uriah waited until another two men left the auction. The pair were cloaked, but their boots were ragged and crafted with the kind of care only the rich could afford. He followed them on their slow saunter through the streets. They spoke in low voices and studied their surroundings carefully. The pair turned down one street, then another, seemingly without purpose. Finally they cleared the corner of a tent and Uriah followed.

The sword was level to Uriah's chest, and he almost impaled himself on its tip upon rounding the tent.

'Well, it looks like we have ourselves a thief,' the swordsman said, his face full with beard. His compatriot, wearing a blond moustache and golden locks, nodded.

Uriah realized they'd spotted him following them, though they obviously misunderstood his intentions. 'Hardly,' Uriah said. 'I thought you were going to Jaffa Hur. I was following you so I could offer him my respects.'

'And why would he want the respect of a guttersnipe?' the swordsman said. 'Likelier, you thought us easy marks for robbing.'

Uriah glanced around. The street was relatively empty, though at least one Goliath with twin Mohawks watched the exchange with cruel interest. 'How could I, one man, rob two men of such skill?' Uriah said. 'I was seeking Jaffa Hur. I'm sorry for the confusion.'

Before Uriah could turn to leave, the swordsman lashed out with his blade, cutting Uriah across the cheek. It stung fiercely. Uriah's hand went to die wound, trying to catch the blood that dribbled between his reddened fingers. He met the two men's gazes, but there was only malicious humour in their eyes. They were going to hurt him regardless. Uriah returned their smile and pulled his bolt pistol, his movement a blur.

The smile remained carved on Uriah's face; he spun past the blade, his cloak momentarily blinding the swordsman, before punching the pistol's barrel straight into the man's gut. Uriah pulled the trigger twice, the shots muffled by the swordsman's body.

The swordsman slumped to the ground before his friend even reacted. Uriah wasn't going to give him that chance either. He spun again, mis time catching the second man with a spin kick in the gut. The gun followed the kick, and Uriah emptied another two muffled shots, this time into the man's chest.

Uriah looked around again, locating the Goliath who'd been watching the exchange. The Lord of Ruin ganger was still there in the shadows, but his expression had changed from one of cruelty to one of animal caution. Uriah leaned down and took the money purses off both bodies. He tossed one to the ganger who caught it widiout ever drawing his gaze away from Uriah.

'Jaffa don't like dead bodies on auction night. Ain't good for business,' the ganger said.

Then best make sure nobody finds them,' Uriah said, tossing the Goliath the second money purse.

The Goliath weighed both bags in his large hand and nodded. Uriah walked away.

URIAH SQUATTED BEHIND a dark tent; he was hidden in the shadows and free from the prying eyes on the street. The medical adhesive strip he'd attached to his face stung, but it kept the wound closed. After a few moments, he applied water from a bottle to the strip and felt it bubble against his skin. A few seconds more, and the strip dissolved, leaving him with a wound glued shut and, hopefully, no scar.

More wonders of Van Soar technology, Uriah thought; he'd have to remember to thank Morgane for her wonderful gifts.

Low voices approached Uriah's position from an adjoining alley. Uriah quickly pulled himself deeper into the shadows, behind a rack with drying clothes, his cloak pulled tight around his shoulders.

'...saw them, all bleeding' a woman's voice said. 'Ducked in here, he did. Up to no good, I reckon.'

Uriah readied his bolt pistol and waited for whoever it was to appear. There were two of them. The speaker was a large woman with the well-muscled body of a

Goliath and a long ponytail on her otherwise shaved head. Her companion was equally built, with a roadmap of scars on his half-naked body and a high green Mohawk. Neither of them had eye implants, for which Uriah was grateful.

'Don't see nobody,' the man said.

'He came through here. 1 saw him!'

'He ain't here now.'

'Maybe that way,' the woman said, walking down another alley. The man followed, shaking his head.

Uriah waited for the footsteps to fade away before emerging from his hole and ducking down another alley away from the two Lords of Ruin.

'Not good,' Uriah said to himself, stepping back out into the streets with his hood drawn down.

'More trouble?' Voice asked.

'I've drawn too much suspicion.'

'Well you're in luck,' Voice said. 'I spoke with a friend. Someone who's been to the area before.'

'He knows where Jaffa Hur's tent is?' Uriah asked, watching his surroundings carefully. He headed back down the crater, where the crowds were thickest.

'Go to the auction ring and face the stage.'

Uriah slipped through the crowd at the slave auction, under the raised arms of those bidding on the current lots. It was hard ignoring the shouting to gain me auctioneer's attention, but Uriah found himself facing the stage.

'Done,' he said, and fought hard to hear the instructions.

Turn right,' Voice said, nearly muted by the surrounding crowds, 'until you see a street with a high pole mounted with a skull.'

'Ah! I see it and I think I see Jaffa Hur's tent,' Uriah said, his gaze halfway up die crater. He stared at a grand black pavilion, which was slightly larger than fhose around it.

'If it's marked with red paint, then that's it.'

'I don't think that's paint,' Uriah said, heading for the street.

Uriah was a few yards from the street slope when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. A Lord of Ruin, more compact in frame than his companions, was walking parallel to LJriah and watching him carefully.

'I've been spotted,' Uriah whispered to Voice. 'I believe the ganger who saw me kill those two men has given me up.'

'Be careful. Might be time to pull out. Call it a lost cause.'

'My dear Voice. Gambles require risk,' Uriah said, before steering back into the crowd. Faces flashed before him, but in between the gaps, he saw another Goliath trying to follow him. This was certainly a hunt, though Uriah had no inclination of remaining the prey.

The throng of auction-goers was thickest closest to the slave podium, and the gangers were waiting in the wings. Uriah manoeuvred himself into the heart of the crowd. He affixed his trusty re-breather to his mouth and drew down the goggles to protect his eyes. He dropped a smoke grenade.

Uriah stood there as the ashen cloud enveloped him. Screams and angry voices followed as the smoke spread out, bringing those caught within it to choking, hacking coughs and fits. The crowd scattered in different

directions, and Uriah moved with the panicked mob, straight for the Goliaths who were maintaining the perimeter.

Uriah's path took him past one of the large gangers. He was hoping to slip by unnoticed, but the tattooed Lord of Ruin spotted him.

The Goliath brute muscled his way through the crowd and reached past people to grab Uriah by the hem of his cloak. Uriah allowed himself to be pulled in, close enough that the ganger didn't see die bolt pistol until die barrel was pressed into his ribcage. A single muffled shot, further drowned out by the growing stampede, was all it took to drop the brute.

Escaping auction-goers quickly fdled the sloped streets and Uriah allowed the mob to carry him towards Jaffa's pavilion. When the crowd lost some of its momentum, Uriah ducked into the alleys between the tents. He made his way up through the back ways, confident that the commotion was drawing everyone to the main streets.

APPROACHING JAFFA'S TENT proved less of an issue than Uriah's initial attempts to find it. The crowds still milled about in the streets while the Lords of Ruin tried weeding through them to find Uriah. It wouldn't be long before they moved into the side streets and tent alleys to find him. Uriah hadn't much time left.

Jaffa Hur's tent was a pavilion with a three-peaked canopy. Plastic and sheet-metal plating stitched the walls while dripping red marks offered crude warnings to rivals. Uriah, however, wasn't fluent in Goliath-tongue, and ignored the messages with a smile. He crouched down and cut a small v-shaped slit between two plates. Careful not to push against the tent wall, Uriah peered through the slit.

The room beyond was dark, lit by three or four candles. The pavilion was sectioned by a heavy curtain five feet away from the wall. That was all Uriah could really see except for the corner of two pieces of furniture; a trunk covered in stitched leather and a scavenged cabinet complete with scratches and worn lacquer. There was also the rhythm of laboured breathing, as well as whispered voices.

'Best you not disturb him,' a woman's voice said. 'Infection set in.'

The news was met with two grunts and people moving away, their candle-cast shadows dancing against the wall.

Uriah waited until the noises inside the pavilion had died away completely before speaking with Voice.

'I believe Jaffa Hur is still recovering from the operation. Something about an infection.'

'He did take an internal organ. Heart accelerant, was it?'

'I believe so. I'm not an expert.'

That's major surgery. He needs time to recover. And frankly transplant rejections and infections kill more patients than the operation itself.'

'Indeed,' Uriah said. 'Going dark.'

Uriah cut a vertical gash in the fabric with his knife. A quick glance inside confirmed his suspicions; it was a bedroom of sorts with the mighty Jaffa Hur in bed and unconscious. Blood-soaked bandages covered his otherwise bare chest and abdomen, and his skin glistened under a thick sweat. An empty chair stood next to his cot for whoever watched over the ganger brute.

Slipping through the slit was easy. Uriah stayed low to the ground, below the flickering candle lights. He could still hear hushed voices toward the pavilion's entrance, again a woman speaking of Jaffa's care. She was probably the local midwife. Unfortunately for Uriah, this meant he had the caretaker to neutralize as well as any of Jaffa's personal guards who were inside the pavilion.

One step at a time, Uriah thought to himself. He hid to the side of the cabinet; it shielded him from the curtain. It was poor cover, but anyone entering the room wouldn't notice him at first glance. In fact, with luck, mey'd have turned away from him as mey headed for the chair. He unsheathed his knife for the quiet kill.

Uriah waited until the voices in the next room finally said their farewells; two women and at least one man,

Uriah realised. He cursed under his breath. Footsteps approached and Uriah's fears were realised. Jaffa Hur's caretaker was a local woman. Not as well-built as the Lords of Ruin themselves, but well-defined and scarred enough to have seen combat of her own. Uriah had heard of such men and women, those within the gang who refused to inject themselves with the chemicals to add obscene muscle mass. The Goliaths considered them to be inferior, but never enough to treat them harshly. Still, a woman was a

woman and Uriah was rather squeamish about killing her. He had killed women in the past, but preferred avoiding it when possible.

The woman didn't see Uriah as she entered and turned for the chair. He rushed up behind her with his drawn blade. She sensed the rush, but didn't turn in time. Uriah struck her against the back of the head with the knife pommel, rendering her senseless. She collapsed with a muffled grunt; she was dazed.

'Jezra?' a man's voice demanded from the next room.

Uriah poked the woman hard in the ribs with two fingers. She groaned at the pain. There was movement from beyond the curtain.

It took a second blow to knock out Jezra. Uriah flipped the knife and caught it by the blade. When the pug-nosed ganger entered, Uriah threw the weapon with practiced aim, catching the Goliath in the neck. Blood spurted from the wound in thick rivers and the ganger grunted, his face contorted by shock. Uriah rash forward and grabbed the knife's bloody pommel. He sliced it out sideways, severing the vocal cords and jugular. The Lord of Ruin fell to the ground, gurgling, but Uriah had already entered the main pavilion in time to see another ganger with dreadlocks running forward.

Uriah launched the blade with an underhand flick. The knife sank into the man's chest through a thick vest.

Uriah shut the man's mouth with his hand, preventing him from screaming, and grabbed the knife again to stab him several times in rapid succession. The Goliath struggled for a moment before his eyes went dull. He slumped to the floor.

Uriah paused long enough to wipe his blade on the ganger's vest and to confirm that the exchange hadn't alerted others. There was no such misfortune, leaving Uriah with one last unpleasant task to complete.

Jaffa Hur remained unconscious despite the grisly scene played out in his tent. Uriah had already bound and gagged Jezra, leaving the two Lords of Ruin dead where they lay. Uriah wasn't one for cruelty despite the brutality of his action. He took a pillow to muffle the sound and placed it over Jaffa Hur's face before firing twice. Hur twitched before falling still.

It was grim work, but Uriah had little choice. He cut away the bandages to reveal an ugly chest gash stitched together with black thread; it was purple from the bruising. With little thought, Uriah cut away the stitches

with his knife and spread the wound open with his gloved hands. There was no heartbeat, so little blood to spill. Uriah cut through the thick ropes of pectoral muscles to reach the sternum and ribs. Cantrall had swapped six ribs as well as the breastbone with titanium replacements. Uriah examined where the bone ribs gave way to metal, and proceeded to crack the bolted seams. He tried not to grimace and focused on other things instead, any other things.

Uriah removed the skeletal plate of titanium, revealing the exposed organs; he instantly spotted the octagonal heart accelerant that was fused against the grey-red heart itself. With his knife, Uriah cut away the blinking Accelerant and dropped the mess into a pouch.

'I have it,' Uriah said. 'I don't even know what it does.'

'It has several functions,' Voice replied. 'It can boost the heart rate, oxygenate the blood more easily and deliver an electric charge to stimulate the heart.'

'I have no idea what all thats means,' Uriah said, sighing.

'Doesn't matter now. Can you escape?'

'Not easily,' Uriah said, looking down at the unconscious woman. 'But I have an idea.'

'Don't you always...'

IT WAS QUICK work. Uriah placed the candles near the pavilion's different walls and hanging partitions. It took a quick moment for the fabrics to catch aflame and faster still for the wildfire to spread up the walls and across the ceiling.

Uriah marched back into Jaffa Hur's bedroom and found the woman, Jezra, struggling against her bonds. He cut the ropes around her wrists, his bolt pistol at the ready and his face covered by the hood and goggles. Jezra stood, eyeing Uriah warily; he nodded for her to escape outside. She hesitated and the fire bellowed its heated roar around them. It spread quickly, driving up the heat. Jezra turned and darted past the flames, screaming for help as she fled.

There was no hesitation in Uriah's step. With Jezra's escape, Uriah slipped back through the slit in the tent's fabric before flames claimed it as well. The roaring fire was joined by the concerned screams of the Goliaths

trying to reach their leader through the pavilion's front flap. Uriah, however, looked back only to confirm that no one was pursuing him.

Walking through the back alleys of the tent city, Uriah directed himself up the crater's slope. He moved against the rush of curious onlookers, all of whom were too interested in the blaze to pay him any heed.

Moments later, Uriah had reached the top of the crater's lip. The fire had spread to several other tents, for which Uriah was genuinely sorry. He wasn't interested in anyone except Jaffa Hur, but that was the nature of his work; death and carnage were random and often most effective when indiscriminate.

'Done,' Uriah said.

'You escaped?' Voice asked.

'Almost.'

'Then what are you doing there. Run!' Voice said, annoyed by her own tone.

'Just admiring the view,' Uriah said. The blaze was enough to light the entire crater. Uriah watched the slopes of the bowl-like basin glow red with the flames.

'Isn't that risky?' Voice asked.

'Normally, yes,' Uriah responded. 'But considering I just sank my hands into someone's chest to remove an implant, I think I earned a moment's reflection.'

'Something's bothering you. What's the matter?'

'None of this makes sense,' Uriah said. 'Soren's life meant nothing to anyone. It's the implants they want. But why?'

'Bring the implant to me. I can examine it,' Voice offered. 'See if it's truly unique.'

'I - I'm not certain,' Uriah admitted.

"You don't trust me?' Voice asked.

Uriah could hear the surprise in her voice, perhaps even hurt.

'What quality of trust do you expect when you don't offer it yourself?' Uriah asked.

'Meaning?'

'Meaning I know nothing about you. I don't even know what you look like.'

'It's a game we both play. And yet you trust me enough to bring me along on your missions,' Voice said.

'I like mysteries,' Uriah said, a faint smile on his lips.

'So, are you bringing the implant?'

Uriah thought about it for a moment. Very well. But I want something in exchange.'

'Excuse me,' Voice said, 'but you're the one who needs the help.'

'Please,' Uriah said. 'You love a mystery as much as I do. You want to see the implant, perhaps more than I need to understand its importance.'

'Perhaps,' Voice said in her typically succinct manner. 'But can you take that chance?'

'Indulge me one question,' Uriah said.

'Only one?'

'For now,' Uriah responded.

Very well, state your question. I may not answer it, but if I do my answers will be honest.'

'Which House did you belong to?' Uriah said. 'You're too well-spoken and too well-learned to have been raised outside of a Guild school.'

There was a pause on the other end. Uriah was about to press the matter when his answer came.

'Escher,' Voice said. 'I was born into House Escher.'

Uriah smiled. 'I'm coming to deliver the implant.'

After absorbing the sight for a moment longer, Uriah left the area and vanished into shadows beyond the burning crater.

CHAPTER SEVEN

> 'Expect the Unexpected' is the credo of distracted fools. Anticipate, prepare and when all else fails, strike first.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

IT WAS LATE into the night when Uriah finally returned to his hab block in Shadowstrohm. The hallways were empty, most good Delaque quiet and asleep. Uriah's steps grew heavier each footfall. Fatigue overtook him swiftly.

It had been a busy day, between his misadventures with Slag and Jaffa Hur, and taking a side-trip to deliver the implant to Voice. He had never seen Voice, and tonight was no exception. She'd left a slot open in the reinforced door of her hideout. He slid the implant through and waited. Nothing. There was no more to it than that. He left, more tired than curious.

Uriah entered his hab block with no other thought than falling into a fast dream, whether that meant sleeping on the couch or making it into his bedroom. He switched on the lights and was immediately jolted awake. His hab block was in rains. Sofa and chairs were gutted of their stuffing, drawers tossed to the floor and spilt of their contents and the monitor on his workbench still smoked from its shattered vid-screen.

The workbench was in a state with tools thrown and broken. Looking at the mess, Uriah realised that this was more than someone searching his dwelling. It was someone with a grudge, someone who took particular

delight in ruining his possessions. The artificial eye was gone, as were the recordings of Cantrall's implant. Uriah cursed himself for not protecting those better, though he did have extra copies hidden elsewhere. Now he had lost his only advantage.

It was only on second glance that Uriah's heart went cold. The desk where he kept Morgane's pendant was overturned. He raced to it, hoping against fear that it was still there. The drawer had been pulled out and the hidden compartment was empty. Morgane's keepsake was missing.

PERCAL HEADED DOWN Shadowstrohm's corridors on his way to his office. Nobody wished him a good morning. They knew better than to bother the master of the Handlers, the chieftain spy of House Delaque. Percal wore a filter mask over his nose slits to filter out airborne particles. Once in his hermetically sealed office, he would remove the mask and allow the room's filtration system to do its work.

The last thing Percal expected to see upon opening the door and stepping into his office was Uriah seated there waiting for him to arrive.

'What are doing in my office?' Percal asked in more of a growl than a question.

'Admiring your furniture,' Uriah said.

'Tread carefully, Uriah. I don't take intrusion well.'

'A coincidence, then. Neither do I.'

'What are you talking about?' Percal asked, going over to his desk. He examined it, ensuring nothing $_{w}$as out of place.

'Someone ransacked my hab!' Uriah responded. 'Practically gutted the place with their heavy hands.'

'And you think I did it? You're a far poorer judge of character than I expected.'

'I think not. Playing regicide I see,' Uriah said nodding over to the holographic board.

'What has that to do with anything?'

'I don't believe you robbed my hab block. I think you sent one of your pawns into my home to do the deed.'

To what end?' Percal asked, sitting behind his desk. By the looks of it, he was regaining his composure.

To whatever end prompted you to send another Handler on my assignment.'

This again? Your paranoia knows no bounds.'

'And again you insult me,' Uriah said shaking his head. 'I don't know which of your slights is worse. The fact that you sent a Handler after me. The fact that you tolerate his sabotage when I'm doing the house's bidding. The fact that you continue to lie to me about it. Or the fact that you actually believed Kaden could best me.'

'Kaden?' Percal said. Why do you say Kaden?'

Uriah studied Percal for a moment, trying to fathom his motives. Percal wasn't questioning the accusation. In fact, he was calm and intrigued. He seemed playful, in as much as a predator was playful with his intended meal. Uriah, of course, knew it was Kaden. Kaden was the only Handler with enough of a grudge against Uriah to ransack his hab and destroy his belongings for the sheer pleasure of it.

He's playing the game, Uriah realised. And suddenly everything clicked into place. Percal was the oldest surviving Delaque Handler. He'd been playing the game for so long that Uriah doubted he knew how to interact normally with people. He would never speak in direct terms, and he'd evade straightforward questions as a defensive measure.

No, Uriah thought, *he wasn't being dishonest. He was playing the game, the game which required its own set of rules and its own language.* Uriah returned the smile and switched tactics. 'How long has it been?'

Percal's smile broadened. His body language shifted, becoming more relaxed - casual. He was shifting tactics as well, synchronizing himself with Uriah.

Uriah understood what was happening. The nature of the conversation was about to shift into the dou blespeak of the Delaque, into the give and take that said everything and nothing in equal strokes. What was about to be said had to be ignored. What wasn't being said was more important.

'Been?' Percal asked, shrugging. 'Since what?'

'Since you engaged in field work. You were quite good at playing the game.'

Percal smiled. 'You're embarrassing me. I survived through sheer luck, nothing more. I'm certainly not the Handler you are.'

'You exaggerate, I'm sure,' Uriah said. 'But you must miss the game.'

'Not really,' Percal said. 'I'm quite comfortable here, still doing my part to serve the House.'

'I don't know if I could give it up so easily,' Uriah said.

'Oh, eventually it becomes boring. You crave risks that few can provide. You almost wish others would offer you greater challenges in the course of your duties.'

'You mean your opponents?'

'Among others,' Percal responded. 'Did I ever tell you about my mentor?'

'Only in name. Liam the Grey, correct? His reputation speaks for itself.'

'He was a good mentor. Always pushing me harder than the assignment demanded.'

'Cruelty?' Uriah asked.

'No,' Percal said, his eyes distant. 'He thought the assignments I received were beneath my skills. So he elevated the game to challenge me.'

'How so?' Uriah asked.

'Small tricks. Starting me off with the barest of intelligence. Giving me a few hours to resolve the issue. Alerting enemies of my position-'

'Sending other Handlers after the same prize?' Uriah asked.

'I can't remember all his tricks. Quite possibly, yes,' Percal said, shrugging. 'He thought it best to keep me challenged.'

"What happened?' Uriah asked. 'With that kind of adversity, why did you grow bored of the game?'

'Because Liam died early in my life. And my new mentor, Genadine, was only interested in results. So she sent me on assignment after assignment, never asking for anything more than my quick success.'

'So it grew boring,' Uriah said, nodding, half-listening while stitching the pieces together.

'Without Liam to challenge me, yes. He wanted a worthy successor.'

'Are you sure that's all?' Uriah asked.

'How so?' Percal asked, suspiciously.

'Liam, I mean,' Uriah said. 'Are you sure he was challenging you? Or was he playing the game through you?'

Percal hesitated. Uriah could see him wrestling with his patience. He'd struck a nerve.

'Liam was a great Handler,' Percal said, measuring his words carefully. 'Greater than you or I. What he did was for my betterment. You would do

well to have a mentor like him.'

'Who says I don't?' Uriah asked with a smile.

'Perhaps,' Percal said. 'But what of you, Uriah?'

Ahh, Uriah diought. *Here's where he goes on the attack.* 'Me?' he asked.

'Surely the game isn't your sole ambition?'

The game?' Uriah said. 'No. Surviving the game is perhaps worthier.'

'Good, good. A man like you can hardly afford other distractions.'

'Distractions? Such as?'

'No, no. I'm merely speaking in the greater sense. I've seen Handlers strive for other goals, only to have such distractions cost them their lives. Better the game serve as your sole mistress. Better nothing divert you from your duty.'

'Seems like a hollow existence, doesn't it?' Uriah asked.

We live alone, we die alone,' Percal said. There can be no other way.'

'And whose truth is that? Yours or Liam's?'

Percal shrugged. 'It's a truth I've come to accept. The game doesn't allow for distinction in our lives. We play the game. We always play the game. We are in it whether in the arms of those we love or fighting the enemy. Once you realise the game is your reality, everything else is superfluous. Friends, family, all assets to be used against you. To have none of those is to have no weaknesses.'

'No friends? No family? Sounds like it means to have no strength,' Uriah said.

'If they are your strength, then they are your weakness to exploit.'

What are you saying?' Uriah asked. The comments were strange and could be understood in any number of ways. Did Percal know Uriah was friends with Soren? pid he know about Morgane? Or perhaps Voice? Uriah wasn't sure, but Percal would play it vague enough to Iceep Uriah on his toes.

'Saying? Nothing, of course,' Percal said. 'I'm merely trying to help you free yourself. Someone broke into your hab, you say? Well, fhey might not have done so had they not considered it a weak link - fair game and all that. You have no privacy. Everything you are and everyone you know is committed to the game.'

PERCAL SAT IN his chair for a few moments after Uriah had left. He knew Uriah was good at what he did, but he was also cocky about it, and the stakes were too high for such allowances. Unfortunately, Percal had to admit that using Kaden might have been a mistake. Kaden was out to prove himself at Uriah's expense; it was becoming personal for him. That meant he would lose.

The regicide board flickered. Percal went to the board and saw that the hologram piece for his opponent's Ecde-siarch had been moved. It was about time his opponent committed himself. Percal was prepared for it. He smiled and touched the base of one of his Citizens before touching an empty spot on the board. The Citizen slid across the board into position.

Percal returned to his chair. He activated the black pict screen and entered in three separate code sequences to access his logic hub. A quick scan indicated it had remained inactive since the night before, when he'd left it. Uriah hadn't tampered with his network. A moment later, six images manifested on screen. All Canttall's customers as captured by his ocular piece - all recipients of Soren's implants - all data stolen from Uriah's logic device.

Percal reached into the hidden pocket and pulled out a tear-shaped pendant hung from a delicate chain. He examined it, bemused curiosity in his expression.

'So, Uriah,' he said to himself. 'Who are you hiding from me? Nobody is spared from me game.'

URIAH HAD SENT the message less than an hour ago. He was sure he'd caught Morgane sleeping, but she'd never admit to that.

The message was more a signal - a pict call with static drowning both voice and sound. The static burst in pitch every four seconds, thanks to Uriah's playing with two exposed wires in his own pict screen. To anyone else, it meant nothing, but to Morgane, it said: meet me in a pre-arranged location. Had the static bursts emerged every eight seconds, Morgane would have rendezvoused with him at his no-longer safe house. Four second bursts meant a different place altogether.

The inn was crushed between two larger buildings that loomed over it and appeared to sweat oil stains; thankfully, the inn itself was relatively

clean and well maintained despite its hourly rates and the constant stream of prostitutes and their clients. It was anonymous.

The knock at the door was almost timid, a mixture of the quiet of the morning and uncertainty. Uriah checked the eye piece and opened the door quickly. Morgane slipped through and was immediately in his arms, her lips pressed against his. They kissed, taking comfort from one another and making up for long absences. Then again, any night away from one another was a long absence.

'I missed you,' she said between gasps of air.

'I know,' Uriah responded. 'I missed you too.'

'Pleasant place. How long do we have here?' Morgane asked, peering around.

'They rent by the week, the day and the hour. Offer them a rate on minutes and I'm sure they'd take it. We have it for a few hours at best.'

'Is that all?' Morgane asked, saddened.

'Sorry, love,' Uriah said. 'It'll have to do for now. Best not get comfortable with one place regardless of its qualities. It'll get better, I promise.'

Morgane smiled and nodded. She understood what vvas at stake. That didn't stop her from tightening her grip around his waist. Uriah grimaced and tensed. Morgane studied him with a worried look.

Uriah smiled. Tm a bit tender. It's been a rough few days. I've been put through my paces.'

Morgane nodded. 'I'll have to work around the pain then. Just tell me where it hurts.'

'Everywhere,' Uriah said, laughing. 'If you're trying to work around the pain, maybe you should wait outside.'

'Not a chance,' Morgane said. 'You'll adapt. You always do.'

With that, Uriah swept her off her feet and carried her towards the bed.

'SOREN IS DEAD,' Morgane repeated, more statement than fact. She leaned back into Uriah's chest; he draped his arm over her shoulder and kissed her on the back of her head. 'I suspected as much. What happened?'

'I'm not sure yet,' Uriah admitted, pushing another pillow behind his back. 'It's a messy affair and I'm afraid it's about to get messier. Whoever

murdered Soren sold his implants to a black-market bio-surgeon named Cantrall. Cantrall, in turn, sold the implants to six others - gangers by the looks of them.'

'He operated on them?'

'On four, yes. The fifth one bought the implant and left. The sixth and last was killed before the implant was grafted on.'

'Maybe the fifth one has his own bio-surgeon.'

'Or maybe he's a broker, I don't know,' Uriah said. They lapsed into silence, both lying in bed. Uriah, however, was distracted by all the things he had yet to tell her.

'What else did Cantrall say about his customers?' Morgane asked. 'I know you can be quite persuasive.'

'No, it's not like that,' Uriah said with a sigh. 'I went to question him, but he was dead, as was the last ganger. There was another Handler there. He made off with Soren's arm.'

'Another Handler? Operating on his own?'

'Unfortunately not. He was officially sanctioned.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning I can't eliminate him. As much as he deserves it.'

'Do you know him?'

'It's a man named Kaden, I'm certain of that.'

'Why would your House assign two handlers? Don't they trust you?' Morgane shifted out of Uriah's arms and turned to face him. She was concerned.

'I think so.'

'But you're not sure?'

'The House trusts me,' Uriah said, 'I'm certain, but I'm not sure about my Overseer. He's playing at some game. He says he's testing my skills by challenging me with a rival, but I'm not certain yet.'

'What do your instincts tell you?'

Uriah laughed and shook his head. 'I'm afraid my instincts are preoccupied at the moment. This thing with Soren - with you - has me so turned around.'

'I can take care of myself,' Morgane said.

'I know you can, my love, but mere's something else. When Kaden killed Cantrall and stole the implant, I still came away with the better prize. I

stole Cantrall's eye implant. It was a Van Saar model.'

'Ah,' Morgane said with a large smile. She pushed a strand of black hair from her face. 'Did you remember what I taught you about the hidden protocols?'

'I did,' Uriah said. 'I accessed the eye's memory archive and came away with the faces of the five remaining customers.'

'But?' Morgane asked, sensing Uriah's hesitation.

'Kaden broke into my hab and stole the data. I have backups, but that wasn't all he stole. He took your black diamond pendant - my keepsake.'

Morgane's expression of shock quickly subsided. That doesn't mean anything,' she said.

'Or it could mean everything. Whether he knows about you or not, both he and my Overseer know I have someone in my life. Someone they can use against me. I was careful in coming here, but my life is now under scrutiny. That is why I only took this room for a day,' Uriah hesitated; he looked away. That's why I think we should-'

'Stop right there,' Morgane said. Her face was a storm of emotions, a mixture of indignation and anger. 'If you're about to suggest we keep our distance-'

Uriah turned to face her. 'Morgane, love, it might be for the best.'

'No,' Morgane said. 'I appreciate your concern, but I will not allow anyone to come between us. I love you too much.'

'And I love you too much to see you hurt.'

'I am not some timid flower to be crashed under someone's boot,' Morgane cupped Uriah's chin in her hands. 'Let them come - the Delaque, the Van Saar, the Orlocks, all of them. I will not be bullied and I will not leave your side.'

'Morgane-'

'My decision is final,' she whispered before kissing him on the lips.

'So be it,' he whispered back. "You do realise this will end in both of us becoming fugitives.'

'Likely, but an eventuality I'm prepared for.'

'As am I,' Uriah said.

There's something else, though, isn't there? Something you're not telling me.'

There's nothing, love. I'm-'

'Stop,' Morgane said. She pressed her finger to his lips.

Uriah, in turn, took her hand and kissed her finger. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'It's difficult. I've been a part of this for so long, that it's easy to lie.'

'I know,' Morgane said. 'But you don't have to, not around me. Whatever it is, I'm strong enough to hear it.'

'All right. Slag is after me. He saw me at Cantrall's. He has my scent. This won't end until he kills me, or I kill him.'

Morgane smiled and nodded. 'It never ends wim you, does it?'

'Never,' Uriah said.

Well then,' she whispered, drawing into a kiss, 'end him before he pays you in kind.'

The lovers sank back down to the bed, in one another's warm embrace.

'HER NAME IS Corval,' Uriah said, studying the mammoth building across the narrow street. It appeared as though it had been built inside the level's support pylon. A lattice of the pylon's I-beams and girders covered the building like a scabbard covers a sword.

Uriah stayed in the shadows of an alleyway, one of many in this tight maze. The other buildings rose up several storeys around him like dirty, crooked fingers. All of them were home to squatters or the gangs that could hold them.

'Name's not familiar,' Voice said.

'Really? She's a member of your house.' Uriah counted the number of angry, well-built women walking through the various streets and alleys. A couple kicked the scrawny, rag-wearing men scouring the refuse piles for food.

•'I'm no longer Escher,' Voice said, her tone laced with an annoyed lilt.

'Of course,' Uriah said. 'Do you still have the physique of one?'

'Uh-uh,' Voice replied. 'You pay for those kinds of questions.'

'Indeed,' Uriah said. 'Something to keep in mind. Anyway, Corval is matriarch for the Cybilline Sisterhood.'

'Heard of them,' Voice said. They're well placed in House Escher. What was their poison, again?' she seemed to be asking herself.

'You mean, how do they choose to denigrate men?'

'Drags,' Voice said, suddenly remembering.

Uriah nodded. 'Rotting Fetter Injections and Acidyne Spinal Taps.'

Vicious, even by Escher standards. Her clients must be desperate to ride those rushes.'

'I wouldn't know,' Uriah said. 'Gasser Bars are as far as I go to ruin my health.'

'Smart. Though I wouldn't call your lifestyle *healthy.'*

'Ah, the lifestyle is thrust upon us all. I merely choose to play it well.'

'All right then, Jester. How will you play this? I suspect you can't blend in this time.'

You're right. I'm not downtrodden enough as a man or *gifted* with your attributes to play the woman.'

You'll manage,' Voice said.

That I will,' Uriah said, peering around. This time, I think I'll start from the top and work my way down.'

'Any particular reason?' Voice asked.

'Corval is likelier to be at the top of the building than at the bottom. And the lower floors will be too well guarded to sneak or bluff my way through.'

'Get to it then,' Voice said. 'Contact me when you need help.'

With that, Uriah waited silently until two muscled and pony-tailed women walked past his hiding spot. After another moment of lurking in the shadows, he darted across the street and reached a tight alley along the side of the building. A thick layer of detritus and rubble covered the floor.

Corval's den and the buildings next to it were built with age-pocked and crumbling plascrete. Uriah removed his gloves and slowly crawled up the side of the building, pulling himself up along the pylon's slanted girders, occasionally shifting over to the building's facade to climb one handhold at a time. His trench coat fluttered freely behind him. Fortunately, the wall was relatively easy to scale between the small craters and the narrow ledges separating the floors.

Uriah came to rest on a narrow ledge some three storeys high. The structure continued for another storey above his head before melting into the ceiling. The building and its pylon carapace served as a support column for the level above it, and when age finally crumbled one or the other, the section above would collapse as well.

The nearby window was one of the few without furniture or metal sheets covering it. In fact, the lower floor windows were better covered than those on the upper floors. Something about heights made people feel more secure, which always worked to Uriah's benefit.

Uriah sidled up close to the window and peered inside. Despite the building's dilapidated exterior, the Escher provided better treatment for its interior. The room was respectable - despite the humidity-stained walls - with a made bed, a worn dresser and a porcelain rinse bowl. By the looks of it this was likely a woman's quarters or one belonging to a house trustee; the Escher did not offer men the same consideration.

Quiedy, Uriah entered through the window, his foot testing the floor before he settled his full weight inside, the building was quiet, but the floors were solid beneath Uriah's feet - they did not creak or groan; it would be difficult to hear him move about. Once inside, Uriah crept to the door and listened. Silence beyond. That, more than anything else, played on his nerves. Sound could have painted his expectations and warned him what to expect next. Without sound, what lay beyond this door was an absolute mystery.

Uriah opened the door a crack and peered through the slit into the corridor. It was empty and silent -enough so that Uriah waited a few moments in the hopes of hearing something. Not even a shuffle or muted conversation greeted his ears. The building felt abandoned. Uriah didn't like the feeling.

Rooms flanked either side of the corridor, but no sound came from them when Uriah pressed his ear against their doors. From one end, the corridor met wall, but from the other, it intersected another corridor with more of the same. Uriah tested the occasional door, his fingers light on the handle; some were locked, but others opened into silent rooms. Beds half-made, yesterday's clothing still heaped on the dressers. Those rooms that Uriah found open seemed caught in transition.

Uriah equalized the pressure in his ears, opening the transmission with Voice.

What is it?' she asked.

The floor is empty,' Uriah said, keeping his voice near sub-vocal.

'What's on the floor?'

'Bedrooms. I suppose uiis is where the Escher sleep.'

'Escher don't sit around in their rooms, you know. They're highly motivated. Perhaps the building matriarch runs a tight ship.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning she doesn't like dawdlers. She keeps her daughters busy. Or maybe, they're at a gathering.'

The last thing I need,' Uriah said, 'is for all the Escher to be in one room.'

'The gatherings were fun,' Voice said. 'But you're right. You would stick out.'

'Suggestions?' Uriah asked.

'Investigate the lower floors. If Corval operates a drug den, the Escher are likely below, tending to their male clientele.'

'I'm curious,' Uriah said. 'Why denigrate men in this fashion? With drugs I mean.'

'The drugs keep the men pliant, breaks the will of stubborn individuals and break down potential recruits.'

'Recruits? You mean the men who come here are willing Escher slaves?'

'It's a hard life for many out there,' Voice said. 'The Escher demand subservience in exchange for shelter, food and protection. For some men, that's a small price to pay.'

'But Corval also sells drugs. To other clientele, I mean.'

'Some recruits don't know they're candidates yet,' Voice replied. 'This is likely how Corval recruits. From among the stock of already broken men. If someone cannot pay, the Escher extend drug credit... withi interest. Eventually, the poor bastard is in so deep, he becomes gang property. What difference does it make to him? He was a slave, already.'

'Well,' Uriah said, shaking his head, 'the sooner I'm done with this unfortunate mess, the better. This place disgusts me.'

'And yet you didn't blink twice when you were inside the Goliath slave camp,' Voice said, irritation flecking her tone. 'Just because the Escher enslave men-'

'Now's not the time to debate politics,' Uriah said, cutting her off. 'But, if you want to know, it bothers me the same. Unfortunately, I'm not here to liberate slaves or house property. I came for Corval. And considering Corval is the only other face I recognized in tlie archives, I have no other leads.'

Well, not entirely true, Uriah thought. Kaden was also a lead in this sorry affair, but Uriah wasn't ready to tap him yet. It wouldn't have taken much effort to eliminate Kaden as a threat, but Uriah didn't believe in wasting potential assets.

'Voice,' Uriah said after neither of them had spoken. 'Can we return to the moment at hand?'

'Agreed,' Voice said, having regained her composure. 'Head downstairs. Just be careful of the gate.'

'The gate?'

'Few Escher actually sleep with their mavants-'

You mean slaves,' Uriah said.

To an Escher, the difference is negligible.'

'So, what's the gate?'

'It's what separates die Escher from slaves and clients. It's likely a heavily reinforced door, with at least two guards. The slaves themselves maintain a second gate.'

'Let me guess - to separate slaves from the addicts or clients.'

'Correct,' Voice said.

Thank you,' Uriah said. 'Jester out.'

FURTHER INTO THE floor and still no signs of life. Uriah moved through the hallways of the enormous building, looking for any hint that would tell the story here. Finally, he found it in one corridor where bullet holes and blood spatters painted one of die walls. Uriah touched a droplet of blood and smudged it. It was partly wet; whatever had happened had been violent and recent.

Uriah crept from door to door, studying each for something new. Further down the corridor, he noticed a small blood smear on the floor that vanished under a door. He listened carefully before finessing open the lock with picks. Uriah opened the door carefully, his body low to the ground and to the side. Only silence greeted him, so he peeked inside.

Five bodies had been dumped inside the room, three strong-looking women and two scrawny men; all shot or hacked with large blades - probably machetes. Uriah quickly studied the three women's faces, but

Corval was not among them. Their wounds still appeared wet and the flies had yet to find them. They were fresh, too fresh for Uriah's comfort.

The little voice in Uriah's head screamed for him to leave, but that thought flickered for as long as it took Uriah to crush it. Being a Handler meant entering unfamiliar and frightening waters. Being a Handler meant committing to the unpleasant.

Uriah closed the door, now forewarned and, hence, forearmed. Something had happened here in this building, and it was likely linked to recent events. All that was left to do was to find that link.

THE ESCHER GATE was located at the stairwell where the corridor widened. It was a trapdoor over the stairs, a huge slab of grey iron pinned to the floor with a pair of greasy hydraulic arms. The blackened joints hissed and popped sparks and the slab of iron was partly open, enough for someone to slip through the crack. More bullet holes riddled the nearby walls. The hallway appeared smeared in blood.

The gate was over thirty yards down the corridor, but Uriah had yet to move from his hiding spot. He studied the gate through the crack of the partly open door. Nothing moved, nothing breathed.

'Not good,' Uriah said in a whisper.

'Still no sign of life?' Voice asked.

'You could say that. The gate looks badly damaged.'

'Maybe they abandoned the building.'

'Again, you could say that.'

There was a pause on the other end before Voice spoke again. 'What did you find?'

'Two rooms filled with dead bodies.'

'A fight?'

'Yes,' Uriah said. 'No survivors thus far. I'm looking at the gate. It looks damaged from here.'

'Time to leave, perhaps?'

'And disappoint my hosts?' Uriah asked with a smile.

'Hm?'

'Someone hid the bodies,' Uriah replied. 'Gunplay and death isn't so uncommon as to require hiding the bodies. Not unless killing everyone

here was the first of two plans.'

'You're thinking trap?'

'Yes.'

'All the more reason to leave,' Voice said, sounding concerned.

'If I wasn't a Handler, then yes,' Uriah said. 'But someone has gone to the effort of laying a trap. I want to know why, and for whom.'

'Why?' Voice asked, startled. 'If it's obvious they're expecting someone, why play into their hands?'

Uriah's smiled deepened. 'I do appreciate the concern, Voice, but the fact is I still retain the upper hand.'

Той do? Care to explain that.'

'I entered through the top floor - something they wouldn't expect or the trap would have been sprung upstairs. If there's a trap to exploit, it'll be mine to play.'

'You are a dangerous man,' Voice said with some appreciation. 'Anything I can do?' 'Not at the moment. At least not until I find Soren's implant.' 'Understood. I'll stand by, Jester,' Thank you,' Uriah said.

Quietly, Uriah entered the corridor and moved to one of the doors. He pulled a rectangular matchbox-like container from his pouch and fixed it inside the door frame, at knee height. It stuck to the metal, clinging with magnetic grip. A second later, a tiny burst of air sounded from the matchbox and Uriah caught die glint of the silvery flechette firing into the opposite wall of the corridor.

Sixth door down, Uriah reminded himself, *knee-height.* He then headed for the gate, darting from door frame to door frame. At every second door, he affixed another matchbox to the door frame and waited for the puff of air to follow. Each time, he placed the matchbox at a different height and reminded himself of its location.

At the last door before the corridor widened, Uriah stopped and listened. He noticed that the gate was heavily damaged, the trapdoor's edges crimped and indented from something or someone strong enough to force the hydraulics open.

Uriah then caught the hint of something, a shuffle of someone moving. It had come from the door right next to him. Quick whispers followed. Uriah moved away from the doorframe, but it was too late. Whether he'd brushed against the door inadvertently or they'd seen his shadow beneath

the door's bottom edge, they knew he was there. 'Someone's upstairs,' a muffled voice cried. Noise erupted around Uriah, from the rooms next to him as well as several downstairs. Uriah understood their game, now. They were waiting to catch someone crawling through the trapdoor, hoping to snare them at a disadvantage.

Uriah bolted back the way he'd come; behind him feet stampeded up the staircase and two doors opened in the corridor, unleashing a handful of Orlocks from each.

'It's Uriah!' someone shouted.

Uriah cursed and ducked beneath the first matchbox. The trap was meant for him, which meant Slag was nearby. He heard someone scream and glanced back long enough to see that someone had run into the first micro-wire that he'd strung across the corridor. It looked like it had cut an inch into his nose, slicing cartilage, before snapping. Uriah continued running and ducked to avoid another strand at neck level. He leapt over the third wire and pretended to duck under another one before a voice caught his attention.

'Uriah!'

Uriah slowed and turned, despite himself. Slag stood there with his men who looked too scared to advance on him. They now realised the hallway was strung with micro-wire filaments.

Next to Slag was a behemoth, someone of Goliath stature with pistons and mechanical claws for arms and hands. His shoulders, and spine, were also plated implants. The behemoth drooled and giggled to himself. Uriah now knew who had broken open the trapdoor.

Slag looked to the behemoth and nodded. 'Get 'im,' he said.

The behemoth tore into a fit of childish giggles and stumbled forwards half running, half-lumbering. Uriah backed away, surprised. The behemoth reached the second wire trap and snapped it a quarter inch inside his flesh. He never slowed; he never reacted to the pain or the cut that stretched across his muscled chest. Instead, he giggled harder. The voice in Uriah's head screamed for him to run, but he was caught off guard. It was only when the third tripwire snapped against the behemoth's artificial legs that Uriah tried running. By then it was too late.

The Orlock behemoth lunged forward with a burst of speed that belied his size. He caught Uriah by his collar and lifted him clean off the ground.

Before Uriah could slip free of the trench coat, the behemoth shoved him face first into the wall, twice. Uriah barely had time to turn his head and avoid a broken nose.

Spots of blinding white light peppered Uriah's vision and the sound of rushing blood almost drowned his hearing.

'Hurt more?' the behemoth asked somewhere in the distance.

'Not yet,' Slag said, his voice further away.

Uriah fought to regain focus, to see through the pain, but he was slipping out of consciousness...

Uriah tried to scream, but the steady jolt of electricity sealed his jaw shut and filled his nostrils with the smell of burning flesh. He went rigid with the spasms and rattled the bolted chair, nearly tearing it loose from the floor. He was strapped in, but his arms were free.

Percal loomed, holding the mechanism that controlled the flow of electricity burning through Uriah. He placed the device on the table in front of Uriah, taunting him with it. The message was clear:

Salvation is a foot away.

'Focus,' Percal told the young Uriah. 'Your life will depend on it.'

Uriah tried to scream 'I can't,' but all that came out were grunts and squeals.

'Quit,' Percal said. 'Only the best can be Handlers. You're obviously not cut out for it'

Uriah managed to shake his head from side to side by throwing his entire body into the motion.

'If you seek mercy from me,' Percal replied, 'then you'll be disappointed. Turn the device off yourself, or die here and now!

And with that, Percal walked out of the room, leaving the device on the table, leaving Uriah to the pain and the smell of burning flesh.

URIAH FORCED HIS way through the pain, forced his fingers to move, forced his senses to come to bear. He was still dangling from the metal fingers of the behemoth, but his back was to Slag and the others; he still had a chance.

The movement was automatic, Uriah's fingers reaching into the right pouch without thought or hesitation. There were two types of memory in Uriah that coexisted with one another; the first was conscious thought; the second was muscle memory born from repetition and practice. Uriah pulled out another matchbox and quickly palmed it before the behemoth swung him around to face Slag.

Time you died,' Slag said, raising his heavy bolter.

'No gloating?' Uriah asked, trying to sound disappointed.

'Only idiots gloat,' Slag said, taking aim.

'Hm,' Uriah said. 'I thought idiots shot prisoners before questioning them about the implants. I could be wrong.'

'You're stallin',' Slag said.

'Of course I'm stalling,' Uriah said with a laugh. 'But that doesn't mean I don't know anything.' Uriah paused a moment when a thought occurred to him. 'I'm curious. How exactly did you know to ambush me here?'

Slag said nothing. He never lowered his gun, but Uriah could see him deliberating matters.

'Let me guess,' Uriah said. 'You're well informed. Someone told you I'd be coming.'

Slag lowered his bolter. 'Drop him Gordo. You two, search 'im, strip 'im and bring 'im,' was his response before walking away.

The behemoth dropped Uriah with a dissatisfied rumble of a sigh and lumbered after Slag. Uriah smiled at the two men advancing on him. He pressed a small button on the matchbox's side. The near-invisible flechette fired into the nearby wall, but neither man noticed. They searched him and removed his pouches while he raised his arms in mock surrender, bringing the matchbox and micro-line well above their heads. Slag, however, turned around long enough to notice Uriah's action.

'Search everywhere!' Slag said with a growl. 'Up his sleeves, too. He's tricky.'

Uriah brought his arms back down, and in one quick flick of the wrist looped the wire around the first Orlock's neck. Before either ganger could react, Uriah punched the second ganger in the nose with the matchbox still in hand. That pulled the wire tight around the neck of the first ganger, cutting deep into his flesh. The filament sliced through both jugulars and

the throat, enough to send arterial spray everywhere. The second man reeled back, momentarily blinded from the pain of his shattered nose.

It was enough for Uriah to drop the matchbox and run down the corridor. He turned the first corner before bolter-fire shredded the walls behind him. Uriah dodged and weaved around the corridors, trying to stay one step ahead of the Orlocks.

Voice!' Uriah said, trying to keep his fleeting breath.

'Here! What's the matter?'

'Trap,' Uriah said, dodging around another corner, 'for me. Pursued.'

"What can I do?'

'Not sure!'

'I have an idea. Keep your head down.'

Uriah kept his bearings despite twisting and turning through the corridors of the large building. Throughout his tour of this floor and the one above it, he'd found three rooms with unprotected windows. He navigated for the first room, but upon turning the corner, found himself face-to-face with two surprised Orlocks. Uriah reacted far more quickly than they did; he elbowed the first in the face and pushed him into the second man before running past them both.

More shots rang out, but Uriah remained one corner ahead of impending death. He relied on pure instinct to push himself forwards. Another corner turned at the intersection of two corridors and Uriah came up behind an Orlock search party. He turned to avoid them and headed for the nearby stairwell. Angry voices erupted behind him; Uriah darted up the stairs.

'Done,' Voice said.

'What?' Uriah asked, trying to keep his sentences short.

You'll see. Just get out.'

The Orlocks had yet to spread upstairs, allowing Uriah to run straight for his next exit. Uriah's pursuers had dropped further behind, following several successful feints, and he reached what he hoped was the right door before they spotted him again. He shouldered his way through as a new volley of shots rang out and punched the wall around him.

Uriah slammed the door shut and heaved the metallic cabinet against it. Something in his back twinged at the heavy weight, but Uriah added it to the mental tally of the week's exhausting damage and pushed it out of his thoughts. He crawled out of the window and was on the ledge when the

Orlocks lacerated the door with shredding gunfire. It would only take them a moment to realise Uriah was no longer inside.

With a pained grunt, Uriah leapt to the support pylon girder, and from there, to another building ledge across the very narrow alley. He dived through the broken window. The building was derelict, save for the odd transient and addict. Uriah fled down the stairs, hoping he'd make it out the front door before the Orlocks could alert Slag that he'd escaped into an adjoining building.

Uriah neared the ground floor when shots rang out on the streets and the ramble of heavy engines shook the walls, dislodging trickles of dust. A quick glance through the window revealed Cybilline Sisterhood gangers on bikes, besieging Corval's building. The Orlocks were locked in a pitched battle with the Escher, and the fight had spilled out into the streets.

You called in your old House?' Uriah asked.

'Nothing like the murder of sisters to draw swift retribution. The first wave consists of those Escher already mobile or in the area. More will come. The Escher gangs are tightly knit against- outsiders.'

Thank you,' Uriah said. 'I don't know what that cost you.'

'Not nearly as much as letting you die. I am charging you by the hour.'

'Duly noted,' Uriah said with a grateful smile. 'And worth every Guilder credit I can scrape together.'

'Did you find the implant?' Voice asked.

'No,' Uriah said. 'And I lost my new bolt pistol. I was rather fond of that piece.'

What's your next step?'

'Not sure yet,' Uriah said. He was heading down the refuse-cluttered hallway to a side exit. 'Someone betrayed my position to Slag. The Orlocks were expecting me.'

'Someone? From inside your House?'

Yes,' Uriah said. 'But the only person who knew my exact location was you.'

'I didn't betray you,' Voice said.

'I know,' Uriah said, stepping into the alley through a door hanging off one hinge. 'It was one of my own, but I helped him, stupidly enough.'

'I don't understand.'

'Someone broke into my hab block and stole Cantrall's implant and the recordings.'

You didn't mention that to me,' Voice said, sounding annoyed.

'I didn't want to worry you,' Uriah said. 'And it was embarrassing, frankly, that someone in my House, my gang, would do this to one of his own.'

Til give the Escher this,' Voice responded. They are loyal to their sisters.'

Then why did you walk away?' Uriah asked, trying to ignore the gunshots and screams echoing through the streets. He stuck to the back alleys and took the long way to the tram.

'A subject for another time. Cantrall had five patients, how did your betrayer know where you'd be?'

'I tell you what,' Uriah said, pausing. Til answer two of your questions if you answer one of mine.'

'Jester...' Voice said, I'm trying to help you work this through. And you're not exactly safe yet.'

'Actually, who betrayed me and how they did so is not vital to your work. You're curious, plain and simple. And besides, it'll help me keep my mind off the pain. Two questions - within limits - ask away,' Uriah said, grimacing against the slow creep of ache that permeated his body.

'Fine,' Voice said. 'But you get one question for my two, within limits.'

'Agreed.'

'All right, how did Slag know where to find you?'

'My stupid fault,' Uriah admitted. "When I was studying the pictures of the gangers, I identified two of them by name and placed question marks next to the other names. That list was taken.'

'Ah,' Voice said. And with news of the attack on Jaffa Hur spreading-'

That left Corval as my only remaining lead.'

Uriah reached the edge of the street. Several blocks away, the Soulsplitters were trying to escape, but more Cybilline Sisterhood Escher were arriving. Uriah darted across the street to the next set of alleys.

'Your second question?' Uriah asked once he was safely inside the alleyway.

'Your question first,' Voice said. 'I'm still thinking.'

'Very well. Why did you leave the Escher?'

There was a pause. Finally, Uriah stopped and rested his back against the alley wall.

Too painful?' Uriah asked.

'I helped a mavant escape slavery,' Voice said.

Ah, a secret lover?'

'Not so secret,' she said. 'They quartered him rather than kill one of their sisters. There was supposed to be a lesson in that, but I never saw it.'

'I'm sorry,' Uriah said, embarrassed. That was insensitive of me.'

'My question,' Voice said. 'Do you have a lover in your life?'

It was Uriah's turn to consider the question. He hesitated before finally continuing down the alley. The sounds of gunfire grew more distant. 'Yes,' he said. 'And I love her dearly.'

That drew a pause from Voice.

'You best be on your way,' Voice said. 'Just remember, you owe me four more questions.'

'What?' Uriah asked. 'How'd you figure that?'

You asked me two questions, not one. Don't think I didn't notice. You asked me why I left the Escher and you also asked me if I had a secret lover. Two questions hidden in one. You owe me four more questions, Jester.'

'Damn,' Uriah said, laughing. 'I didn't think you'd noticed that.'

'Go,' Voice said. 'Sounds like you could use the rest. We'll talk later.'

Uriah paused long enough to catch his breath before continuing his escape. He desperately needed sleep, but the day was not yet won. Three implants were still up for grabs.

'PULL OUT!' SLAG ordered, striding for his bike while his men provided cover fire. If Slag was worried, he showed no sign of it.

We lost Uriah!' one of his men shouted, ducking from the return fire.

'Noticed,' Slag said, unflinching. He swept one leg over the carriage of his bike. The leg?'

The implant? Right here!' another man said, holding a wrapped cloth with a blood stain at one end.

Slag paused and held out his hand. The Soulsplitter holding the stump stayed low to the ground. He passed the stump to Slag, who promptly

fitted it under his own arm.

4Ve're leavin',' Slag said, his demeanor calm.

'What about them?' another man shouted from behind the cover of his heavy bike, shooting at several Escher.

'Not them you gotta worry about,' Slag said, gunning the engine. Two shots ricocheted of the bike's chassis. Slag didn't blink. His men look confused.

Slag kicked his bike into a screeching fit, his rear wheel fishtailing, his heavy tires gouging the street. As the remaining Soulsplitters raced for their bikes, an armoured truck swept around the corner; Slag, undeterred, released the brakes and hurtled straight for it.

'Enforcers!' a Soulsplitter yelled, referring to the local authorities.

The heavily-plated armoured car turned and spun into a bootlegger one hundred and eighty degrees, bringing the back end forward. It screeched to a halt on the street, bullets ricocheting off its skin. Before the rear doors swung open, Slag knew what was coming. He pulled away, off to the side and gave the rear door a wide berth as he was about to pass by.

Sure enough, the rear doors swung open, revealing a shielded turret bolter manned by someone in scuffed chain-armour. The Enforcer squeezed the trigger and unleashed a barrage of high-velocity rounds. In seconds the armoured car was pacifying the street, ripping walls to shreds, causing bikes to explode and killing Cybilline Sisterhood Escher and Soulsplitter Orlocks alike.

Slag flew by the armoured car and turned a street corner before the roof turret could lock on him. He headed for one of the shuttle elevators, the implant still under his arm, the sounds of gunfire fading in the background.

CHAPTER EIGHT

> War is the absence of reason. But then, life often demands unreasonable responses.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

THIS HAD GONE on long enough. Between the loss of the first implant to Kaden in Cantrall's building, the ransacking of his hab and the information leak that had allowed Slag to ambush him, Uriah was tired of being on the defensive.

It was time to act. This was something he should have dealt with at the outset.

The first step was acquiring new tools, since the Orlocks had stripped him of this old ones. What hurt him the most was the loss of his beloved bolt pistol; he was fond of that weapon and would be hard pressed to replace it with something of equal worth. He doubted Weapon's Master Coryin would offer him anomer chance on that front.

You lost the pistol?' Coryin asked, disbelief stretched high on his eyebrow. The bald man was unhappy, that much was obvious.

'I know,' Uriah said, trying to soothe Coryin's rising temper, but too tired to actually care. 'It was a fine weapon, but I had litde choice.'

'So you've said,' Coryin responded. He went back to work along the range, bucket in hand, collecting shell casings from the stands. The truth is that weapon was worth more than your hide.'

'Well of course you'd feel that way,' Uriah said, snapping 'Believe it or not, your precious weapons are here to serve us, not the other way around.'

Coryin spun around and stormed to within a nose hair of the smaller handler. 'Don't you speak down to me, boy, don't you ever! I didn't say my equipment was worth more than a Delaque's life. I said it was worth more than yours.'

The comment caught Uriah off guard. 'So that's the game. Where's this spite coming from, eh Coryin?'

The great Uriah Storm,' Coryin said. 'Always laughing in the face of danger.'

That's what this is, jealousy?'

'No,' Coryin said. 'I'm tired of your cavalier attitude. I'm tired of you treating everything - everyone - around you as a joke. Like it's all beneath your notice. Worthy of nothing but your contempt. So typical of Percal's Handlers, but none more so than you.'

Uriah paused. 'All right,' he said. 'Maybe I am cavalier with those around me, but that's nothing to do with contempt.'

You don't act like it.'

Why this sudden rush of animosity? You've never been one to hold your tongue, before. So why am I hearing this now?'

'Like you don't know,' Coryin said, returning to his errands.

'Enlighten me.'

You were protected, Uriah. Percal's shining protege. He said you were to want for nothing and though you were not of the Requisitioners we provided for you as per the terms of our alliance, even when it meant holding our tongues.'

'But you're no longer holding your tongue. Why? You no longer scared of Percal? Or are you saying I no longer hold Percal's favour?'

'It doesn't appear so, no.'

What have you heard?' Uriah asked.

Coryin sighed and stopped. He didn't turn around, but neither did he ignore Uriah.

'Please,' Uriah said. 'What have you heard?'

'Nothing specific,' Coryin said, putting down the bucket. 'But you know Percal. He never speaks in specifics. He leaves it to you to interpret his statements and art accordingly. So long as he doesn't dirty his hands.'

Then the implication?'

The implication is *no more special treatment.* The implication is you are no longer the favoured son. It's as though you're not even a Handler any more. At least in his eyes.'

Uriah listened, but his tired mind raced at the thoughts. He enjoyed Percal's support, but he never saw the reach of it. This was a new element in his life, one to which he was blind. Was he really that privileged that the other gangs in Shadowstrohm were forced to heed his concerns? If he was, everything made more sense. He had no true friends among the Delaque, but always seemed to find them outside the House, outside Percal's influence. Was this Percal's doing, to alienate him from his peers? Or was this inter-House jealousy for his position as Percal's protege.

Who is, then? Who is the new favoured son?' Uriah asked.

'I'm - I'm not sure,' Coryin admitted. 'I don't think there is one.'

What of Kaden?' Uriah asked. 'Could it be him?'

Coryin laughed. That fool? As much as Kaden would like to believe he's Percal's favourite, he isn't. Or at least,

Percal hasn't offered him the same preferential treatment that he gave you and the others,' 'Others?' Uriah said.

Coryin studied him, searching his face hard with a mixture of surprise and pity, Uriah realised.

'He's really kept you on a tight leash, hasn't he,' Coryin said. 'What others?' Uriah asked.

Coryin looked around, as though sharing in some great mystery. 'Before you, Percal had other proteges. Very few lasted long - a few months here, a year there. Killed in duty, you know. A couple, though, a couple possessed your skill,' 'What happened to them?'

'One retired and vanished. Talented lass, she was, and popular. Percal didn't like that, so he pushed her harder than most. Finally got to her. At first, we thought Percal had a thing for her and was jealous that he had to share her. But it was his way of keeping his Handlers from getting too close to anyone else. His way of controlling them,' ЛлТry didn't anyone tell me?' Uriah asked, shocked. 'Nobody wanted to cross Percal. After her, it was understood that you left Percal's proteges alone. It was difficult to ignore some, and easier for others,' 'Like me?' Uriah asked.

'You're good at what you do, Uriah,' Coryin said, 'I'll admit that. But you're arrogant, and if you aren't, then you act it. That little stunt on the

firing range a couple of days ago was typical of your behaviour and it did nothing to ingratiate you with your Housemates. Percal had his work cut out with you. Stroke your ego enough for you to drive others away.'

That's not fair,' Uriah said, but his comment felt feeble on his lips.

'You're a student of Percal. Enough to know that nothing is fair,' Coryin said.

'So noted,' Uriah said. He pitched his back against one of the metal firing stands and sank to the ground. He felt exhausted, but worse, defeated. 'You mentioned Percal had another protege, someone of my skill?'

Coryin nodded. 'He was executed. For betraying House Delaque. I never knew the specifics. Percal kept that matter internal to his gang.'

There was a moment's silence as Uriah absorbed the full impact of the news; Coryin stood there, studying him.

'Percal's kept me close to control what I hear,' Uriah said, his own voice distant and numb to his ears. And everyone knew?'

'Not everyone. Only those of us who've survived our service knew Percal's game. A handful really. No, most people believe you're privileged or spoiled or both,' Coryin waited for Uriah to say something, but Uriah was quiet, absorbing the news. 'Wait here,' Coryin said, finally.

Uriah sat in the comfortable dark of the quiet shooting range, reflecting on everything that was happening. Coryin returned a short time later, holding something wrapped in cloth. Uriah took it and unwrapped it. It was another slender bolt pistol with silver engraved siding, two extra magazines and a box of rounds.

'And for the Machine Spirit's sake,' Coryin said, about to walk away, 'don't lose her too.'

Thank you,' Uriah said. 'Wait, you believe in the Machine Spirit too?'

'Most Requisitioned pay some lip service to the Machine Spirit, but yes, I do believe. It's hard working with devices without seeing the miracle in them. I'm more surprised that you do, however. Never seen a Handler thank the Machine. Percal isn't the type to encourage faith in anything but himself.'

'It was something I picked up on assignment,' Uriah said.

'I'd be more careful about talking to the Machine Spirit in public. I saw you doing it on the range.'

'There's nothing wrong with paying it thanks.'

'Not for some folks. Others think it's a Van Saar streak - they might question your loyalties.'

'I'll keep that in mind. Thank you, again,' Uriah said.

Coryin nodded and left Uriah alone to his thoughts.

SLAG KILLED THE throttle on his bike and coasted to a stop next to the snub-nosed truck. An Orlock ganger, a small man with a soft stomach and sagging features, was leaning against the vehicle; he stood when Slag stopped.

'You got it?' the ganger asked, eyeing the wrapped and bloodied cloth in Slag's grip.

Slag pulled Uriah's bolt pistol from his waistband and pointed it at the ganger. The Orlock immediately brought his hands up.

'Hey! Whoa! Why you pointin' that thing at me?'

'Go ahead,' Slag said. 'Ask me another dumb question.'

'Okay, okay,' the ganger said, lowering his hands. 'Sorry.'

Slag casually tossed the wrapped implant at the man with one hand. It nearly bowled the ganger over.

'Heavy,' the ganger said, eyeing Slag and getting a better grip on the implant.

'Yeah,' Slag said. 'Get the leg to Stainstrip Research Facility. They're expectin' it.'

'Yeah, I can do that,' the ganger said.

Slag levelled the pistol at the ganger, whose eyes widened.

'And no detours,' Slag said. 'No takin' it to other suppliers first. No borrowin' components. You got thirty minutes to reach Stainstrip. At thirty-one minutes, you're a dead man and I'm the killin' stroke.'

'All right,' the ganger said, not daring to move a muscle, his brow slick with sweat.

Slag didn't break eye contact, nor did he lower his pistol.

After a moment, the nervous ganger blurted out with 'What?'

'You have twenty-nine minutes,' Slag said.

'All right, all right,' the ganger replied, getting in the truck. 'I'm going.'

SHADOWSTROHM FELT LIKE a different place. Uriah examined his surroundings with a new awareness; he studied the people with a new wary appreciation. He'd always interpreted their stares as those of jealousy for his skills or for the favour the Handlers enjoyed in Shadowstrohm. Percal had taught him that lie; better with which to alienate him. Now he saw the cold edge to their eyes - the dislike, the disinterest, the loathing in some cases. This was a barren hostility, one he'd never recognized before.

He was an unwanted stranger in his own House.

Uriah recounted and questioned everything he remembered Percal telling him. Use people before they use you; falsehood is more comforting than the truth; there are no friends, only assets. Everything seemed designed to alienate him from his peers. Uriah even found himself questioning those lessons found in the Book of Lies, a tome of advice partly written by Percal himself.

Then, like all emotions left to fester, Uriah's sorrow turned into indignation and then anger. He was being used, nothing more than a pawn in a game. Uriah thought himself above that, above the board itself, setting the pieces into motion rather than being manipulated by them.

Uncertainty was also playing on his nerves. If he was a piece to Percal, which piece was he? A Citizen, an Ecclesiarch or perhaps even the King? Uriah wasn't sure, if only because of recent events. Was Percal using Uriah for a feint, sacrificing him for a more important play? Or was he still needed on the board?

Actually, Uriah realised, it didn't matter. The regicide player loses his power to control and dictate the game when the pieces gain autonomy or self-awareness. They are no longer restricted to a strict range of movements determined by extended laws. Uriah realised that was exactly what was happening to him. If he was a regicide piece, then perhaps it was time to play the game his way.

Control the board, or leave it entirely.

The thought stopped Uriah in his tracks. The disadvantage shared by all regicide pieces, even with autonomy, was that their scope remained limited. They couldn't see the entire board from their vantage; only the player could. Then, as someone who controlled the pieces, you were locked in an entirely different game, one where the board consisted of two adversaries. At that point, the rules of the game changed, because you

didn't play to win, you played to engineer your adversary's downfall. It wasn't about playing the game itself, it was about playing the other person.

That's the trap Percal set for himself, Uriah thought. *He went from being a piece to being a player without realising there was no real transition. And if I'm not careful, it's the trap I'll fall into as well.*

Uriah entered his hab block using his new key and checked the laser tripwire he'd set under the sofa. It hadn't been activated. Nobody else had entered his sanctuary. Uriah collapsed onto the sofa and allowed the aches of the day to soak into him. He was tired, on the verge of exhaustion.

'*I can no longer play the game. I must survive on my own terms. I have to force my rivals to keep pace with me.*

Uriah chuckled at the irony of the last sentence and fell asleep.

SLEEP WAS A pitched battle that Uriah was losing. He woke up with a start, the last buzz of the pict screen ringing in his sleep. The light was flashing. Someone had left him a message.

Uriah checked the time, and then regretted doing so. Less than an hour's sleep; just enough to remind him of his exhausted state. The fatigue seemed to accentuate the pain in his joints and the bruised stings.

Uriah replayed the message on the pict screen and caught only bursts of coded static. Morgane needed to see him.

This Wasn't An opportunity for an intimate tryst, as much as Uriah and Morgane wanted it to be. Instead, they stayed on opposite sides of a wall with no easy way to reach one another; their only conduit was a metal grate. The wall was in a relatively unused portion of an abandoned Underhive transport station. Anyone trying to see who either person was speaking with would have to follow a long set of tunnels to the other side. Uriah and Morgane had this place timed to the minute. They could speak for two-and-a-half minutes before they endangered one another.

Are you all right?' Uriah asked. He stayed near the grate with his back against the wall. He was trying to seem casual even though the station appeared empty.

'I'm fine, my love,' Morgane said. 'I heard something interesting that I think you should know.'

'What is it?'

A maker by the name of Rot-Tongue spoke to my House today. He wanted to sell us one of Soren's implants. He was hoping we'd have a bounty for the return of Van Saar property.'

'And did they?' Uriah asked.

'No. That's the reason I wanted to speak to you. The House refused to buy back Soren's implants.'

'Is that unusual?'

'Yes it is,' Morgane said. 'We're so territorial with our technology that we offer substantial rewards for the return of intact Van Saar tech, if it's advanced enough.'

'Wasn't Soren sporting some of your newest models?'

'He was,' Morgane said, 'which is why this is so strange.'

'How did you hear about this?' Uriah asked.

'Unlike you Delaque,' Morgane said, 'we Van Saar delight in rumour, especially in the failings of another gang.'

'Rumours can be disinformation, you know,' Uriah chided.

'I know,' Morgane said. 'Which is why I spoke directly to the House representative who dealt with Rot-Tongue. He's an intermediary of my guild. He said the orders to refuse the implant came from high within the Van Saar hierarchy. It came from the House proper.'

'So this Rot-Tongue still has the implant?' 'I believe so, but for how long? I don't know. He was making noise about selling the implant to one of the other Houses.'

'Which means I have to move fast,' Uriah said with a sigh.

'Before you go,' Morgane said, 'there is one other thing.'

'Hurry, we have to leave soon,' Uriah said, checking his timepiece.

'The representative who spoke with Rot-Tongue saw the implant in question... an eye. He's not a technician, but Uriah, he says the eye looks like an older model.'

'So maybe Rot-Tongue was trying to swindle you? Pretend he had the right property.'

'The representative didn't think so. He's dealt with this maker before, and says the man is a professional. He's as close to a House asset as possible without being in our full time employment. Rot-Tongue even

provided us with Soren's genetic material from the implant to confirm the owner's identity.'

'So at the very least, something is afoot and Rot-Tongue has some connection to the implants or Soren's death. Thank you, love. You've renewed my faith in this ordeal.'

'Be well, love. I miss you,' Morgane said before Uriah heard her walk away.

Uriah walked away as well, contemplating the turn of events. That House Van Saar refused to buy back the implants, much less even entertain the thought, was troubling in itself. Unfortunately, rather than revealing any truths, it clouded matters further and added another layer to the mystery. Were this the only ordeal facing Uriah, he might have been better suited to handling it. Now Uriah contended with battles on multiple fronts, with Percal playing his own version of the game and Soren's death taking a stranger turn.

Uriah felt exhausted, but he couldn't quit now. There was too much at stake and if he paused, for even a moment, events would spiral beyond his control. It was time to handle both situations and damn the consequences. The first step would be to find Rot-Tongue.

Fortunately, Rot-Tongue was a maker, meaning he dealt widi the sale and distribution of illegal or hard-to-obtain products. That meant he'd be easier to find than most, and Uriah knew where to start.

Uriah reached his cycle, its green chassis housing a massive engine and two thick wheels. He hated the fact that he couldn't use this cycle anywhere outside the Underhive. Unfortunately, the Underhive had been lacking in public transportation for Helmawr knows how many millennia but was also a place where Uriah really needed to get around. He mounted the bike, gunned the throttle and tore through the near-abandoned streets. He activated his throat communicator.

'Voice. You there?' Uriah asked.

It took a moment for a groggy-sounding Voice to respond. 'I'm here. I'm here.'

'Sleeping?'

'I don't sleep,' Voice said with a yawn. 'I take small naps to invigorate myself.'

'That's called sleep,' Uriah said with a grin.

'If that's what you call it,' Voice said. 'What do you need, Jester?'

'Two things. First, what's the prognosis on Jaffa's implant? The heart accelerant.'

'I - I haven't dared touch it.'

'What? Why?' Uriah asked, surprised.

'Well, it's a complicated piece of equipment,' Voice said. 'Far superior to the components I'm used to handling. I'm afraid I might damage it if I tamper with it.'

Uriah paused a moment, waiting for something else to follow. He felt a gap in Voice's reason. 'What else?' Uriah asked finally. 'You're holding something back.'

Voice sighed into her transmitter, flooding Uriah's earpiece with a brief wash of static. 'It'll sound strange,' Voice said.

'I won't judge.'

Very well,' Voice said, obviously steeling herself. 'It feels wrong.'

'What does?' Uriah asked, uncertain.

'The heart accelerant. Every time I set about examining it in-depth, I have second thoughts.'

'You feel strange around it?' Uriah asked. 'Is the Machine Spirit trying to warn you?'

'I don't believe in the Machine Spirit,' Voice said. 'That's a Van Saar thing.'

'Not always,' Uriah said, 'but you feel strange around it.'

'I can't explain it. I don't feel like I should be tampering with the implant. And neither should you.'

'That's remarkably... cryptic.'

You said you wouldn't judge me,' Voice said, snapping.

'And I'm not,' Uriah said, still zipping through narrowing streets. 'I find it strange that you feel this way. I trust your instincts.'

'Thank you,' Voice replied. 'Should I return it?'

'No,' Uriah said after a moment's consideration. 'Hold on to it. Maybe you can determine why the implant makes you so uneasy.'

'Thank you,' Voice said again. 'I - appreciate your trust. You said you had another question?'

'Yes,' Uriah responded. 'Rot-Tongue. What can you tell me about him?'

URIAH FOLLOWED VOICE'S instructions, contacting Rot-Tongue through the appropriate channel. The channel, in this case, was Rot-Tongue's associate and manager, who then forwarded the request for the meeting and potential purchase of Soren's implant. The response came within fifteen minutes. Rot-Tongue was willing to meet.

The meeting spot was an old sewer network, two centuries dry and taken over by the poor, the downtrodden and the mutated. Filth stains still painted the cylindrical corridors and raw sewage still ran down the central trough. People had carved their homes into the walls or taken residence in natural niches, but for the most part, the dwellings were rarely more than three metres deep inside.

Why Rot-Tongue chose to reside in this district was a mystery, but Uriah surmised it was the big fish, small pond syndrome. Rot-Tongue's estate was located in an old pumping hub. Three tunnels converged on the six storey high hub. Crushed within the chamber were several hundred residents perusing the stock of enterprising merchants whose wares were laid out on carpets.

Above, the air extended three-storeys high before reaching the first thick grate that covered half the ceiling like a wide balcony. Six desiccated corpses hung from the metal ceiling, a reminder to those below never to draw the ire of Rot-Tongue for any reason. Above the grate was Rot-Tongue's two-storey sewer mansion, one floor separated from the other by another thick grate. The balcony's ledges for both levels were covered in thick banners of hanging fabric, providing Rot-Tongue with some privacy.

Uriah waited for his turn to speak to the stair guards. When he finally announced his presence, the guards patted him down. They found the knife that he wanted them to find and missed the pistol he wanted them to miss.

The metal stairs were enclosed within a chain-linked cage, and they followed the curve of the cylindrical room. Uriah mounted the stairs to the second floor, where more guards awaited.

The so-called mansion extended over thirty metres along the diameter; gossamer fabrics hung from the grate above and undulated at the barest hint of movement; carpets covered the floors, as did mounds of cushions that served as chairs and sofas; columns extended to the grated ceiling above. Oil-lamp globes, as well as a haze of smoke from water-bubble pipes added to the exotic nature of Rot-Tongue's pavilion.

Rot-Tongue sat on a throne of pillows while four guards - dressed in heavy leathers - flanked him. He was a big man, even without the body fat dripping from his frame. His straw coloured hair hung loose at his shoulders and the moustache did little to hide his baby-face; he wore billowing robes and walked barefoot. Rot-Tongue was aptly named, though Uriah was at a loss to identify what malady was capable of turning someone's tongue into a masticated, rotting piece of flesh. Half of it looked bitten away, and when he spoke, he spoke with a slur. Uriah did not recognize him; he wasn't one of Cantrall's customers.

'You're the Choir, I presume?' Rot-Tongue asked, his voice lazy and imperious.

'Jakob the Choir. Jakob is fine,' Uriah replied, slipping into his false identity.

4Vhat brings you to my home?' Rot-Tongue asked.

'I was told you had an implant for sale, an eye purchased from the bio-surgeon Cantrall?'

'Told? By whom?'

'I can't say,' Uriah said, shrugging.

"Which House are you with, then?'

'I freelance for the Van Saar.'

'They didn't want the implant.'

'Officially, you're right,' Uriah said, slipping into his prepared story. 'Unofficially, the House has been having problems - scavengers poaching Van Saar agents for their implants and selling them back to the House.'

'So?'

'The Van Saar have been refusing to purchase back implants to curtail the trade against them. They hire me to make the transactions on their behalf.'

'Why are you telling me this?' Rot-Tongue asked, looking unconvinced.

'You're still in good favour with the House and you have supporters. I also think you might have scared the Van Saar when you threatened to sell the implant to another House.'

'Is that so?' Rot-Tongue asked, looking bored again. His eyes wandered about the room.

'I am curious, though,' Uriah said.

'Hm?'

'How is it you obtained the implant? I thought Cantrall implanted it in a client.'

'He did not,' Rot-Tongue said.

Uriah realised it must have been the client who took the device rather than having it implanted.

'He took it to have it grafted on by someone cheaper and I took it from him. He owed me money.'

'And this man?' Uriah asked.

'He doesn't owe me money, anymore,' With that, Rot-Tongue looked down at an exposed portion of the grate. A piece of chain was tied to the edge of the grate's hole; from it dangled someone's corpse.

Uriah couldn't identify the man through the grate, but his hair colour and style looked similar to the ganger who had walked away with the eye.

Rot-Tongue sat forward and raised his arms. Immediately, two guards grabbed him by his elbows and gently lifted him to his feet. The rotund maker walked to the pavilion's balcony, where the two guards rushed to draw aside the curtains; Rot-Tongue studied his domain. The remaining two guards stared at Uriah.

'Do you like my kingdom?' Rot-Tongue asked, leaning against the railing and watching the people below.

'Most impressive,' Uriah said, standing.

'Down here, I am a God,' Rot-Tongue said, stretching out his arms. 'By my word, men live and die.'

Uriah said nothing.

'Some men, though, some men would like nothing more than to kill a God eh, Jakob?'

'I wouldn't know,' Uriah replied. 'I'm a businessman.'

'Really?'" Rot-Tongue asked, turning to face Uriah. He rested against the railing. 'You know, I wouldn't take you for a Van Sarr.'

'I only freelance for them. Much like yourself,' Uriah said. He wasn't sure where this was going, but he knew it was going somewhere. Uriah prepared himself, slowly drawing the pistol from the sleeve of his coat.

'No,' Rot-Tongue said. 'I wouldn't call you a Van Saar. You strike me more as... an assassin.'

The two guards were expecting to get the drop on Uriah, but they weren't fast enough for the nimble Handler. They brought their autoguns up at the

same time Uriah drew his pistol and emptied a round into each of their skulls. The gunshots echoed through the pavilion with a sharp snap. Uriah knew he was counting his life in the seconds. Were the guards below expecting to hear gunfire? It didn't matter; Uriah was in for a fight.

Rot-Tongue looked horrified at the sudden speed at which events turned against him. He froze. His two bodyguards, however, reacted far quicker.

Uriah dived behind the nearest column, shots whining past him and dinging off the metal grate. He exchanged a few shots with the guards, switching from one side to the other to prevent them from flanking him. Uriah was certain all this gunfire would draw the remaining guards upstairs. There wasn't much time left. He looked around in between snapping off shots at the two guards. It took a quick second to register the oil lamp globes and hanging fabrics.

Muttering a quick prayer, Uriah fired at a nearby globe. The shot splattered oil and ignited it; the hanging fabrics nearby caught fire. Uriah shot again, hitting another globe and spraying another curtain with flame.

Rot-Tongue shrieked at the inferno spreading along the web of fabrics like a lit fuse. The carpets covering the grates upstairs caught fire as well, spreading the blaze further.

'Do something!' Rot-Tongue cried with a hysterical shriek.

Uriah fired again at the guards, keeping them pinned down, before directing his attention to the stairs. The two guards from downstairs had just arrived, their heads level with the grate. Uriah shot the first in the temple; the other guard retreated fast, out of sight.

The blaze spread far quicker than Uriah anticipated. Waves of flame sheathed the ceiling and the fire was spreading fast along the curtains. Still, if there was one lesson that Percal had taught him -one lesson Uriah could trust - it was that victory belonged to the calm. A flurry of erratic gunfire proved Percal correct; the guards were panicking, no thanks to Rot-Tongue's hysteria, and rushing Uriah's position. Uriah fired around the column, catching both men in their sprint. One guard fired a shot that struck him.

The round nicked Uriah in the left arm, cutting across his bicep. It was a white-hot explosion of pain. Uriah stifled a cry and the sudden wave of nausea. He continued firing, catching both men in the open. They both

dropped; the pistol clicked without the accompanying thunder; Uriah was firing blanks. He was out of shots.

Rot-Tongue continued shrieking and was trying to find a way past the flames and the wounded Handler. Uriah raised his pistol, praying Rot-Tongue didn't realise he had spent his ammunition. The rotund maker, however, was in no state for rational thought.

Despite the stabbing pain in his arm and the accumulating smoke that made his eyes water, Uriah rushed up to Rot-Tongue and pushed him up against the railing with the gun barrel to his forehead. People below were running and screaming.

'Don't shoot! Don't shoot!' Rot-Tongue shrieked.

The implant!' Uriah said, 'where is it?'

'I sold it!' Rot-Tongue said, crying. 'Don't shoot!'

To who?'

The Delaque, one of their Handlers!'

'Kaden!' Uriah said, snarling. 'Was it Kaden?'

Yes, yes!' Rot-Tongue replied. 'Now please, I don't want to burn.'

'Not yet!' Uriah said, shouting over the din of the roaring blaze. Why did you attack me? Who said I was an assassin? Was it Kaden?'

'Yes! He said you were sent to kill me!'

4Vhat else?' Uriah asked, pressing the gun barrel into Rot-Tongue's temple.

'Nothing! I swear! Just-'

'Just? Just what?'

'He said to open the curtains on the balcony. So he could see me shoot you!'

Uriah's head whipped up. His eyes darted across the wall opposite the balcony. Only he was too late.

A skull-probe floated in the air, lazy and watching Uriah with its bionic eye. Beyond it, in an old drain pipe that was three storeys above the ground, Kaden was kneeling and staring down the scope of a sniper rifle aimed right at him. Uriah winced as the gunshot echoed through the chamber; he felt certain of the outcome. It took Uriah a quick moment to realise the shot wasn't intended for him. Rot-Tongue slumped forward, the back of his skull a rose of exposed brain and skull, his eyes emptied of life.

With a broad grin, Kaden gave Uriah a casual salute before vanishing into the darkness of the drain pipe. The skull probe followed, bobbing lazily behind.

Uriah let Rot-Tongue drop and uttered a small curse. Fire engulfed the floor, cutting him off from the stairs. His only hope was a three storey drop over the balcony railing. After tucking away the pistol, Uriah manoeu-vered his way over the railing and lowered himself until he was dangling. Despite himself, Uriah waited until the heat of raging flames threatened to eat at his fingers. Then he let go.

The ground rushed up faster than Uriah expected, barely giving him time to fall properly. It still didn't prepare Uriah for the shock of feeling his legs hammered up into his body and his jaw slammed shut with a jarring crack. Uriah hit the ground, stunned from the fall. A moment later, the numbness dissipated and Uriah's body screamed its cacophony of complaints. Screaming people ran past him, oblivious to his pain.

Uriah tried to stand, but his legs failed him. Someone grabbed his trench coat and began pulling it off him. Uriah reached for the gun with blind instinct and waved it in the face of a female scavenger dressed in rags. She ran.

Through the din, someone shouted. It sounded like orders, though Uriah couldn't hear the barking man clearly. The intention was clear to the Delaque Handler. They were after him. Uriah stumbled forward, suddenly pressing into the backs of the frightened mob. More people surged in around him, holding him up in the rush of bodies, pushing him forward and through one of the tunnels.

Uriah didn't stop running, even after he was lost, even after he careened off several walls in his mad escape. It would take him another couple of hours before he finally found the surface.

CHAPTER NINE

> If a war must be fought, then ensure it's being fought between your enemies and not with you.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

THE NEWS SPREAD quickly. The Orlocks had besieged an Escher stronghold and murdered its matriarch, Corval. The resulting street battle claimed dozens of lives and sparked gang skirmishes across Hive Primus.

Activity in Shadowstrohm had increased substantially as a result; not for the reasons most people suspected, but Kaden was enjoying his ringside seat to the event nonetheless.

Kaden sat across from Percal, watching quietly as the man issued orders to various agents. Most of his instructions were issued quickly, using the vox. Seeing Percal in person was a privilege few people actually experienced. Kaden felt smug in that regard.

'Utopia, dear,' Percal addressed someone over the vox caster, 'the Escher are stretched thin. It's the perfect time to ingratiate yourself into their ranks. Say the Strong Sisters or the Billie-Clubs?' Percal switched channels. 'Is the strike team ready? All women? Good. Hit the Orlock's Meltpile facility by tonight and make it look like an Escher attack,' Percal switched channels again. 'Roedai, I need those updates! Where are the other Houses in this conflict?'

Kaden had never seen Percal this purposeful before. He looked like he was actually enjoying himself. Kaden waited until the master Handler was done with his current batch of assignments before bothering Percal.

'So why hit Meltpile?' Kaden asked.

'Think,' Percal instructed, checking incoming messages on his private monitor.

Kaden considered it for a moment before shrugging. 'Are you trying to prolong this? Take advantage of the situation?'

'If that's your guess, then it must be right,' Percal said, still distracted.

Kaden waited in silence, but quiet was never his thing. 'You need somethin' done?'

'How about sitting quietly?' Percal said, engrossed in his reading.

'Okay,' Kaden said. The silence lasted another moment before, 'but you did call me, right? Figured you needed something.'

'Kaden,' Percal warned.

'Because I should be out there, you know? Gettin' the implants. Kickin' Uriah around some.'

Percal sighed and pinched the bridge of his missing nose. Kaden suppressed a shudder.

'Fine,' Percal said. 'You wish to talk. Let's talk. Why did you let Uriah see you?'

'What, at Rot-Tongue's place?' Kaden shrugged. 'I had Uriah dead to rights-'

'I told you I didn't want him harmed.'

'I didn't do nothing. Just made him sweat a little. Let him know I had the best of him.'

'Handlers are supposed to work quietly behind the scenes,' Percal said, impatiently.

'Well, yeah,' Kaden said in agreement. 'Most times I do. But with Uriah it's different, right? It's part of the game. Sportsmanship, right? Tends to get bloody.'

'Be very careful,' Percal said. 'You and Uriah are playing entirely different games.'

'That's right. I'm winning. He isn't,' Kaden said, laughing-

Percal leaned forward. 'I thought the goal was to strengthen the House? Strengthen the Handlers?'

'Sure,' Kaden replied, unabashed. 'But if there's personal glory for the taking, then why not. So long as it don't hurt the House or Handlers, right?'

'I wonder...' Percal said.

Wonder away,' Kaden said with a grin.

'I doubt Uriah would make the same mistakes that you're making.'

Kaden shrugged. 'Are you paying me for style or for results? So far, I've got you two implants.'

'Actually,' Percal said, 'the way I see it, you've failed to secure the four remaining implants.'

'And I like to think that I haven't got them for you yet.'

Then shouldn't you be out looking for them instead of pestering me?' Percal asked.

Kaden stood up with a heavy sigh. 'That's what I've been saying! You're the one who called me in.'

Yes,' Percal said. 'I wanted to tell you to stop attracting attention.'

'You don't want me pushing after Uriah?'

Percal sighed. 'No. But stop being so flagrant about it.'

Kaden shrugged. 'Whatever you say, boss.'

It wasn't until he'd left Percal's office that he muttered to himself. 'Stop being flagrant about it? Where's the fun in that?'

THE CHAMBER WAS relatively spacious, big enough for the large man and his assistant. One wall was covered with all manner of optographs, from grainy ones taken at range to full-colour jobs. Each shot was the picture of someone, their name inscribed or their face occasionally crossed out with red. None of the subjects ever realised they were being shot.

Well met, Uriah,' the large Information Culler said. Despite his congenial smile and bright green eyes made more brilliant by his red hair and beard, he never offered his hand.

Uriah nodded instead and smiled despite the numbing fatigue and joint pain flaring throughout his body. He sat on the comfortable couch and almost melted in relief. His loud groan drew a smile from the assistant, a black-haired girl barely old enough to be out of the House scholam.

'Derrik, you have good news, I hope?' Uriah asked.

'Depends. Is one out of three good news?' Derrik asked.

'Only if the one out of the three isn't Rot-Tongue.'

Who's Rot-Tongue?'

'Perfect,' Uriah said, satisfied.

Derrik looked perplexed and flipped through the optographs on his desk. 'No, seriously. Which one is Rot-Tongue?'

Uriah smiled. You can't stand not knowing someone's name.'

'It's my job. If I didn't know names, you'd be lost.'

True,' Uriah said. You managed to identify one of the pictures I sent you?'

'I did. This man,' Derrik said, pushing an optograph toward Uriah.

Uriah leaned forward and studied the picture. It was a Goliath ganger, a small compact man with all the muscle of that House, but shorter by far. 'Does he have a name and affiliation?' Uriah asked.

'His name's Rival. He lairs in the Anachrolis District, fifth level.'

'What does he do?' Uriah asked, already dreading the answer.

'He's the head of a gang. The Black Rats.'

Uriah threw his arms in the air. 'Why is it every one of these fools leads a gang? Couldn't I find a toadie or a minion?'

Well,' Derrik said, 'they were all clients of Cantrall, correct? Cantrall was expensive. Not many toadies could afford him.'

'Yes,' Uriah said, his eyes narrowing. 'How'd you know about Cantrall?'

'Kaden,' Derrik said with casual aplomb. 'He brought in the same exact optos a short time after you. Only, he was far more "generous" with his information.'

'Does he know about Rival?' Uriah asked.

'No,' Derrik said, smiling. 'Not yet.'

You saved it for me first? To what do I owe the pleasure or is it a favour?'

'A bit of both. I don't like Kaden,' Derrik said. 'And favours are never a bad thing to have.'

'But you've already offered me the information,' Uriah said, grinning.

'Only because you're an honourable man. I've dealt with you enough to know that. Besides, unlike Kaden, you've always kept the Information Cullers current on your intelligence. We appreciate that.'

'Fair enough,' Uriah said. 'Respect, a favour and our mutual dislike of Kaden it is.'

'Now,' Derrik said with a sigh. 'Which one of these chaps is Rot-Tongue?'

Uriah leaned forward and tapped the picture of a ganger with greasy brown hair. 'Well that's not actually Rot-Tongue. This man owed Rot-

Tongue money, Rot-Tongue collected with interest. Besides, Rot-Tongue's dead now,' Uriah added, sitting back. 'Courtesy of Kaden.'

Derrik frowned. 'Doesn't make sense. If Kaden knew how to find him, why give me the picture?'

'Kaden didn't know. Rot-Tongue contacted us. That's not important right now. I'm hoping you can help me with something.'

'With what?'

Uriah glanced at the assistant who was hard at work. Derrik smiled. 'I'm grooming her to replace me eventually. She'll need to know everything I know. Besides, she doesn't much like Kaden either.'

The assistant turned her head and raised her eyebrows, as though agreeing.

'Very well,' Uriah said, 'but this has little to do with Kaden. I want to know about Percal's former proteges.'

Derrik inhaled softly and leaned back. 'Tricky matter that,' he said.

'Please. I seem to be following a path that Percal's already laid out before me. I don't know where it's going, but I suspect Percal's former students travelled further along that same road before their circumstances changed.'

'You want to know if there's danger ahead?' Derrik asked, glancing at his assistant's back. She'd stopped working and was listening. 'What I say doesn't leave this room, that goes for the both of you,' Derrik said.

Uriah nodded, as did the assistant who swivelled around in her chair to face her mentor.

'I have enough problems with Percal without this getting out,' Derrik muttered.

'Problems?' Uriah asked.

'I sweep my office for micro-transmitters on a frequent basis. Percal eventually gave up eavesdropping on my conversations, though he still tries on occasion.'

'He spies on you?' Uriah asked, shocked.

'He does it to everyone here. The Seductresses, the Information Cullers, the Cartographers - even his own

Handlers. Only a handful of us know about it. Those of us with enough connections to remain safe.'

'But,' the assistant said before hesitating. She didn't intend to intrude. Derrik smiled his encouragement, and she continued. 'But we're part of the same House.'

'Percal is loyal to the House, but we, my dear are outside of his gang and therefore below his notice. I know of no man or woman whom he holds in equal esteem to himself.'

'So he spies on you?'

'On everyone who barters in information.'

'But why trust me with this?' Uriah said. 'I'm not of your gang and everyone here thinks of me as Percal's lackey and they think me arrogant.'

'The arrogant bit, I can believe,' Derrik said laughing.

Uriah returned the laugh, grateful that someone was comfortable enough around him to joke about the matter.

'I trust you with this,' Derrik said, 'because most of the other proteges were truly arrogant. You're certain and perhaps cocky, but you're also questioning Percal's role for you. The others didn't, and they suffered for it.'

Tell me about them?'

'I can't remember them all,' Derrik said.

'Then tell me about the most promising ones. The woman who retired and the man who was executed.'

Derrik grimaced. 'Ugly affairs. The woman was called Bettyna. A real beauty she was, with skin a luxurious brown. She was friendly and liked by many in Shadow-strohm.'

'I thought Percal liked his proteges kept isolated,' Uriah said.

'Didn't work, not with her,' Derrik said. 'She was too vibrant for Percal to contain. But he tried. Gods how he tried,' Derrik said, shaking his head at some distant tragic memory.

'What happened?' Uriah asked.

'Percal sent her on errands, never giving her a full accounting of what she faced. Thought he was challenging her or some such nonsense. Some of us, those who liked her, tried softening her rigours. We helped when we could, digging deeper into her assignments, trying to warn her of any pitfalls we uncovered.'

'But you didn't always succeed,' Uriah said.

'No. We didn't. Make no mistake, Bettyna was competent and quick on her feet. She survived situations that would have killed Percal at his best, but she didn't emerge from all unscathed. It's difficult enough playing the game without also counting allies as enemies. Even the best Handler needs safe harbour and a friendly shoulder.'

'And was that you?' Uriah asked. 'Were you her friendly shoulder?'

Derrik laughed before sighing. 'Her head rested on another's shoulder, though I certainly would have been there for the asking.'

'Who then?' Uriah asked.

'Nobody you know. Died before your time,' Derrik said, fixing Uriah with a look.

Uriah caught the gaze and understood immediately. 'Percal killed her lover.'

'No murders to speak of in House Delaque,' Derrik said.

'Only accidents,' his assistant responded, nodding her head.

'But we all knew,' Derrik said, 'especially Bettyna.'

'What happened?' Uriah asked.

'She fled. Once she realised the extent of Percal's deceptions, she just ran.'

'Just like that?' Uriah asked. 'She quit being a Handler and vanished?'

'Nobody simply stops being a Handler, especially anyone serving under Percal,' Derrik said. 'She escaped, with help from allies, but Percal wouldn't leave it alone. He tried to find her, like some petulant child looking for his favourite toy.'

'For how long?' the assistant asked.

'Months. Eventually Bettyna realised she was no longer safe here. Rumour was she fled to another hive.'

'Are there such things?' the assistant asked, her eyes wide in amazement.

'Nobody knows for sure. I like to think there are,' Derrik said with a chuckle.

'Where is she now?' Uriah asked.

'I wish I knew,' Derrik said with a sad smile. 'I miss her kind face. I lost track of her after she left, but I'd like to think she's doing well.'

Uriah nodded and remained quiet for a moment. Partly to digest what he'd just heard, but partly in respect for Derrik and his memory. Finally, he spoke. 'What of the man who was executed?'

'Nobody missed him,' Derrik said, remembering. 'He was a bastard. Elias, I think was his name. Worshipped the ground Percal stood on and followed in his steps with ruthless ambition. Now there was somebody truly hated.'

'How long after Bettyna was Elias?' Uriah asked.

'A few years. Bettyna was Percal's first or second prize Handler before his skills in manipulation grew. I do remember a quick succession of Handlers following Bettyna, but they either proved inferior by Percal's standards or died on assignments. Elias survived longer than any of them.'

'What happened to him?' Uriah asked.

'Caught stealing secrets from us and selling them to the other Houses. Slow and messy execution. We like being the betrayers, never the betrayed,' Derrik said with a twinkle in his eye.

'A traitor under Percal's nose? And his reputation didn't suffer for it?'

'It was Percal who caught him and presided over his execution. But I will give Elias his due. He was stoic during his ordeal.'

'So,' Uriah said, stringing the pieces together, 'after Elias, Percal trained more Handlers, but none really survived until I came along.'

'Like I mentioned,' Derrik said, 'arrogant.'

'You tell me, then,' Uriah said. 'Am I equal to Bettyna and Elias? Or am I some distant third.'

'Bettyna: you two would have challenged each other. I think you would have liked her, though. But you're better than Elias,' Derrik said. 'And better than Kaden.'

Thank you,' Uriah said. 'I'm sorry people didn't think they could trust me earlier.'

After Bettyna, we tried ignoring the affairs of the Handlers. It was not our place and frankly it's hard knowing which of Percal's proteges to trust. You all happen to fall under someone's long shadow.'

And now?' Uriah asked.

'I've always liked you, Uriah,' Derrik said. 'I may not have revealed certain truths to you, but I did treat you better man most. And you always responded in kind.'

'Not better than all, though,' Uriah said, laughing.

'Ah, Bettyna - nobody can ever replace her in my heart.'

'Maybe not,' Uriah said, standing, 'but I hope to hold similar respect in your eyes. Thank you, Derrik.'

'Good luck hunting Rival,' Derrik responded. 'I can't withhold information from Kaden for long, but I'll certainly give you a head start.'

Uriah nodded to the assistant before taking his leave.

* * *

THE ANACHROLIS DISTRICT was an enormous pit, literally. The circular chamber rose over forty storeys high, with the hab blocks and kiosks along the interior shaft overlooking a kilometre-wide courtyard. The street was a wide ledge that corkscrewed its way down to the bottom. No stairs to take, just industrial elevators large enough to accommodate vehicles and the long, winding road.

Stores and food vendors were crammed into shallow niches no more than a couple of metres deep; they catered to the press of human traffic on the street. Unlike Jaffa Hur's junk-pile camp, this Goliath territory was open for commerce.

'Ever been here?' Uriah asked.

'If I remember correctly,' Voice said, 'you owe me the questions.'

'I wasn't pressing you for information,' Uriah said, leaning against the balcony and staring down the maw of the forty-storey pit. What I want to know is do I have to describe this place to you?'

'No,' Voice said. 'Some of my favourite cooks are there.'

Ah, really. Which ones?'

'Try again,' Voice said, laughing. 'That's one question I won't answer.'

'Fair enough,' Uriah replied. 'Did you find the information I need?'

'Yes, I did,' Voice said. 'Rival makes his home there. But the Black Rats don't control the territory with an iron fist.'

'Rare for Goliaths. How come?'

'Because they make more money this way. Avoids scaring away the visitors because of gang skirmishes.'

'Rival sounds like a reasonable man.'

'Perhaps,' Voice said. At least until you ask for the implant.'

'True,' Uriah said with a sigh. 'So where am I going? Other than the fifth level.'

'Look for the burnt-out temple - to something called the Adeptus... something or other. I can't pronounce it. The Goliaths make their home there.'

'Any idea of their numbers?'

'Many,' Voice said.

'Wonderfully helpful. Thank you.'

Uriah shouldered his way through the crowd. Everyone here came for supplies and the food, so the mass of people moved at a sluggish clip as they perused the wares and edibles displayed on tables and rugs.

After half an hour of fighting the crowds and navigating only four storeys down, Uriah headed for the elevators. The lines were certain to be long, but not the hours it would take him to walk to the fifth level some thirty storeys down.

As Uriah approached the long line to the bank of industrial elevators, someone behind him cursed.

'Watch where you're going!' a woman said.

Uriah turned. Three Orlock gangers were pushing through the crowd, their eyes locked on him.

Soulsplitters Uriah realised.

Uriah pressed harder into the back of the crowd, pushing his way past people and drawing his share of insults. The three Orlocks kept pace.

'Trouble,' Uriah said.

'Already?' Voice asked. 'Incredible.'

'No, Soulsplitters are here.'

'What're you going to do?' Voice asked.

'Find help,' Uriah replied.

Uriah couldn't hear Voice's response over the insults shouted at him by passers-by. Instead, he directed himself straight to the four Black Rat Goliaths standing near the elevators. The three Orlocks continued their chase, oblivious to the other gangers.

'Orlocks!' Uriah said upon reaching the Goliaths. He pointed to the three advancing men who showed no indication of slowing. Before he could move on, a safe distance from the anticipated firefight, one of the Orlocks shouted:

'It's him! Grab him!'

To Uriah's horror, a flash of recognition crossed the Goliaths' eyes, and four pairs of meaty hands grabbed him. He tried to spin away, but their grip remained true.

The thought floating in Uriah's head was one of simple shock. *They're working together.* Then the rain of fists and feet fell, pummelling him in the face and in the stomach; the four Goliaths and three Orlocks unleashed their fury against him.

After a moment, everything went numb under the painful haze of blows.

Then darkness swallowed Uriah whole.

THE WORLD TASTED of iron, a bitter taste to be sure. His tongue filled his mouth like a fat worm, and there was a gap where one of his molars had sat. Uriah slowly awoke to the world, one filled with a slow, growing awareness of pain.

Something on Uriah's forehead itched and he reached up to scratch it. His arm jolted short of it, however. Someone had shackled his wrists.

'He's awake,' someone said.

Uriah tried to open his eyes, but only one opened fully. The other hurt; he suspected it was swollen almost shut. With his good eye Uriah looked around. He was sitting on the floor, propped up against the wall. His wrists were shackled together and connected to chains bolted to the floor.

The chamber itself was a side-chapel with fire-blackened walls, columns set at intervals and a vaulted ceiling. An arched doorway led into the darkness of the burnt-out temple. Looming over Uriah were a handful of Black Rat Goliaths and Soulsplitter Orlocks. Two stood out in particular. The first was Rival himself, a Goliath ganger shorter than his confederates, but just as well muscled. He stared at Uriah, a mix of derision and intelligent appraisal in his one-eyed gaze. The other eye was covered with an eye patch. The implant was missing.

The second man was Slag.

'The boy don't look like much,' Rival said.

'That's his cunning,' Slag said. 'And your death if you're not careful.'

Uriah's head lolled to the side as the weight of the pain came crashing back in. He was losing consciousness again, unable to muster the strength

to keep his head up. In the growing dim, Uriah caught the last of the conversation.

'Gonna kill him?' Rival asked.

'When he's healthy enough,' Slag handed something to Rival. 'I'm going after Corsikan. Get whoever was on the end of his ear piece.'

Somewhere, deep in the back of his cranium where the darkness had yet to flood in, Uriah realised they were holding the receiver that had been in his ear.

Voice, Uriah realised. *They're going after Voice.*

Uriah tried to activate his microphone, but the burn in his throat told him that too was gone.

ONE BY ONE, the threads of shadow snapped, slowly unfettering Uriah from unconsciousness. He drifted back to the surface of awareness, the growing pain and ache in his body serving as his anchor. One eye opened, the other feeling like it'd been welded shut.

'Still don't look like much,' Rival said. He was squatting in front of Uriah, studying him. In his hand was a nickel-plated jolt rod.

'That's funny,' Uriah said, feeling his words drag across his tongue, 'considering you're rather short for a Goliath.'

Rival shrugged. 'Not telling me nothing I don't already know.'

'What are you doing with Slag?' Uriah asked.

'Slag and me came to an arrangement for the implant and for help catching you. If you couldn't tell, I'm providing for my end of the bargain.'

'Slag negotiated?' Uriah asked, the thought amusing enough to draw a chuckle from him. 'I can actually imagine you simians grunting at one another.'

'You got caught because you underestimated us once. Don't think you want to keep doing that by opening your yap.'

'You got lucky,' Uriah said. 'Filling a room with bullets to kill someone isn't skill, it's called luck. Or clumsiness - not sure which.'

'I'll take either, just the same,' Rival said. 'And don't think I don't know what you're doing. You're smart, I'll give you that. Trying to goad me on like that. Trying to get me to drop my guard around you. You're pretty cagey for a small guy.'

'I could say the same about you,' Uriah said, smiling.

'Ain't gonna get to me through vanity, either,' Rival said.

'All right,' Uriah said, growing more aware of his surroundings. 'How about I match Slag's offer for the implant and for freeing me - plus something extra. Like another eye.'

'Ain't happening,' Rival said. 'I ain't much fond of Delaque. And Slag's more suited to my temperament. Besides, the Soulsplitters promised me a better eye for the one I gave them.'

'Slag'll get you killed,' Uriah said.

'And you'll stab me in the back. I know how you Delaque work. I'm in better company with the Orlocks. Better fit. They understand business.'

'Your choice, but the Orlocks are the ones you have to watch out for.'

'No,' Rival said. 'You're the one who's got to watch out for them. Slag wants to torture you something fierce.'

'Speaking of ugly, where is he?'

'Don't you worry about that,' Rival said, slapping the rod in his open palm. 'Slag asked me to see to your recovery, and what I find gets a man kicking is some juice,' With that, Rival poked Uriah in the ribs, hard, unleashing a jolt of electricity.

Uriah's muscles seized up and his arms snapped against his chains. The electricity contracted all the muscles in his body; he went rigid, like a corpse and couldn't concentrate past the pain. Spattered images of Percal torturing him, teaching him to act despite the pain, flooded back into his memory. But in the deepest recesses of his brain, Uriah realised this was not the time to display this particular skill. Let Rival have his fun, despite the agony caused by the electricity.

Seconds passed with the agonizing crawl of hours, until finally, Uriah collapsed back to the floor, the pain suddenly gone.

'How's that feel?' Rival asked, his face split into a grin.

'A little more to the, unh, left next time,' Uriah managed to say.

Rival's grin evaporated instantly, and he jammed the rod into Uriah's ribs much harder.

Uriah went rigid again, his muscles steel-hard, his teeth grinding under the pressure.

* * *

URIAH HIT THE floor hard after the Black Rat and Soul-splitter guards tossed him into the cage. Landing on the stone floor was pain enough to shove away the cloying shadows threatening to overwhelm his perceptions. Right now, he was playing dead - waiting for the right opportunity to escape. He couldn't risk falling unconscious and awakening with Slag's fingers sliding around his throat.

It was a struggle. Uriah hurt so much, he was on the verge of collapse. His muscles screamed and his joints ached. His body felt like a single bruised nerve, and his mind wanted to retreat from its constant wail of pain. He was a stitching needle, coursing through the fabric that separated him from exhausted unconsciousness. It was in this moment that Uriah was grateful for Percal's training, for stretching his endurance to the breaking point and teaching him to surpass his own limitations. Then, of course, another part of him cursed Percal for putting him into this predicament in the first place.

No, Uriah decided, better to blame Percal. Hate was a stronger emotion to keep him awake.

'When's he getting back?' one of the guards asked as they walked away.

'You impatient or something?' guard two asked, his voice distant. 'Slag's still looking for Corsikan. Coward went into hiding when he heard there was a bounty on the implant.'

'Figures,' the first guard replied before their conversation was lost to the corridors of the temple.

For that tidbit, Uriah was grateful. If Corsikan was hiding, Uriah still had a chance of finding the last implant and wrapping up this endeavour. Unfortunately, one small matter took precedence over all others and that was rescuing Voice. Uriah had precious little time to lose, and even less strength to spare. He pushed himself up from the ground and sat on the stone floor. Gravity conspired against him, threatening to pull him back to the ground where cool unconsciousness waited, but Uriah fought the sway. He needed to collect his strength. He needed to collect himself.

CHAPTER TEN

> Fight the inevitable with all your strength, but when war comes upon you, do not hesitate. Use every ounce of cunning and every shred of your cold heart to win the day and strike fear into your enemy.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

URIAH SAT ON the stone floor, his legs crossed, his eyes closed. His strength was still dim and his bones felt splintered under the weight of his heavy muscles, but he was feeling a little stronger. He focused on that energy, that small kernel of strength growing in the barren wastes of his chest. With Voice's life on the line, whatever meagre reservoir he could muster would have to do.

Thoughts drifting, Uriah recounted the events of the last few days. Everything was moving so quickly, he'd had little chance to examine and consider what had happened. Without Voice or Morgane to provide feedback, Uriah spoke to himself, his lips moving but his tongue silent.

Soren is dead, Uriah thought, his implants stolen and sold to Cantrall. But why? Soren's death couldn't have been mere coincidence. He was to rendezvous wim

House Delaque agents to sell them new Van Saar implants. And he was negotiating with the Orlocks as well.

Uriah paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. There was too much at stake and nothing made sense. If Soren was murdered for his implants, then why not simply steal the implants. Why sell them to Cantrall?

Perhaps he was murdered by a free agent who knew enough about the implants to sell them? It wasn't uncommon for greed to spoil the deal. The Orlocks might have hired someone to find Soren, only for the killer to steal the implants for himself.

Still, why did the Van Saar refuse to purchase the implant back from Rot-Tongue? Was it older technology, like Morgane's friend claimed?

That brought up the possibility that Soren was selling slightly older tech to the Delaque and Orlocks, and promoting it as new. I liked Soren, but he was a fool for pitting two Houses against one another. Still, I wouldn't put it past him to try to dupe both Houses into buying inferior technology by Van Saar standards. Perhaps his murderer realised the technology was inferior and only worthy of a bio-surgeon's interests.

Then, there was that entire incident with Percal and his strange behaviour. Is Percal testing me, Uriah wondered, or have I fallen from his grace? If I have then why?

Uriah sighed and was about to continue his reflections when he heard a whirr. A soft purr of noise brought his attention into focus. He listened carefully but kept his eyes closed. The whirr drifted closer, to somewhere outside the metal bars of his cage.

'You know,' a man said, the voice mechanical and raspy, 'you move your lips when you think.'

Uriah's eyes flew open when he realised it was Kaden's voice. Instead of Kaden, however, Uriah stared at a probe built from a real human skull. A camera-lens glittered from inside one eye-socket, a speaker grille covered the mouth and bundles of wires hung from heavy jacks lining both sides of the parietal bone.

Uriah recognized the skull-probe as the one from Rot-Tongue's assassination - the one in Kaden's possession.

'Wish I could read lips,' Kaden said. The skull bobbed.

'Lamenting your inadequacies must be a full-time job for you,' Uriah said.

'You're a funny bird, being in a cage and all. Sing for me. Tell me how I beat you good.'

'The game's far from won.'

'I've got two implants,' Kaden said.

'You missed four.'

'That's what Percal keeps yapping on about.'

'That's a mistake,' Uriah said. 'Percal would be upset if he knew how liberal you were being with his name.'

'Percal's an idiot,' Kaden said. 'Playing the game like it's the only thing that matters.'

'And you don't?' Uriah asked, almost laughing. You revealed my location and identity to the enemy. You broke into my hab to steal documents. You betrayed a fellow Handler.'

'Hey!' Kaden said. 'I'm just playing the game. If I wanted you dead, you wouldn't be here. I would have done you in a long time ago. At Cantrall's I could've fixed you. At Rot-Tongue's I had you dead to rights.'

'But instead,' Uriah said, 'you're willing to help other people kill me rather than sully your own hands.'

Kaden laughed. 'Don't take it like that. I was providing you with a challenge. I've got to admit it gets boring running the same scams on the same idiots -knowing they'll never learn better.'

Uriah shook his head. 'Don't pretend that was you. Don't feign such creativity. Percal's been the one to test me. You're only following orders like a good pup.'

'Hey!' Kaden said, almost shouting through the speaker grill, 'Percal told me to test you but I came up with those ideas myself

'Percal let you think that,' Uriah said. 'He's good at directing the course. He manipulated you.'

'Nobody manipulated me,' Kaden replied. 'Breaking into your place, that was me. Getting Rot-Tongue to rough you up - that was me too.'

'And telling Slag to find me at Corval's?'

That comment drew silence from the skull-probe. It caught Uriah off-guard.

'Your silence is damning,' Uriah said.

'Who the hell is Corval?' Kaden asked.

'The woman in Cantrall's implant recordings. The Cybilline Sisterhood Escher,' Uriah said. 'Are you saying you had nothing to do with that?'

'Corval,' Kaden said. 'She's why there's this vendetta war between the Orlocks and Escher. You saying you did her in?'

'You had no hand in that?'

'Hell no!' Kaden replied. 'Like I said, I'm not about to kill you. Just remedy you with a dose of humiliation.'

'Then what about that bit at Rot-Tongue's? He was going to kill me.'

'Like hell,' Kaden said. 'I had Rot-Tongue and his boys covered. I just wanted you to sweat.'

Uriah was quiet. If he's telling the truth he thought, then that means someone else tipped Slag as to my location with Corval.

'You gave Percal the eye's recordings, what Cantrall saw, correct?' Uriah asked.

'What about it?' Kaden asked.

Uriah sighed and pressed his head against the back of the bars, suddenly realising that Percal had betrayed him.

'Hey! What about it?' Kaden asked.

'Nothing,' Uriah said. 'It's just that you picked a dancing partner who dances better than you.'

'Meaning?'

'You're in over your head. I'm afraid I might be too. We're being played, Kaden.'

'Like hell!'

'I'm afraid so. Percal is using your dislike of me to keep you distracted from the truth. And he's using you to keep me distracted.'

'He says he's testing you,' Kaden said. 'Seeing if you've got claim to being his protege. Personally, I think he's lost faith in you. Says you're sounding more and more like a Van Saar. Getting too comfortable with their way of thinking.'

'Percal thinks I've turned against the Handlers?'

'Looks like, and you done nothing to convince anyone otherwise.'

'I'd never betray the House!'

'Then why were you acting all friendly with Soren? Did you turn him? Or did he turn you? And why are you talking to devices now, and using Van Saar tech? And don't claim otherwise. I've seen your place.'

'I obtained those devices when I was undercover with the Van Saar!' Uriah said, trying to control his anger. An assignment Percal sent me on! I befriended Soren, again at Percal's behest! I'm chasing after Soren because Percal wants Van Saar tech. And now that I'm doing my job well, I'm called into question for it? You tell me something, Kaden; how am I

supposed to steal Van Saar secrets without befriending them or learning to speak the way they speak.'

And then the thought struck Uriah. It fell with the clarity of a blow to the back of the head. Has Percal sent me on these assignments to set me up? Has this been one long play over the years to move his chess pieces into position? Has Percal been setting me up to appear a traitor? Choosing assignments specifically to account for my supposed guilt? Unfortunately, while Uriah reeled from the thought, he knew he couldn't ponder the matter.

'Frankly, Uriah,' Kaden said, 'I don't rightly care. Per-cal's lost faith in you. But me - he knows I can deliver the goods.'

'He knows he can manipulate you,' Uriah said.

'Now you see, you keep singing that tune. But the fact is I think your time has come and gone. And I think you know it too.'

'Really? Prove it, then. Free me from here and we'll confront Percal. No games. No pretence. Get everything out there on the table.'

'Now, see,' Kaden said, 'I got me a small problem with that. I like you where you are just fine.'

'They're going to kill me,' Uriah said. 'I thought you didn't wish me any real harm.'

'They ain't up to killing you yet. Not until Slag comes back, from what I hear, and he's too busy trying to find that last implant. So am I.'

'I know who has the last implant,' Uriah said. 'Release me and I'll-'

'Don't bother,' Kaden said. 'I overheard them talking. I know who's got that last implant and I know he's hidin'. And frankly, I aim to get it without you inter-ferin',' The skull-probe began floating away.

'Kaden!' Uriah said, watching it leave.

'Don't worry. I'll be back to fetch you when I'm done. Enjoy the rest,' And with that, the skull-probe floated out of the small window of the chamber.

Uriah shook his head. Idiot, he thought. Percal's playing with our lives and he's too stubborn to realise we may share the same fate. Still, if Kaden had accomplished one thing, it was in stimulating Uriah's strength and giving him focus. He felt stronger.

It was time for him to escape.

URIAH SPENT A few moments searching for the right sized stone. It was lying less than half a metre outside his cage, forcing Uriah to reach through the bars with his boot before scooping up the stone.

The rock was a remnant of the wall, with sharp edges lining the corners. Uriah spent a few minutes further sharpening the stone against the rusty bars, until it was sharp enough to draw blood. He pressed it against the lump behind his right ear and pushed hard. The pain was intense and Uriah felt a trickle of blood flowing down his neck. Thankfully, there wasn't much of it. Uriah completed the inch-long incision and cupped his hand over the wound.

Despite the sharp pain that shot through his neck, Uriah gritted his teeth and jabbed the injury; he found the plastic edge of the double-chambered ampoule beneath the fold of flesh. The agony flared, but he pulled the ampoule free of the skin pouch; he then spent a moment breathing hard while keeping his hand pressed against his neck. When the bleeding stopped completely, Uriah gently cracked open the ampoule's seal and removed the metal splinters hidden inside.

Before Uriah could react, someone fired a shot, followed by another. It was enough to startle him; he almost dropped the ampoule.

The gunfire continued, but it was coming from outside. Shouts followed the gunfire, as did crowds of people screaming. It was a gun battle.

With little time to spare, Uriah withdrew the blue splinter from its sheath and gripped its disc-like head between his forefinger and thumb. He then reached through the bars closest to the cage door and felt around for the lock. When he finally found it, after some fumbling, he jammed the splinter into the door's lock and pressed the disc head as hard as he could. He let go of the splinter when he felt the flash of heat from it. A second later, the splinter consumed itself with a tiny pop, melting the lock in a quick chemical flash. The interior of the lock dissolved and the door unlocked.

Uriah shoved his way through the door, aware now that the gunfire was increasing in volume. More shooters were joining the fight.

What the hell is going on out there? Uriah wondered. He raced to the wall of the chamber, adjacent to the door, and listened. The gunfire continued, growing in pitch and fury. Uriah felt naked without any firearms, but he wasn't defenceless; at least not entirely. He withdrew the

red splinter from the ampoule and kept that between his fingers. The gunfire outside grew worse.

Both Slag's and Rival's men, were shouting to one another as they raced to the entrance. The temple itself was under barrage by heavy weapons that sent shudders through the stone walls; dust trickled down and coated the air itself.

Uriah slipped out of the chamber and into the shadows of the corridor. Ahead, the passageway opened up into the main chapel of the temple. The chapel served as the heart of the temple. From its cross-shaped floor, smaller passages radiated outward, while the entrance lay at the foot of the nave. Uriah, however, was further along the length of one wall, just below the corner of the transept.

Columns, both broken and untouched, lined the length of the nave and transept in tight formation and spread the height of the tall arched ceiling. Once out of the corridor, Uriah kept his back flush against the temple wall where the columns hid him in darkness. He allowed himself a glimpse towards the entrance, where Black Rats and Soulsplitters held the line. At their feet lay numerous bodies, including those of well-built Escher who'd managed to charge the line.

The Escher are attacking, Uriah thought before a chuckle escaped his lips. That's what you earn from supping with Orlocks, Rival.

More men raced to the entrance while a couple of those wounded were forced from their position. All were preoccupied with holding the double doors, which the various Escher gangers hammered with heavy bolt weapons that tore at the masonry and slowly widened the entryway.

Uriah continued his way along the wall, finally reaching the corner where the transepts split from either side of the chapel's nave. He waited, trying to determine the best escape. Unfortunately, if there were any exits to be had, only Rival's men would know about them.

The battle continued with grenade explosions rattling the temple interior and sending more dust raining down on everyone's heads. Uriah suppressed his coughs and watched carefully while a large Black Rat Goliath appeared from a passageway adjacent to the empty transept chapel. He gathered four men racing to the entrance and motioned for them to follow.

'.. .from behind...' Uriah heard the man say.

My escape, Uriah thought. They're going to come up behind the Escher. Uriah waited for the men to vanish into the corridor before he darted across the transept and followed after them.

THE CORRIDOR TWISTED and turned like a fire-blackened vein. It opened in chambers and intersected more tunnels as it wound its way through. The gangers carried bright-sticks, and Uriah followed the distant glow reflecting off the walls.

As Uriah approached one corner, he suddenly realised that the reflected lights were growing in intensity. Someone was approaching. Uriah doubled back, barely managing to duck into a side corridor when someone turned the corner. Breath held, Uriah waited for the ganger to pass. He was surprised when Rival marched past, intent on reaching the main chapel.

Uriah's indecision lasted the briefest of seconds. Rival was alone; he wouldn't get another chance. *Then again,* Uriah wondered to himself, *was it worth going after Rival at this time?*

Part of Uriah thirsted for revenge, but that was not the part that drove him. Rival was an enemy who knew his identity, and Uriah couldn't afford having another Slag in his life.

Splinter in hand, Uriah darted out of the corridor and padded silently after Rival. It was difficult, however. Rival walked with purpose, his legs in quick motion. Uriah had no choice but to rush up behind him; he was not as silent as he would have wished.

Rival turned just as Uriah slammed into him. Both men struck the wall hard, but Rival was obviously better trained in combat and in better health than his foe. Rival swung and popped Uriah hard in the jaw. Uriah's world sparkled under the hard blow before dimming at the edges. His grip on Rival's vest slackened. Rival pressed the matter and grabbed Uriah by the neck in a one-handed chokehold. He slammed him into wall repeatedly until Uriah could no longer stand. Uriah dropped to the floor, breathing hard; starbursts of white light cluttered his vision; Rival stood over him.

'I don't care what Slag says,' Rival said, breathing hard. He pulled a bolt pistol from his waistband. 'I don't like houseguests and you overstayed your welcome.'

Thanks,' Uriah said, out of breath himself. 'I needed a pistol. In fact, is that mine?'

That it is,' Rival said, studying the weapon- 'Not that you need it now. I just like the poetry of it - killing you with your own weapon.'

That is poetic. You sure you can aim properly with one eye?' Uriah asked, pointing to Rival's eye patch.

'Let's find out,' Rival said. He pointed the pistol at Uriah.

'Your aim seems good,' Uriah said, dusting himself off and appearing calm. Too bad you died about ten seconds ago.'

Rival threw Uriah a questioning look before shaking his head. He cocked the pistol and was about to pull the trigger when tremors overtook his body. Rival's good eye widened as he realised Uriah had done something to him. Uriah used the moment to his advantage and kicked Rival in the knees. The ganger went down, howling in pain as his kneecap shattered at the end of Uriah's boot.

The tremors were now crippling, and Rival shook uncontrollably on the ground. His howl turned to grunts as Uriah clamped his hand over Rival's mouth; the ganger was too weak to fight back. Uriah took the gun from Rival; after ensuring nobody was coming to the gang leader's rescue, and stared him straight in the eye.

'I figure every man has a right to know what killed him,' With that, Uriah removed the small splinter that he'd rammed into Rival's bicep when he tackled him.

He showed it to the gang leader as the Goliath's tremors slowed and finally stopped. Rival lay absolutely still, a prisoner in his own body.

'Nasty little poison, this,' Uriah said. 'Kills all muscle control in your body. Your outside flesh is essentially dead, your organs untouched. You're living inside a corpse's shell. Soon, your lungs will stop breathing, leaving all but your brain untouched. You'll suffocate to death, aware of it all.'

Rival didn't react, his face an emotionless mask.

'But unlike you,' Uriah whispered, noting the colour leaving Rival's face, his one eye filled with horrible awareness, 'I'm not a cruel man,' Uriah raised the pistol to Rival's forehead and fired one shot into his brain.

The shot echoed off the wall before melting into the sounds of nearby gunfire. Uriah realised the fight was drawing closer. The Escher had penetrated the temple and the battle was spreading everywhere.

After closing Rival's one good eye, Uriah took two ammo clips from him. He had just managed to stand and gain his bearings when gangers - Orlocks and Goliaths - entered the corridor from the temple area. Uriah hesitated, but the gangers were preoccupied with exchanging gunfire with their pursuers. The Escher were pushing back the male gangers.

Uriah turned and ran down the corridor, away from the fight.

'Hey!' someone behind him shouted.

Uriah ignored the voice, but he hunched over just in case. He was around the corner when the first shot rang out. It didn't slow him down in the slightest. Uriah followed the corridor, praying it wouldn't branch off before it reached the exit. Shots continued to ring out behind him, always too late, fortunately Uriah was tired of being shot at. The good news was that while he hadn't turned around to see who was shooting at him, it sounded like a single pursuer who'd broken away from the pack.

After rounding one turn, Uriah spun around and aimed down the corridor, using the passageway's corner as cover. A single Goliath ganger came around the bend in hot pursuit, not expecting to run headlong into his quarry. Uriah fired a single shot, right into the meat of the man's thigh. He went down, grunting in pain; his heavy bolter clattered to the floor, several feet from him. The Goliath crawled forward to grab his weapon, but Uriah was already on top of it with his pistol aimed at the ganger's head.

'Do you want to die?' Uriah asked.

The wide-eyed ganger shook his head; his long black ponytail flopped around like a dying snake. Uriah kicked away the heavy bolter, suddenly aware that the gunfire was drawing closer again.

'Rival stole some of my equipment. What did he do with it?'

The ganger seemed confused by the question. He shrugged. Uriah responded by drawing closer to the man, his pistol barrel centimetres from his face. The ganger flinched.

'I told Rival I wasn't a cruel man,' Uriah said. 'Don't make a liar of me.'

'I'm sorry, I don't know where it is,' the ganger said.

'Did Rival follow Slag's instructions?' Uriah asked. 'Did he send men out after my friend?'

'I - I think so,' the ganger said. 'Before the attack Rival sent a bunch of guys to capture someone.'

'Damn it,' Uriah said, hissing.

'Please don't kill me,' the ganger pleaded. 'I got nothing to do with your friend.'

The gunfight sounded right around the comer.

'I'm not going to kill you,' Uriah said. 'I'm sure the Escher will see to that if you remain.'

Uriah turned and ran back down the corridor. No gunshots followed him, not that he expected any. Instead, he followed the twisting corridor until it reached a set of stone stairs that rose up to meet a large door one storey above. He took the stairs and, after a few seconds examining the featureless door, pressed his shoulder against one corner. It swivelled open and Uriah walked into hell.

THE FIGHT CONTINUED outside, with the Black Rats and Soulsplitters trying desperately to escape. The Escher pressed their attack inside and outside the temple. Inside, the fight was done. Outside, was pure pandemonium.

The thick crowds surged away from the fight, either seeking shelter in stores, or escaping along the corkscrew path. In their wake, bodies lay everywhere, some the victims of indiscriminate fire and explosions, others crushed against walls or trampled underfoot. While the immediate level was relatively free of innocents, those on the two storeys above and below the temple still hoped to escape. The mob of people collapsed into denser clusters of desperate people trying to move, but there was only so much pushing to be done before folks pushed back. Fights broke out between the escapees and those who didn't understand the situation.

As Uriah surveyed the chaos, a steady trickle of bodies fell from the upper tiers - unfortunates forced over the railing by the mob displacing the crowd. By the end of the fight, Uriah wouldn't have been surprised to hear that a few hundred had fallen to their deaths. Still, this was not the time to mourn their plight. A wall of people blocked either end of the corkscrew path while a firefight still raged in the area; Uriah was trapped with no time to lose.

There must be another way out, Uriah thought, darting from alcove to alcove; he was still in the alley just off the main strip. Over the side? Uriah wondered. He was only five levels up, which meant the drop was

certainly easier than the climb. Unfortunately, the strip of street between the alley and the railing was heavily contested. A pack of Orlocks and Goliaths were using the lip of the alley for cover while they exchanged gunfire with the Escher. They hadn't turned around to notice Uriah, fortunately, but neither could he race past them without earning several easy shots to his back.

The Escher, Uriah realised. They had been coming up behind him earlier. Uriah glanced around the alley, desperate for a hiding place. The building extended from floor to ceiling, so there was no scampering to the rooftop. The doors in the alley were likewise shut and well-bolted. Uriah ran back the way he had come, racing past the hidden door into the temple. Still, there was little cover to be had. Even the lack of trash surprised him.

Trash, Uriah realised. Where's the build-up of trash? Then he saw it; at the far end of the alley was a trash chute and Uriah's hopes for escape.

The secret door to the temple swivelled open behind Uriah. He barely heard it and glanced back in time to see an Escher poking her head outside; she was looking away from him, down the alley in the opposite direction. Uriah ducked into another alcove, hoping she wouldn't turn around in time. He pressed himself face first into the corner of the door, trying to blend into the alcove's shadow.

Uriah heard nothing at first - then movement behind his door. In a truly absurd moment, he heard a voice whisper from beyond the door: 'Who's there?'

Uriah said nothing; he didn't want to attract attention to his position. He hoped the female gangers had noticed the gun battle at the lip of the alley, but he wasn't even sure the Escher weren't heading his way already. He dared not move in either case.

'I know someone's out there,' the voice beyond the door hissed. 'Go away! Or I'll blast you through the door!'

'Shut up!' Uriah said in a low voice. 'There are Escher outside!'

'I know!' the voice said, snapping back. 'You'll bring them to me. Go away or I'll shoot!'

'You shoot,' Uriah whispered through the door, 'and they'll come for certain.'

There was a momentary silence from the other side. Uriah was ready to breathe again when he saw the movement of shadows through the crack

between the door and the doorframe. His senses screamed for him to escape; he quickly backed away from the door and nearly fell from the alcove itself when a long, thin blade pushed through the door's crack.

They're trying to stab me! Uriah realised indignantly before peering down the passageway again.

A small group of Escher had snuck into the alley, and were now taking up sniping points behind the Orlocks and Goliaths.

They'll be cut to ribbons, Uriah realised. Worse yet they won't last long enough for me to make my escape unnoticed. He needed them engaged.

Uriah waited until the Escher moved into their final firing position; they raised their weapons for the kill.

'Look out!' Uriah screamed from the alcove and fired a shot over the gangers' heads.

The Escher spun around, surprised, momentarily forgetting their ambush. The Soulsplitters and Black Rats did the same and suddenly realised they'd been flanked. The male gangers spun around with their guns facing their female counterparts. The female gangers remembered their real adversaries and turned to meet their original targets. They all opened fire at the same time. The alley lit up with muzzle flashes and bullet arcs.

Taking a deep breath, Uriah jammed the pistol into his waistband and ran into the alley with bullets screaming past him. He was in the thick of it, no doubt, and felt the heat of several rounds pass close enough to burn his skin or clothing. He focused on the trash chute, desperate to reach it in time. One bullet nicked his shoulder, another his arm. Nobody was aiming for him specifically. It was the nature of wild fire.

Uriah reached the mouth of the large trash chute and paused long enough to pull the door down. Three shots struck the wall next to him; he leapt in, legs first. The world slipped out from beneath his feet, and his stomach lurched from the sudden plunge. He shot out his arms to the opposite walls of the chute, hoping to slow his plummet. His palms skipped over the metal surface, stuttering on the dry portions and slipping on grimy coatings of mould.

It all happened so quickly. He fell at blinding speeds before finally crashing into a pile of refuse. Before Uriah could recover, he tumbled down the two-storey filth-slope of trash, striking hard objects along the

way and cutting his arm against jagged metal. The smell was horrible and overwhelming. It dug deep into the back of his nostrils and it coated him in its fetid, decaying stench.

Uriah finally came to rest at the bottom of the slope. The air was thick with flies and the entire floor was dark. He was on the kilometre-wide composting floor, the decomposing hell that lay just beneath the pit of the Anachrolis District. Here, the waste and debris pyramids would be left to decompose for several months before gatherers finally collected the vile waste as fertilizer for the fungus farms.

Uriah retched at the smell and tried desperately to cover his nose and mouth, but the filth was soaking into his clothing. He felt light-headed and nauseous; methane and carbon monoxide build-up he realised; he stumbled across the solid lake of trash to reach one of the exit hatches.

Fortunately, he was close to the wall and a set of stairs leading to an airlock. He stumbled up the stairs, his vision growing blurry and his head pounding. He reached the hatch and mustered the strength to spin the door wheel. It popped open, and Uriah stumbled through before shutting it behind him. He fell to the grated floor, breathing in huge gasps of oily air. It tasted foul and bitter, but he could still breathe it in.

'Oi! You ain't supposed ta be 'ere!' a man shouted. He was a large, old man covered in dirt, his overalls black from it.

'Water!' Uriah groaned on the floor, clutching his wounds. 'For - for the love of the Machine God, throw - throw water on me!'

'Aye, ya are smellin' ripe there!' the man said, laughing. 'How much d'ya think dat water's worth ta ya?'

'I don't know,' Uriah said, pulling the pistol from his waistband. 'How much does one of these bullets cost?' he asked.

'Sheesh,' the old man replied. 'Ya got no sense o' fair bargainin'.'

'Not right now, no,' Uriah replied, still suffering under his own stench. 'I tell you what. Get me water and show me the way back to the surface, and I'll make it worth your while.'

'Throw in somethin' extra and I'll tend ta dose wound's a yours 'fore they infect.' the man replied.

'Deal,' Uriah said, slowly recovering.

A moment later, a hard jet of hose-water hit Uriah and slowly blasted the stink off him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

> If it comes down to your life or that of an asset's, always
> save yourself. No war was ever won because the general
> sacrificed his life to save those of his soldiers.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

THE OLD MAN had done a decent job on Uriah's wounds. The stitch-work was good enough to bind them closed, and the antibiotic salve was scrubbing his injuries clean with eye-watering efficiency. Uriah felt like he was on his second-wind, though he wasn't sure how long that would last. His body was badly hurt, and he was certain it couldn't withstand much more punishment before he collapsed.

Uriah rode his cycle hard, kicking the green monster into a long sprint. The wind racing past him did much to dry his clothes, but it also set a small chill in his bones. Uriah was going to need a full range of Van Saar remedies to stave off the certain pneumonia.

For now he had no other concern than saving his ally, Voice.

He prayed he wasn't too late.

Uriah raced his heavy bike through container alleys, a green bandit screaming through the grid of streets.

Faded lot numbers streaked past him, but he'd been here often enough to remember the way to Voice's lair.

Cutting through one alley, then another, Uriah was nearing the home stretch; his heart sank when he saw smoke billowing into the dark sky. The black column rose from the vicinity of Voice's container. Uriah drove his wrist forward, gunning the throttle while he popped the clutch. His tires screeched and he wanted to scream alongside them.

Uriah nearly bounced off a container as he pulled the bike out from a tight turn. Voice's smoking residence was directly ahead; he counted three damaged and smoking bikes lying on the ground out front. Five blackened bodies also lay on the ground, the corpses still smouldering and lit with tiny embers. Uriah pulled alongside the container, pistol in hand, and studied the damage. The walls and roof were shredded, flowers of twisted metal blossomed outward like petals around an exit wound. Smoke poured skyward in heavy braids.

It took Uriah a moment to understand the carnage. An explosion from inside had ripped the container apart. By the damage to the bikes, they weren't expecting the explosion either. It was a booby trap set by Voice. Uriah quickly studied the interior of the container; it was empty except for the destroyed remnants of small equipment.

'A decoy,' Uriah muttered to himself. Voice was using the container as a relay station and drop-off point for her clients. 'Where are you?' Uriah said to himself. Voice had to be nearby to pick up money and the items dropped off. Possibly some place overlooking this one. Uriah scanned the area, looking for some telltale sign of Voice's presence. That's when he heard something over the rumble of his bike's engines. He killed the motor, the sounds of crackling fire from the giant storage container his only companions.

Gunshots rang out nearby and scattered in echoes through the alleys. The direction of the sound was hard to pin down, but the muzzle flashes were beacons to his eyes. Uriah kicked the bike into a hard, throaty roar and shredded street as he took off. He accelerated down Underhive streets, popping the brakes and swerving hard at the last second to take the corners.

More gunshots, this time muzzle flashes dancing off the containers in the next alley. Uriah banked his cycle hard, turning in to the intersection and almost losing control. Up ahead, three bikes threaded the alleyways. Two of the heavy black bikes were Soulsplitters by the double-headed axe

adorning the flags that fluttered behind them. The third yellow bike was smaller and more nimble, but definitely a bite-size morsel for the two Orlocks. A well-built woman in a green tank-top, with a bald head save for a long ponytail rode the yellow chopper.

Voice,' Uriah muttered.

Uriah gunned the throttle and gave chase after the train of bikes. Voice was surviving only by wit and manoeuverability. She took tight turns, dodging and weaving around objects in the hopes of losing her pursuers. No such luck. The two heavier bikes, while slower, dug well into the turns and never missed a beat.

This was a chase of pure speed. The drivers didn't dare pull their weapons and fire on one another; at least not without risking a wipe-out. Instead, they focused on keeping the throttle open and the wind screaming in their ears. Uriah banked and turned with the three bikes. Although he was a distant fourth, he was drawing closer to the chase. Unfortunately, the Orlocks were also drawing closer to Voice.

Uriah approached the rearmost Soulsplitter bike and gunned his engine. The Orlock driver must have heard or sensed movement to his side, because he veered away from Uriah's bike as it pulled parallel to the ganger.

The goggle-wearing Orlock glanced at Uriah twice before his eyes widened; he recognized the Delaque handler. Uriah accommodated him by waving back. The Orlock was caught off guard, enough for Uriah to swerve into the ganger. It was deliberate and timed. Uriah never intended to hit the other bike.

The Soulsplitter swung away again right into the open door of a container. The door slammed shut from the impact, but the Orlock lost control of the bike and hit the ground hard. The rider tumbled along the road, breaking bones and grinding away flesh on his mad slide. His bike hurtled into another container, exploding on impact.

'One down,' Uriah muttered.

The lead bike ganger saw his compatriot go down in flames. Voice did as well. She did a double-glance when she saw Uriah, but neither her nor the last ganger slowed their chase. Uriah accelerated once more.

Judging by her driving, Voice was trying to keep the Orlock from overtaking her while still keeping Uriah within sight. Uriah waited for her

to turn again before signalling her to drive straight ahead. She complied.

Voice drove straight through the grid of streets. She was pulling ahead of the Orlock ganger who, in turn, could now shoot at her. Fortunately, that's what Uriah had hoped. He too was drawing a bead on the Orlock.

Voice continued driving straight, though she weaved to avoid the gunfire. The Soulsplitter peppered the road ahead with a fast-repeating bolter that sprayed out a trail of shots. Uriah took aim; his shot had to count or the Orlock would realise he was the hunted.

The Soulsplitter zipped into Uriah's line of sight. Uriah fired as the ganger ripped loose another barrage and struck the Orlock dead centre of the spine; the ganger was equally lucky, striking Voice's bike and leg.

Uriah watched in horror as both riders lost control of their bikes and struck the ground. Voice fell and tumbled forward, her arms wrapped around her unprotected head. Uriah could do nothing but watch as Voice slowed to a halt, her body battered and bleeding, chunks of skin left behind on the road. The Orlock too had come to a halt, his bike a smoking ruin and straddling his still body.

Uriah was off his bike before it had even slowed to a halt. It crashed to the ground as he raced to Voice's side.

Voice was in a bad way, her arms torn and eaten by the road and her leg broken badly enough to see bone. She was barely conscious. Uriah tore off his shirt and jacket, ripping what he could into strips to stop the bleeding.

'Jester,' Voice mumbled in half-groans. 'You're hurt.'

'I'm fine,' he said. 'Hang on. Don't quit on me.'

Voice said nothing, instead her head lolled from one side to the other.

After binding the open wounds and scrapes as best he could, Uriah studied the area around him. He spotted several shafts of iron lying between nearby containers. He retrieved them and set about making a splint. The tricky part was going to be resetting her broken leg. Unfortunately, if he wanted to move her, he had little choice.

This is going to hurt,' he said before jerking the bone and leg back into place. Voice howled in pain, an anguished cry that bounced off the canyon walls. Uriah winced, but Voice promptly fell unconscious. Uriah worked on the splint and watched the makeshift bindings become soaked in blood. He didn't have much time to save her.

* * *

WITH VOICE TIED around his waist, her arms over his shoulders and her hands bound tight, Uriah navigated the Underhive's streets. It was difficult steering, but he managed.

"Voice. Voice!' Uriah shouted. 'Stay awake. Talk to me.'

Voice mumbled something in his ear - something lost to the wind.

'I can't hear you. Louder!'

'Where are you taking me?'

'To a healer,' he said. 'She operates in the Underhive. It isn't much further. Stay with me.'

'Not going anywhere,' she mumbled before Uriah felt her head droop against his shoulders.

Uriah nudged his shoulder, forcing her head back up. He needed her to focus on something, anything. His undershirt was growing wet with her blood. 'Stay with me, Voice. I - I still owe you a question!' he said.

'Four,' Voice muttered.

'What?'

'Owe me four questions,' she replied.

Uriah laughed. 'Good girl,' he said. 'Keep it up. What's your question?'

Voice was silent, her head dropping to Uriah's shoulder.

'Voice!'

She was startled, her head lifting from his shoulders.

'You scared me,' he said. What's your question?'

'Name,' Voice finally said. 'What's your real name?'

Uriah hesitated. He'd only revealed his full identity to one person outside House Delaque, and that was Morgane. Even Soren never knew his real name. Then again, that was a lesson taught to him by Percal: *Never trust.*

Voice was going limp again.

'All right!' Uriah shouted, trying to grab her attention. 'Storm. My name's Uriah Storm.'

Voice laughed. It was weak, but it had spirit. 'Should have stuck with Jester,' she mumbled.

Uriah laughed alongside her until she went limp again.

WITHIN MINUTES OF arriving with Uriah, Voice was strapped into a gurney with a coagulant accelerant piped into her arm. The nurse was wheeling her into the bowels of Mother's Den for emergency work while Uriah and Mother ran alongside the gurney.

'Look at you, the mother hen,' Mother said.

Uriah stared into the blue eyes of the pale and plump old woman. 'Save her Mother,' he said.

'I saved you plenty of times, m'boy,' Mother said, pushing open Voice's eyelids. She nodded. 'She needs care now,' Mother told the nurse. The nurse, her skin dark like obsidian, nodded.

'An Orlock gang is after her,' Uriah said.

Mother pulled aside her blood-splattered grey smock; a mean-looking bolter was tucked into the waistband of her pants. 'Let them come,' she said. 'Been dealing with their kind since long before someone was wiping your ass.'

Uriah nodded. He knew Mother was tougher than most, himself included.

'How are those legs of yours?' Mother asked.

'I'm running, aren't I,' Uriah said with a tired smile. 'But,' he added when he saw her face redden, 'if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be walking. You have my eternal gratitude.'

That's better,' she said, 'now run along so I can tend to this lass.'

Uriah was about to stop and let them continue down the sloping hallway when Voice reached out and grabbed his arm.

'Uri - Jester,' Voice said, correcting herself.

'It's okay,' Uriah responded. 'You're in the best care possible.'

'No,' Voice whispered. 'The implant. I found out. I found out.'

Uriah drew in closer. Voice whispered in his ears.

And the pieces fell into place with a crescendo of hammer strokes...

'YOU CERTAIN?' MORGANE asked.

Uriah nodded and winced at the needle being pushed into his neck. 'Ow!' he said.

'Stop squirming,' Morgane said, 'this should accelerate the healing process,' She tended to the wound behind Uriah's neck, sealing it up after

having inserted a new packet. 'Did the ampoules help?'

'Saved my life,' Uriah replied. 'Used the fuse pick to burn open a lock and used the poison needle to kill a frightening man.'

'Well, I've given you the same packet,' Morgane replied, 'though I can't promise that the tissue over the pouch won't scar over. It'll be harder to open the next time. Are you certain you don't want another pouch implanted behind the other ear? I can arrange for the same surgeon.'

'Positive,' Uriah said, gripping the table's side. The table was littered with bloodied bandages; this was not the ideal place to be handling this, but they had little choice; another clandestine rendezvous with Morgane, in another inn of questionable repute. 'Inserting the pouch is painful enough. I don't need more of those things in my body.'

'Done,' Morgane said, patting the wound and dissolving the crusted blood with a salve.

Uriah sighed in relief and almost melted into the chair. In every portion of his body, his muscles ached and protested. Everywhere they could, his joints ached in dull pain. Even his bones throbbed and felt ready to splinter under the weight of his body. Morgane slipped her arm under his armpit and helped Uriah to the bed. He collapsed on the sheets his head spinning from fatigue.

'How's your friend?' Morgane asked.

'Voice,' Uriah mumbled, eyes heavy enough to close. 'Mother stabilised her. She'll live. Hurt, but alive.'

'That's good,' Morgane said. She stroked Uriah's hair, which plunged him deeper into sleep.

'Don't,' Uriah muttered.

'Doesn't it feel nice?' Morgane whispered in his ear.

'Making me sleepy,' Uriah muttered. 'Have to find Corsikan.'

'Corsikan has gone into hiding,' Morgane said. 'The Orlocks are no longer concealing their agenda. They've put out a hefty bounty on the ganger. No one's claimed it yet.'

'I know,' Uriah said. 'Have to find him first,' He tried to get up, but collapsed back into the bed. 'I can't - I can't get up. So tired.'

'I know, love,' Morgane said, kissing him on the forehead. 'The injection I gave you included a hyper-sedative-'

'You drugged me?' Uriah asked, his head swimming.

'Yes, you stubborn mule, I drugged you. It's a Van Saar sedative designed to simulate a full eight hours sleep over the span of an hour. The dreams are fast and pitched, but you will feel rested for the while.'

'But Corsikan,' Uriah said, his fingers slipping from their grip on consciousness.

'Corsikan is in hiding, but I know how you can find him. Now sleep. I'll be here to watch over you. If you trust me, you'll let go.'

Uriah felt himself nod, his neck sluggish. He let go and plunged into a deeper darkness than any sleep he'd ever known.

THE ORLOCK RESEARCH outpost of Stainstrip owed more to machine shops than the relatively sterile facilities of the Van Saar. Oily chains hung from the sleds mounted on ceiling tracks, metal fillings littered the floor and a variety of instruments were crammed against the laboratory's walls. Band saws, mounted chain-blades, drill pistons, compressed tanks of actuator fluid and all kinds of heavy industrial equipment. Where the Van Saar used finesse, the Orlock's Tech-Trust was more about rivets than screws, skin bolts than bone pins, iron than chrome-plated alloys, machetes than scalpels.

In short, Stainstrip exemplified the nature of Orlocks and their heavy-handed approach to technology.

'Well?' the chief Tech-Trust ganger asked, looking over the shoulder of his subordinate.

The subordinate, a beefy man with black hair set in a crew cut, stopped staring into the mounted magnifying lens and swivelled it away. He looked back at the white-haired Tech-Trust chief with a sneer.

'Stop that, will you,' the subordinate responded. 'Hate you looking over my shoulder while I work.'

'You'll adapt,' the Tech-Trust chief responded absently. He was still looking over his subordinate's shoulder, studying the implant.

The subordinate shook his head and went back to studying the leg implant through the magnifier. 'I can handle this,' he muttered.

'Then perhaps you'd like to explain that to Slag.'

'Slag?' the subordinate said, straightening up. 'This comes from Slag?'

'Indeed,' the older man replied. 'Now, would you like to continue?'

The subordinate swallowed hard and returned back to studying the implant. He proceeded far more cautiously this time.

'I've cracked the housing,' the subordinate said.

'Good. Take your time. No mistakes.'

The two men worked in silence, slowly removing the articulated exo-plating on the implant, peeling away the exterior until they'd opened the core. The ganger chief handed the stripped exo-plating to a messenger who'd just arrived, a young man with blond hair.

Take this to the Iron Ferriers,' the old man said. 'See if they can't fathom its metals.'

The messenger departed as the subordinate snapped his fingers at the Tech-Trust chief.

'Hang on,' the subordinate said. What have we here?' He was studying the internal mechanisms of the implant.

The old man leaned in to look at the device. "What is it?' he asked.

The devices within the implant. I'm - I'm not sure I understand meir function.'

'Hm. We'll salvage what we can but-' the Tech-Trust chief paused, looking through the magnifier. Wait. What's that? I've never seen that before in an implant.'

Both men leaned in, taking a closer look at the small chip soldered into the wall of the implant.

'It's not connected to anything,' the subordinate said.

'Pry it loose,' the older man said.

The subordinate extracted a set of fine tweezers from the table and gently fitted *the* prongs around the chip. Carefully, he pulled the chip from its unusual socket...

THE MESSENGER RACED through the halls of Stainstrip, on his way to finding the metal-smiths of the Orlocks, the Iron Ferriers. Suddenly, thunder shook the walls of Stainstrip, knocking the Orlocks off their feet. The messenger fell as well, the exo-plates spilling to the floor.

It took everyone a moment to realise the thunder was an explosion in the machine labs. As the messenger turned to look back down the corridor he'd just left, he saw the plasma fire flood across the ceiling. It was fluid and

angry. It scorched all in its path, turning walls instantly black and setting ablaze those caught beneath it. The screams were instant, though the messenger couldn't discern his own screams from the roar of the inferno or those of its victims. He cradled his head between his arms, a reflex at the dying moment.

But the heat died upon reaching him. Death did not come. The messenger peered between his own arms. The fire had died out, with him on the threshold of grace. All that was left of the corridor and the sections beyond it was a blackened pit filled with sparks from exposed wires. The messenger felt like he was staring down someone's charred and charcoal throat. The machine labs beyond had been engulfed in the explosion.

URIAH LAIRED IN the deepest darkest ocean, foetal and floating; dreams passed over him, mercurial and comfortingly muted. Suddenly, a single thought emerged, the first to find root in his thoughts in what felt to be an eternity. *Corsikan.*

Uriah felt propelled upward and rushed up to the lit surface.

He broke through the waters and found himself sitting up in bed. He was awake in a moment of instant clarity. Morgane sat on a chair next to the bed, reading something from a display pad. His bolter pistol lay on her armrest. She smiled at him.

Uriah felt rested, his body aching from some long sleep but definitely lessened of its burden. His spine felt coiled and he accommodated it with a stretch and a yawn that travelled the length of his body.

'Hello, love,' Morgane said. 'Do you forgive me?'

'How long was I unconscious?' Uriah asked, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed.

'An hour and a half,' she said. You were more tired than I anticipated.'

An hour and a half,' Uriah repeated, marvelling at the infusion of energy. 'I feel incredible.'

'Be careful, love,' Morgane said. She stood from the chair and brought the pistol to him. The infusion is temporary. The dmg I administered is masking your body's pain. When it wears off, and it will, then everything you felt before will be revisited. You'll need real rest, then. I just - I couldn't bear to see you so exhausted, so hurt.'

Uriah nodded. He took die pistol and kissed Morgane on the cheek. 'All is forgiven, then. How long do I have?'

A day,' Morgane replied.

Then I'll make the most of it,' he said. He dressed himself, buttoning the fresh black shirt and jacket Morgane had purchased for him on her way over. 'Now, you mentioned finding Corsikan?'

'Yes,' Morgane replied. 'Corsikan is in hiding, correct? And the Orlocks won't stop hunting him for as long as he...?' Morgane asked, trailing off.

'For as long as he has the implant,' Uriah concluded. 'Oh, why didn't I see mat? Corsikan's a hunted man so long as he wears the implant. All he has to do is find someone to remove the implant and hand mat over to the Soulsplitters. And he's safe again.'

'So?' Morgane said. 4Vhere are you going to start?'

'We're creatures of habit,' Uriah said. 'So Corsikan will likely approach a bio-surgeon he already knows, someone from his patch.'

'Sounds like a plan,' Morgane said with a smile.

'I wish it were that easy,' Uriah said. 'If you've thought of this, then so has Slag. This is still a race, my love, and the fight for the prize is greater than ever.'

'Even with what Voice told you? I believe she's right.'

'As do I,' Uriah said. "Which is precisely why I have to find the implant first.'

'Is there anything 1 can do to help?' Morgane asked.

'No, sadly,' Uriah said. 'I have to see this tiling through. But I'm better prepared for Voice's information and I'm better armed for your help. I'll see you when this is said and done.'

'That you will,' Morgane said, kissing Uriah on the lips. 'Be careful, love.'

'Thank you,' Uriah said, 'despite my stubbornness.'

'DON'T TELL ME - another pistol lost,' Weapon's Master Coryin said when he saw Uriah walking towards him. The noise on the firing range was loud.

'No,' Uriah said. He pulled Coryin along with a tug at his elbow and whispered, 'You're rated to defuse and arm explosives, are you not?'

'I am,' Coryin said, squinting.

'Good,' Uriah said, 'then I need your help with a matter. I need a piece of equipment off the record.'

Coryin sighed. 'All right, Uriah. What is it you need?'

DERRIK SEEMED SURPRISED to see Uriah walking through the door. 'What spat you up?' Derrik asked, spying Uriah's new injuries and bruises.

'Are your walls deaf?' Uriah asked.

'As deaf as a nine-hundred year old mother hen,' Derrik said. 'Close the door.'

Uriah did before leaning against Derrik's desk. 'I need help finding someone,' Uriah said.

Derrik nodded and looked at his assistant. She walked over and deposited a folder on his desk. She smiled at Uriah before returning to her seat.

'Perchance,' Derrik asked, handing the folder to Uriah, is it someone named Corsikan?'

Uriah's eyes went wide. 'How did you know?' He immediately flipped through the pages, studying the documents within.

'Kaden came in a few hours ago requesting any information we had on Corsikan. I kept it aside in case it related to your current predicament. This is the *complete* file.'

Uriah glanced up to study Derrik's face. The complete file? You saying Kaden was not given all the information?'

'Some documents might have slipped loose,' Derrik said.

'I'm clumsy that way,' Derrik's assistant replied with a grin. i could kiss you both, twice over,' Uriah said, laughing.

'I'd prefer you didn't,' Derrik replied.

His assistant said nothing, but her smile stretched across her cherry-red face.

'I assume he's one of the optographs you gave me to study?' Derrik asked.

Uriah nodded. Yes, the last man to take an implant, I believe.'

'We had plenty of intelligence on him, but we never had any optographs before. Sorry we missed him.'

'No worries. I do have one last question to ask you, though,' Uriah said.

'Ask away,' Derrik replied.

'I asked you about Elias, Percal's protege who was executed?'

'I remember. What of him?' is it possible he wasn't the traitor others believed him to be?'

'What do you mean?' Derrik asked.

'I think you know exactly what I mean,' Uriah said smiling, is it possible Elias wasn't operating alone?'

Ah,' Derrik said. He leaned back and rested his hands behind his head. 'Now there's a question whose answer might be equally deadly.'

'I know,' Uriah said, 'which is why I'm asking it.'

'AH right,' Derrik said. 'I don't think he was alone, but you better not make any such accusations publicly, not without protecting yourself.'

'Don't worry,' Uriah said. 'I'm working on that part right now...'

CHAPTER TWELVE

> Turn everything you have into a weapon and you'll never be defenceless.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

ALONE URIAH THOUGHT to himself. *Without Voice's companionship and guidance, I am alone in this.* The thought bothered Uriah; Percal had taught him to be self-reliant, and for years he was. Then he met Morgane and slowly, she managed to slip past his defences. He wanted her too. He was tired of being alone, though he never vocalised that particular sentiment.

It was always something there, in the back of my thoughts, but refusing to speak aloud.

Then came Voice. Uriah needed Voice's help with an assignment, and she came highly recommended. Her skills with the Machine Spirit were extraordinary, nothing short of something he'd expect from a gifted Van Saar tech. Even if Voice never believed in the Machine Spirit, she still managed her way around it.

Uriah continued using Voice in different assignments, but the truth was, he didn't need to, not truly. He liked the company. He enjoyed the presence of another person's voice in a job that demanded his solitary involvement. It didn't occur to Uriah until now, but:

He needed Voice. He didn't want to die alone, with nobody knowing his fate or his last words.

Voice was welcome company on his assignments. She reminded him that he was still human when it was so very easy to become inhuman. And that's where Percal had failed. By forcing isolation and distrust upon him, Percal drove Uriah to seek out the very opposite.

Percal's good at what he does Uriah thought to himself, good enough to control reactions and even outlook. Eventually, however, he loses control. He cannot maintain that hold because there comes a time when control slips. And when it slips, everything that it held back pours out in a flood. And therein lay Percal's failures and weaknesses.

Percal had misjudged Uriah, and he betrayed him; it now appeared that Percal was manipulating Uriah into a position where his loyalties could easily be called into question. For what reason, Uriah only suspected at this moment, but the betrayal was there. Now Uriah needed to confirm what Voice had discovered about Jaffa Hur's heart accelerant to tie up the loose ends. With the implant destroyed during Voice's flight from the Soulsplitters, however, Uriah's only hope of corroborating Voice's findings was to find Corsikan and retrieve the last implant - a lung scrubber that neutralised harmful gases and airborne poisons.

Time to end this. Uriah thought.

Uriah exited the tram at a tower station. Immediately, two thick-necked district Enforcers in black carapace body-suits stopped him from taking the stairs to the bottom level.

'Restricted district,' one of them said.

'Appointment,' Uriah replied. 'With Hauser Demlok. He's a-'

'We know who he is,' the other Enforcer said. AVhat's your business?'

Uriah smiled and looked one way, and then another. He offered the two men his profile, showing them the bruised skin and recent wounds.

The two Enforcers looked at each other before the first one motioned Uriah past with a flick of his head.

Uriah headed down the tram tower's stairs and into the well-lit streets of Shina District, Corsikan's turf. The buildings were unusually decorative for this part of the Hive, with small balconies running across their fronts, arched ceilings stretching above the streets, and vendors selling wares from the baskets on their bicycles.

Shina District operated under the aegis of one corporate entity with multiple House partnerships. The local business was water reclamation

and filtration for the rich inhabiting the Spire a mile above, and the Enforcers were a strong presence. The district was supposed to be neutral territory, above the House turf wars because of its importance to the Spire; while the local gangs kept matters civilised, the Enforcers overlooked their activities.

The area seemed calm, a definite change from the chaos of Rival's temple or Corval's building. Uriah knew that would change soon. The information Derrik withheld from Kaden included the names of several acquaintances including a bio-surgeon named Hauser. It wouldn't take Kaden or Slag long to uncover that bit of intelligence, if they realised that Corsikan was trying to remove his implant.

And currently, Uriah had no reason to believe that Slag and Kaden wouldn't reach that conclusion.

Uriah stopped on the edge of the street and reviewed what he knew. Corsikan, unlike the other gangers Uriah had faced, wasn't violent. It didn't mean he wasn't capable of it, but the data on him indicated he served as an arranger. Be it sex, drugs or hard-to-obtain items, Cor-sikan and his gang, the Shina Boys, procured and sold them. Unlike the Goliaths and Orlocks, the Shina Boys rarely engaged in gunplay, though as independent operators they were likely to be well-armed to protect their investments. They'd remained safe thus far, however, because of the strong Enforcer presence in Shina.

Uriah realised this wasn't going to be easy, especially now that Corsikan knew he was being hunted. The situation rested on too many conditionals - would Corsikan remove the implant? Would he come to Hauser for the job? Or were Derrik's files incomplete and Corsikan knew someone who could help him? Perhaps Corsikan had already removed the implant and was long gone. The fact was, Uriah didn't know, but from what Uriah read of the ganger's files, Corsikan was a practical man and likelier to pursue a practical solution. Uriah felt he was on the right track. The habitation complex on the road opposite Uriah was surprisingly extravagant if only in one respect - that of space. Four hab block buildings, ten storeys apiece in a district whose cavernous ceiling measured twenty, each sat at one corner of a three storey annexe. The habitation buildings were made of ferro-iron and concrete, while the annexe was covered by a half-cylindrical skylight made of stained glass under a ferro-iron lattice. Outside the annexe's

double doors, three gigantic fountains sent streams of water high into the air; it was an extravagant display, showing off Shina District's prominence and wealth. Giggling children swept their hands and feet through the blue pools of water.

Uriah surveyed the area and immediately spotted a ganger waiting outside the complex's main door. He looked normal enough and most people might have mistaken him for a concerned parent. Only Uriah saw the unmistakable bulge of a weapon hidden under his coat or the killer's stare he used to assess anyone approaching the building. He didn't appear to be Orlock. He dressed normally and looked relatively clean-cut, much like Corsikan himself. He was definitely a Shina Boy.

That's a good sign, Uriah thought. It means Corsikan might be here as well.

Considering the matter for a moment, Uriah hunched his shoulders and introduced a shuffle into his step; he kept his eyes downcast and walked up to the front double ferro-iron doors of the annexe. The sentry glanced at him once, then promptly ignored him as innocuous. Cool, filtered air struck Uriah as he pushed through the doors and into the central annexe.

The annexe rose three storeys in height to meet the ribbed stained-glass ceiling; there was a strange mural depicting Hive Primus itself with a bucolic landscape surrounding the city. Uriah chuckled to himself; the city exterior was Hell re-imagined on an industrial scale.

The annexe's interior was open, with long tracts of gardens. Carved sculptures of noblemen served as columns that supported the second-storey ledge running the circumference of the annexe. Open stalls ran the length of the second-storey ledge. It was a tranquil place and one of the few obvious gems to be found below Hive Primus's Spire.

Uriah recognized the principle at work here. The conglomerate that ran the water purification plant likely provided this market space. It allowed the spouses of workers to manage their patch of the communal field, either harvesting food and animals for themselves, or selling their goods in the shops on the second floor. The practice kept the workers happy, but importantly, made them and their families more dependent on the conglomerate's good graces.

Uriah studied the market for a moment, impressed by the operations and briefly entertaining the notion of bribing a conglomerate foreman for a

hab here. The scene was certainly pastoral, and it would be nice to find a safe haven for Morgane and himself. Unfortunately, despite the airs here, habs were reserved for high-ranking conglomerate members. All the other workers slept in dormitories.

With a sigh, Uriah tore his eyes from the scenery and shuffled his way toward the north-west building's interior entry. Hauser's operation occupied the entire fourth floor of the building, at the back of the annexe, as part of a legitimate practice. His prominence in this habitation block told Uriah that Hauser's family was well-connected with the Spire or the conglomerate running Shina district. Unlike street surgeons who cobbled together scraps for their clientele in back alleys and abandoned basements, legitimate surgeons were in great demand by wealthy clientele living in or near the Spire. They procured higher-end implants and surgical tools than their street counterparts - who were part mechanic,part butcher - and their choice in living space was a reflection of that.

Uriah headed for the north-west building.

Standing next to the bank of elevators leading to the upper floors were two more men who looked average, but carried themselves with a killer's bearing. Uriah shuffled by them as well, unmolested. He entered the elevator and closed the doors.

No sooner had the doors closed when Uriah immediately pried the punch-code panel open with a knife. With a prayer to the Machine Spirit, Uriah stripped and then crossed two of the wires leading from the panel, sending a shower of sparks to the floor. The elevator was secure, meaning only residents and their invited guests could reach the upper storeys. Uriah was trying to bypass that security measure and prayed the two men standing guard outside the elevators wouldn't notice that this one had yet to move. After a second of short-circuiting the wires, the elevator buttons lit. With a sigh of relief, Uriah punched the sixth floor - two above the one he needed - and sealed up the panel. With so many men on lookout, the floors above were probably clear.

Uriah disembarked on the sixth floor. He was standing in a wide corridor that led straight to iron double-doors and dormitories beyond. To his right were doors leading to the stairwell. To his left, doors to a communal shower block. Uriah entered the block and was immediately grateful to see

that windows lined one wall. Someone was taking a shower in one of the stalls to his left.

Uriah pulled out a small pouch as he walked to the window. He'd prepared well tonight, restocking his inventory of toys with anything and everything he could procure off the books. The windows faced the annexe and the adjoining south-west building, but Uriah had little choice at the moment. He'd have to risk exposure to have his answers. Uriah attached two small suction cups to the glass and, with a glass-cutter, sliced out a pane from the window. He gently pulled on the suction cups' grips and yanked the glass free. After retrieving the suction cups, Uriah was on the metre-wide ledge, praying nobody outside would see him.

Reasoning that each floor was relatively similar in layout, Uriah lowered himself over the ledge to the fifth floor and stared through the windows of the next shower block. A man was washing his face with a rag, but had yet to notice him. Uriah carefully scaled over the ledge of the fifth floor, down to the fourth. The block there was empty.

Uriah walked along the ledge, staring through each window to gauge the lay of the land. The first windows after the bathroom were those overlooking reception. A quick peek and Uriah spotted four heavily armed men sitting around. Their backs were turned so Uriah simply snuck past.

The next four windows belonged to private rooms for recovering patients. All of them were empty.

Hardly surprising considering the current client, Uriah thought. Hauser had probably had to clear his patient roster before admitting Corsikan.

Uriah continued, rounding the building corner. No windows along the way this time. They'd been plascreted over.

Surgical bays, Uriah concluded. He ran across the ledge to the next corner and found the next set of windows. This time, it was a supply room, the window overlooking the stained-glass roof of the annexe.

As good as place as any, Uriah thought. He kept this entry point in mind while he examined the next window. It was Hauser's office, with a gigantic metal desk and volumes of vellum bound books lining the shelves. The room was empty.

Uriah returned to the supply room window and cut the pane out with the suction cups and glass cutter. He slipped inside the rectangular room with its white walls, careful not to disturb the metal racks filled with medical

supplies and sheets. Uriah crept up to the door and listened. The voices on the other side sounded like more men.

'.. .much you think we'll get?' one man asked.

'Not certain. We'll see,' someone answered.

'When they finishing in there?' the first man asked.

'Do I look like a damn bio-surgeon?' the second man answered.

The voices drifted off, tfieir footsteps trailing away. A moment later, everything was silent again. Uriah pulled a retractable wand with a small circular mirror attached to its tip from his belt. He extended the wand to its full length and slipped the mirrored portion beneath the door frame. The hallway outside appeared empty. After collapsing the wand and sheathing it, Uriah opened the door carefully.

To Uriah's left, the hallway continued to Hauser's office before turning the corner towards reception. To his right, the hallways led to double swing doors. The sign read 'No Entry.'

The surgery bays Uriah thought.

Uriah slinked to the double doors and pushed them aside to peer inside. He entered. It was an ante-room separating the operating theatre from the rest of the clinic. To the side was a door marked 'Private,' probably where the doctor prepares himself, Uriah thought. Direcdy ahead was another double door leading to the surgery bay. This time there were two small porthole windows offering a view inside, into the operating theatre. Uriah chanced a look.

Hauser was a tall, skinny man with a widow's peak. On the operating slab in front of him rested the body of Corsikan, his chest cracked open and kept apart by a bloodied chest spreader. Overlooking the process were two more well-groomed men, both of them armed. One was smoking.

That's when the incongruities caught Uriah's attention.

Neither Hauser nor the two men wore masks.

None of the equipment meant to keep Corsikan alive were turned on.

Corsikan himself was bare-faced - no respirator to keep him breathing. In fact, no intravenous tubes to feed him blood or pulmonary wires to keep his heart beating. Corsikan was dead. And Hauser was cutting away the implant with little heed to the surrounding tissue. That's when Uriah heard someone in the hallway behind him yell:

'The Soulsplitters are here for the implant.'

Realisation collided with Uriah enough to sicken him. Corsikan's men had betrayed him for the reward. Now the Orlocks were here, probably with Slag in the lead. And again, Uriah was facing two groups alone.

Not this time Uriah thought to himself with a snarl. He charged into the surgery bay with his bolt pistol pulled. Hauser looked up in shock. The two gangers briefly considered pulling their weapons, but stopped when Uriah pointed his pistol at their faces.

What is this?' the black-haired ganger snarled.

Uriah smiled. I'm not facing two more groups of enemies, he thought to himself. 'Compliments of House Orlock and the Soulsplitters,' Uriah said. 'We've decided we aren't paying for the implant. Now, Doctor Hauser. Hand over the device, please, before you find yourself with a third eye.'

That did it. Both men appeared livid, and Hauser confused.

'We had a deal, Orlock,' the brown-haired ganger with the pony-tail said, his fists clenched to his side.

'Oh, you're naive,' Uriah said, laughing, 'how quaint.'

'Orlocks are here!' someone said, shouting in the hallway behind Uriah.

'Kill them!' the black-haired ganger shouted, dropping to the floor behind the surgical slab. A mortified Hauser followed him down. The brown-haired ganger pulled his Las pistol, but Uriah dropped him with a head shot that echoed off the walls.

Uriah dropped to the floor and spun around in time to shoot another ganger coming through the bay's doors.

'It's a double-cross!' someone in the hallway shouted. 'Kill the Orlocks!'

Uriah pushed backwards, hiding behind the waist-high toolbox on wheels. Two Las shots ripped by

Uriah's cover, carbon-scorching the edges. Another shot struck the toolbox. Uriah felt the metal behind his back heat up.

Somewhere outside, more shots rang and echoed. The firefight had begun in earnest, the Orlocks fighting it out with Corsikan's men. Uriah pushed against the toolbox, engaging the wheels and steering it towards the operating slab. Another ganger burst through the double doors and met a swift end when Uriah shot him.

More las-bolts struck the toolbox, and Uriah felt the box spike in temperature again.

The next couple of shots are going to burn through the metal, Uriah realised, but he was close enough to the operating slab where Coriskan lay silent. Uriah leapt from cover and jumped over the slab. The black-haired ganger sailed into view below him, a look of astonishment frozen on his face. Uriah spun in mid air and shot the ganger mid-chest before striking the ground with his shoulder.

At least I'm safe behind cover, Uriah thought. With that, he brought his pistol to bear on Hauser.

'Don't shoot, don't shoot!' Hauser squealed, holding his hands in front of his face.

The implant, where is it?' Uriah asked.

'Still attached to the patient's lungs.'

Wait,' Uriah said. 'Can you still call him a patient after you've murdered him?'

'Please, they said they'd kill me if I didn't cooperate.'

Uriah shook his head and pressed the pistol's barrel against Hauser's forehead. 'You're lying to me and I'm likelier to kill liars than spare them.'

'No, no!' Hauser screamed. 'I'm - I'm an important man here. You don't know who you're dealing with,'

'A talking corpse?' Uriah ventured. 'Likely to be a silent corpse in a moment.'

Uriah heard movement near the doors. He peeked around a corner of the operating slab and caught a ganger trying to sneak in low to the ground.

'Hello,' Uriah said to grab the man's attention before shooting him dead.

Meanwhile, the fighting outside was drawing closer. Corsikan's men were definitely outgunned.

Uriah retrained the gun on Hauser, who was too frightened to move.

'Now,' Uriah asked. 'Where were we? Something about shooting you, was it?'

'No, you want the implant!' Hauser said.

'Ah yes, the implant,' Uriah said. 'Where is it again?'

'Still attached to the lungs.'

'Well?' Uriah asked. 'Shouldn't you be removing it?'

'But... but... there's a gunfight outside. What if someone shoots me?'

Uriah sighed. He reached up, grabbed Corsikan's hairy forearm; with a tug, he pulled the corpse down next to diem. Corsikan dropped to the floor

with a heavy thud, his body twisted, his neck at an uncomfortable angle.

'Now,' Uriah repeated. The implant.'

Hauser nodded. He began reaching up for the instruments on the slab above his head when Uriah shoved the pistol against his nostril.

'Careful there,' Uriah said. 'I'm not a surgeon by trade, but I'm wonderful at alterations.'

Hauser nodded, more vigorously this time. He slowly reached for the instruments and pulled down a scalpel. With it in his hand, he peered into Corsikan's chest cavity and prodded die greying organs. Hauser cut into the lungs to continue removing me rust-coloured spherical device with intake wings clamped on both lungs.

Uriah shifted his attention between the door and the surgeon. Stray shots and las-bolts blasted through the door. The fight, by all accounts was in full pitch, with the Soulsplitters in greater numbers, but with Corsikan's treacherous crew holding the choke points.

'Hurry up, man!' Uriah said.

"Why bother,' Hauser said, his hands shaking. 'I'm a dead man either way.'

Uriah smiled. 'Come now. Pessimism is a sour quality in a physician. Who wants their physician spouting doom and gloom during their prognosis?'

'I'm a surgeon.'

'Yes, and a slow one at that. Are you done?'

'Yes,' Hauser said. In his hands was the bloodied piece of technology with lung matter stuck to it.

You couldn't clean it?' Uriah asked with a devilish twinkle in his eye.

Hauser stared at Uriah, unsure if he was being serious or not. Uriah just shook his head and yanked the implant from his hands.

'This will do,' Uriah said. 'Now. Throw the scalpel away.'

Hauser complied. 'Are you going to kill me?' he asked quietly.

'I'm afraid not,' Uriah replied before striking him across the temple with the butt of his gun. Hauser fell to the floor, unconscious. 'I suspect I'll need all my ammunition for the batde to come.'

Uriah wiped his hands on Hauser's white smock and examined the implant. After fiddling with one of his pouches, he removed the small device that Coryin had given him. It was rectangular and easily

concealable in the palm of his hand. Uriah pulled on a small knob on the device's head and extended an antenna-like rod. He touched the antenna to the implant and waited a moment for it to confirm his suspicions. The implant beeped repeatedly. Voice was telling the truth. The implants were booby-trapped.

Uriah stuffed the implant and reading device into his pouch. He then ran to the wall adjacent to the double doors and peered through the small porthole windows. Two gangers were hiding in the next room, firing down the corridor at the Soulsplitters who'd taken reception. Several more Corsikan gangers were hiding in doorways and side-corridors to keep Slag's men at bay.

Inhaling deeply, Uriah counted three men that he could see between him and the window where he'd entered - two at the door and another using the stockroom. The good thing about firefights, however, was that they were chaotic. Breath held, Uriah raced out of the surgery bay and planted two shots into the two men firing from cover at the door. None of Corsikan's men saw them go down; the two men were behind everyone else.

As Uriah approached the open double-doors leading into the corridor, he fired again, this time hitting the ganger shooting from the stockroom. Uriah dashed into the room as gunshots erupted around him, and slammed the door shut. He ignored the blistering fire that pinged the metal door, instead grabbing the shelving units and pulling them down behind him. Uriah hit the window and scrambled out, driven forward by bullets and Las fire. He was out on the ledge and away from the window. He moved towards the building corner with the windowless expanse of plascrete wall.

Several panels of the stained glass window disintegrated and the echoes of a firefight drifted up to Uriah's ears. The fight was spreading, with more of the Shina Boys engaging the Soulsplitters. Uriah smiled briefly; he quickly noticed the floating skull probe hovering above the scene of carnage. It was looking straight at him.

'Kaden,' Uriah mumbled. 'Wonderful.'

Movement at the stockroom window caught his attention. One of Corsikan's gangers was trying to climb through it. Whether to escape or come after him, Uriah wasn't sure. All he knew was that he needed to climb down, and fast. The slightly pudgy ganger climbing through the window saw Uriah and fumbled for his pistol. Uriah knew he couldn't

afford returning into the building where the fight raged. Instead, he fired at the man and hit the edge of the window; that frightened the Shina Boy back inside where he fell with an audible grunt.

Conserve ammunition, Uriah thought to himself. He scrambled over the side of the ledge and dropped down to the floor below, which was flush with the annexe's rooftop. The ferro-iron ribbed skylight arched half-a-storey higher still, but a rusted metal grated shelf ran its periphery between the skylight and the building's edge.

Uriah ran alongside the shelf, occasionally ducking as panels of stained glass in front of him or behind him exploded in a shower of shards.

The fight's really raging full pitch down there, Uriah thought. He chanced a quick glance through a hole in the skylight and saw the carnage. Corsikan's men were hidden throughout the area. They initially allowed the Soulsplitters to pass, but once the Shina Boys thought they'd been double crossed, they closed their fist around the Orlocks. Only the Orlocks weren't that helpless. Now the fight in the north-west building had spilled into the market annexe, with gangers hiding behind columns and half-walls.

What caught Uriah's attention were the farmers and market-goers caught inside when the gun battles began. Some were already dead. Some wounded. One couple on the second floor was trying to protect their small daughter, covering her with their bodies as they wedged themselves behind a half-column against a wall. Uriah hesitated. The ammunition being used in battle wouldn't stop for flesh or bone. It would travel through two or three people before lodging in the wall.

The daughter would die alongside her parents when the first bullet struck them. A couple of wild shots were already hammering the column they hid behind, gouging out fist-sized chunks.

Uriah wanted to move, to run, as instinct and training demanded. In minutes, the Enforcers would arrive in full force and execute any non-residents involved in the fracas.

Leave a voice told him. Nothing but the prize, Uriah heard Percal say.

Maybe, at one time, Uriah might have considered mat sound advice. But that was before this entire sordid affair came along. That was before he understood Per-cal's game.

'Game,' Uriah muttered. To Percal it was a game - it eased the conscience. Uriah couldn't do that, however, not anymore. It was time to rectify past errors of judgement.

Uriah was about to crawl through the window to help the family, when a thought occurred to him. There was no reason not to plan this through; for that to work, Uriah needed a wildcard, something to throw the existing odds into chaos. When the outcome seemed certain, it was time to introduce new variables.

Uriah pulled the implant from his pouch and showed it to Kaden's floating skull-probe. 'Come and get it,' he said, 'before the Soulsplitters catch me and you fail once again,' With that, Uriah dropped through the hole and down to the second floor, where he hit the ground with a roll that absorbed most of his fall's impact. He ignored the jolt of pain to gain his bearings.

The gun battle was heated. From behind their cover, the gangers fired at one another - blind and wild - and all they managed to kill were civilians. Uriah scrambled to his feet and ran for the couple protecting their child. A gunman popped up from behind a half-wall to Uriah's right, but he fired once catching the man in the throat.

Uriah reached the couple and their screaming daughter. The mother was white and pretty in that 'untouched by poverty' way, while her ebony husband had some muscle to him. The daughter was a black-haired beauty caught in terror. Uriah felt strange doing this. He'd never played the hero before.

'When I say move, you move!' Uriah said. 'Run to that shop over there,' Uriah motioned with his head to the herbalist's shop.

The husband nodded, then hesitated. 'Wait, what if they come after us?'

'Head to the rear of the shop. They'll have an exit behind to throw trash.'

Thank you,' the wife managed.

It was Uriah's turn to nod. He felt embarrassed.

The firefight continued, but the Soulsplitters were gaining the upper hand, eliminating the occasional Enforcer who arrived to help. It was now or never. Uriah gauged which gangers posed the greatest danger before shouting, 'Now!'

The family ran, hunched over with their daughter in the father's arms. Uriah put himself between the family and the shooters. As he feared, the

movement of runners caught a couple of gangers' attentions, and they instinctively tried firing at the moving targets. Uriah fired back, forcing them to keep their heads down until the family reached the herbalist's.

Just before Uriah entered the shop, a hail of bullets mangled the balcony railing and wall near the herbalist's door. Uriah ducked, barely catching Slag firing at him with the behemoth Gordo at his side.

Uriah cursed and pushed the family further back into the unit as bullets and las-fire turned the storefront into a shower of steel and glass shards. Two dead bodies littered the floor.

'The exit,' Uriah shouted at the family. 'Go.'

'What about you?' the man asked, holding his daughter.

'Someone needs to hold them off. You don't want them following you, do you?'

'No,' the man replied.

The wife ran up to Uriah and kissed him on the cheek. Thank you,' she said. 'I don't know how we could ever repay you.'

'Survive this,' Uriah replied. 'Now run!'

With that, the family headed for the back of the store, past the racks of hanging spice jars and shelves filled with assorted goods. Uriah scrambled to the display window and fired a few shots outside to let Slag know he hadn't escaped. He wanted to give the family time to flee.

There's no exit!'

Uriah turned to find the panicked father and mother back with their child.

'Damn it!' he said with a snarl. 'Hide in the back and keep your heads down no matter what. It's me they'll want. I'll draw them away from here. Stay here for hours if need be,' They'll kill you,' the man said.

They'll try, but I promise you I'll get the better of them,' Uriah said. His eyes glittered with some wild-ness. 'I always do.'

'Good luck,' the woman said. They headed back into the shop.

Uriah sighed and steeled himself to the task. He removed a grenade from his pouch and threw it out of the window, over the balcony to the annexe floor below. Uriah counted to three before he ran out of the store.

His return into the line of fire was immediately followed by a brilliant flash of white and a booming bang from below. The windows shook and several gangers screamed in pain, their eyes burned from the phosphorus

flash. Most were momentarily disoriented, allowing Uriah to run full pelt for ten metres alongside the second floor balcony before las-fire streamed past him. Uriah hit the ground a second before withering fire shredded a nearby wall.

Uriah realised he was running out of options. None of the commerce units had rear exits and the only ways out were over the railing to the ground floor, out through the skylight or into another building. Unfortunately, Slag was waiting for him on the ground floor, he couldn't reach the skylight, and the elevators - with their adjoining stairwell - to the nearest hab block were a good dozen metres away.

Uriah checked his ammunition and tried raising his head, but several shots ripped past him. He was pinned down, and it was only a matter of time before they came upstairs.

Uriah thought about crawling forward, but no sooner had he considered the idea than he heard Slag shout, 'Shoot the windows,' from below.

Windows collapsed under the immediate hail of bullets, showering the ground with giant splinters of glass. Bits rained down on Uriah, cutting his face and fingers with sharp nicks. Uriah cursed Slag for his forethought. Dragging himself across the ground would cut him open from his throat to his toes.

Time to return the favour, Uriah thought. He turned onto his back, aimed at the skylight and fired at the stained glass. Entire panels of glass, gravity propelled razors, rained down upon the first floor. It was a petty thing to do, but Uriah smiled at the panicked screams of the Soulsplitters as the guillotines of glass rained down upon their heads. He pushed off the ground, ignoring the cuts to his hand, and bolted for the stairwell to the other building.

Uriah was ten metres away from the elevators when the first shots rang out. Four metres later, an orchestra of shots rang out, and Uriah dived into the last commerce unit. He was six metres shy of the elevators and stairwell.

Uriah tried poking his head out from the store he was hidden in, but las-fire drove him back inside. The gangers were now on the second floor and had their gun sights trained on his hiding hole.

He was trapped. With Corsikan's men dead and the Enforcers yet to arrive in force, the Soulsplitters were coming up the stairs. Kaden's skull

probe floated through the ruptured skylight and the broken display window, a couple of shots ringing out behind it.

'You're in a world of pain here,' Kaden's voice said through the speaker grille in the skull's mouth.

'So everything you said about not wanting me dead? Just wanting me humiliated? That was a lie?' Uriah spoke while searching the unit for additional cover. He moved behind a metal bin.

'That's not going to protect you much,' Kaden said.

'So you're here to watch the execution.'

The skull probe said nothing. Uriah took shot at a couple of Orlocks within sight of the store. They ducked behind cover.

'Listen,' Kaden said. 'I never wished you this kind of ill. How long do you think you can hold out for? Maybe I can get Percal to send help.'

'He won't. Or they won't arrive in time. Either way, Kaden, I'm dead unless you intercede.'

'Me? You must be some special kind of crazy.'

'Crazy? I must be to have believed Percal all these years.'

'What are you on about?'

Uriah ignored the question. 'Look, the fact is I have the last implant, the one you want. If I fall, the Orlocks get the implant. If you help me, House Delaque gets the implant. You have to decide when your dislike of me crosses that line of hurting the House, our House,' Uriah fired another shot at the Orlocks, but they were closing in on the commerce unit.

'Give me the implant,' Kaden said. 'This here skull's got itself a small compartment. I can fly it out, for the good of the House.'

'No. Help me,' Uriah said, 'as a brother of the House. This errand shouldn't be worth more than a brother's life no matter what Percal claims.'

Uriah did not receive his answer. The skull probe hovered in place for too long; a bullet slammed into the back of the skull and a shower of hot sparks spewed forth from its mouth. The probe fell to the ground and cracked open. Black smoke leaked from its eyes.

'Storm,' Slag called out from somewhere outside the shop. 'Your reckoning has arrived.'

While the air was troubled by the occasional shot as Orlocks kept the Enforcers at bay, most of the Soulsplitters were lined up on the balcony

across from the unit. Uriah couldn't move without taking fire.

'Come out, Uriah,' Slag said. 'A quick bullet. I promise.'

'I have the implant,' Uriah said.

You have my property. House Orlock paid for that. It's ours.'

'House Delaque also paid Slag.'

'Not my problem. I want the implant.'

'All right,' Uriah said. You get the implant and I walk.'

You don't get it,' Slag said. 'I get the implant. And I get you. No way in hell are you walking away from this.'

'I fail to see my incentive in the matter,' Uriah said. 'Either I walk or I destroy the implant.'

'Incentive is in how you die,' Slag said.

Uriah realised the voice was closer now. He heard glass crunching under several heavy feet. Slag was inside the unit. Uriah glanced quickly and saw the broad frame of Gordo, standing just inside the doorway. Slag was hidden behind him.

'Hiding behind your men?' Uriah asked.

'Bet you my cover's better than yours,' Slag said. He fired a shot through the metal bin above Uriah's head. It punched clean through. Uriah might as well have been hiding behind paper.

'Fair enough,' Uriah said.

'Enough stalling. Your answer. And no explosives either. I'm ready for your tricks.'

Uriah rested his head against the cool metal. Every path he envisioned led to the same course - his death. This was the end; no exit, no escape. He was tired and the pain that Morgane had driven away was slowly seeping back inside him. He ached in truly ancient ways.

Still, if death was awaiting his response, he wasn't going to allow it an easy meal. Let it come. Let it wrest its morsel of food from his dying hands. Uriah unlatched the small knife hidden up his sleeve in his wrist sheath and tucked the pistol in his waistband.

Uriah stood from his hiding spot, arms raised. In one hand, he held the implant. In the other, an explosive device.

'I said no tricks!' Slag bellowed.

'Five... Four... Three...' Uriah began, counting down.

Slag's eyes widened when he realised the trigger was already in motion. He dived to the side, out of the store. The other gangers with him turned and ran.

Two...' Uriah said, tossing the explosive to Gordo. Gordo caught the device with an ignorant smile and childlike guffaw.

'One...' Uriah concluded, running past Gordo and out of the store.

No explosion ensued, but that didn't stop Uriah from continuing the count in his head.

Three... no reason to tell Slag the real countdown, Uriah thought.

'I caught it,' Gordo exclaimed gleefully.

Two... Uriah was out the door and running for the stairwell.

One... The Orlocks across the way were only now reacting to events. They started taking aim.

'Shoot him!' Slag shouted, believing he'd been duped again.

Zero... Gordo caught the blast full in the face.

Uriah knew that tough or not, Gordo's upper body would have disintegrated in the explosion. Unfortunately, the yield was stronger than Uriah anticipated; the explosion threw Uriah to the floor, cutting his arm on the bed of broken glass.

The stairwell to the building was three metres away. Uriah tried rising to his knees; an Orlock boot slammed into his back and pushed him to the ground. More glass cut into him.

'Got 'em!' an unfamiliar voice said.

Before Uriah could react, he heard Slag roar; a large boot kicked him in his ribs. Two more kicks followed. Uriah almost blacked out from the sharp pain; several ribs cracked and for a moment he couldn't breathe.

Slag lifted Uriah to his feet and sent a meaty fist into his stomach. Uriah felt caught between trying to inhale and trying to vomit, opposite reactions that had him stutter-gasping for air. Two men grabbed Uriah by the arms and pulled the pistol from his waistband.

'Look at me,' Slag said, grabbing Uriah's jaw hard and lifting it up. 'Look at me! You devolved piece of excrement! You think you're better than me? Me! You're a fly! And I'm going to pull your wings off! Slowly!'

Uriah finally managed to catch his breath. He inhaled deeply.

'And when I'm done,' Slag said, 'I'm sticking your head on my flagstaff.'

Uriah laughed and asked with weakened breath: 'Did I upset you?'

Slag pummelled Uriah in the stomach and in the face with several fast blows. Another rib broke. Uriah dropped to the floor on his knees, his face bleeding, his lungs aching as though he'd swallowed glass. The two Orlocks pulled him back up.

Uriah felt something cold and metallic press into his forehead. Slag was holding a pistol. It was his pistol, the one stripped from him in Corval's building.

'Now you die!'

A shot rang out. Slag screamed as a sniper bullet tore through his gun shoulder; he dropped the pistol. More shots rang out, and the man holding Uriah's right arm fell away, the top of his head vanishing in a red smear. The other ganger let go of Uriah and scrambled for cover. A shot struck him in the back and he fell.

The other gangers fired blindly at the skylight, where a sniper had taken up position. It was Kaden.

Uriah reached for the pistol on the ground, but Slag was on top of him as quickly. Uriah grabbed the pistol, but a one-armed Slag grabbed his wrist. Both men rolled around on the broken glass, neither surrendering to the pain. Kaden continued firing, but he was now being pinned down by return fire.

Slag was strong, but Uriah had the use of both hands.

And I'm smarter, he thought in the struggle.

Uriah let go of the pistol. Slag, with his one good hand reached over Uriah to grab it; with a triumphant smile, he clutched the pistol and was about to bring it to bear against Uriah's head. He stopped instead -shock registering across his face. He looked down to see the knife in his stomach.

'Surprise,' Uriah whispered and twisted the knife deeper into Slag's belly. It was the one he'd pulled from his wrist sheath. You broke my legs and you hurt my friend. Consider all debts repaid.'

Slag gurgled in response; Uriah pushed him off.

And here's a secret,' Uriah said. He quickly whispered in Slag's ears and relished the look of surprise on the Orlock's face. That's right,' Uriah said. You died for *nothing.'*

Slag tried to say something, but it was lost in a blood-soaked gurgle. His eyes dimmed. Crimson briefly trickled from the Soulsplitter's mouth, but

the trickle stopped at the same moment Slag did.

Uriah grabbed his old pistol from Slag as well as the one that the gangers had pulled from his waistband. He scrambled for the stairwell, grateful for Kaden's cover fire. He stumbled down the stairs and found an exit.

Uriah stumbled out into the night, the steady pops of gunfire growing in intensity. The Enforcers had arrived in greater numbers and were hopefully eliminating the last of Slag's minions. Uriah vanished into the shadows, his escape route a Delaque tunnel to be used only in emergencies.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

> Last of all, never blink. The game is never won by the most skilled. It's won by the most daring.
>
> — *Delaque Operational Commandments from the Book of Lies*.

EVERYTHING WAS A blur, a smear that washed out the specifics into one jumbled mess of sight, sound and smell. Uriah stumbled upon moments of clarity, small islands of salvation in the stormy seas, when he needed them most. He was aware long enough to pull his two pistols on the young gangers about to rob him. When they ran, Uriah lost track of muddied time again.

Uriah found himself in a tunnel, moving down, deeper into the city's belly. When he regained his clarity for a moment, he was in a shuttle car, a vertical train barrelling down a shaft deep inside Hive Primus. He eyed his fellow passengers, a warning in his gaze to mind their own business. They complied. Time muddied again.

It continued like this for what felt like days; Uriah blacked out, coming to for just long enough to find himself closer to sanctuary. He was on the shuttle car, he was stumbling through the sewers, he was pulling out his green bike from its hiding hole, he was astride his bike, racing down at top speed and swerving to avoid crashing. It wasn't until he stumbled into Mother's den that he awoke for a final time. Mother loomed over him, checking his injuries.

'Hello Mother,' Uriah muttered.

'Sweet tears of oil,' Mother said, annoyed, 'can't you do anything in moderation?'

'I need you to call someone,' Uriah said, and told Mother how to reach Morgane. 'I love her,' he said.

'Well it's about time you found someone you selfish bastard,' Mother said.

Uriah smiled and felt as though he'd cracked his own face. The events and punishment of the past week came crashing down upon him. Everything went black under its weight.

EVERYONE STARED WHEN Uriah walked into Shadow-strohm. He'd been missing for a week following Kaden's report of the shootout in Shina District. Many had assumed he was dead, but Uriah was happy to disappoint.

Fact was, they weren't that far off. What could be seen of his body was covered in bandages and bruises. He looked like Hell's kickball, but there was an unexpected energy to his step, a macabre rejuvenation that belied his condition. He walked with purpose despite the slight limp. A week in Morgane's and Mother's care, being nursed back from death and exhaustion, worked its wonders. Uriah still ached and still needed plenty of rest, but he was finally strong enough to wrap up this matter.

Uriah walked straight for Derrik's office to pick up a file and give the dark-haired girl his regards. Before Der-rik could barrage him with any questions, Uriah told him: 'Wait. I have one matter to finish first. I'll return. I promise.'

Then, Uriah made his way to Percal's office, where he knocked and waited. A moment later, gears shifted and whined, and the door opened.

Where the hell have you been?' Percal roared as Uriah walked inside. Kaden was already seated.

'Ah, you received my message,' Uriah said to Kaden. 'Excellent.'

'Where... were... you?' Percal asked, emphasising each word as though ready to explode on any of them.

'Keep your nose on,' Uriah said, smiling.

Percal's face turned beet red; even Kaden looked shocked.

'I brought the implant,' Uriah said. He tossed the lung scrubber on the desk. Percal jumped.

'Have you gone mad?' Percal roared.

'Not at all,' Uriah said. 'I just needed some time to sort through some matters. But as promised I delivered you the implant.'

'I wanted all the implants,' Percal said. 'But all you and Kaden managed to acquire were three out of six. Two of the supposedly finest Handlers of House Delaque and you allow the Orlocks to steal away with three implants for study. Worse yet,' he said, pointing to Uriah, 'you only bring me one implant while Kaden procured the other two.'

Kaden smiled and shrugged at the off-handed compliment.

'In truth,' Uriah said. 'I recovered three implants. One, Kaden appropriated. The second one was destroyed in a bike crash.'

'You lost one of the implants? I'm disappointed in you, Uriah,' Percal said. 'I thought I was grooming a worthy successor.'

'Come now,' Uriah said. 'It's not all that bad and the truth is, you know that,' Uriah tossed the file folder on the desk.

What's that?' Kaden asked. Percal, however, didn't budge. Instead, he kept a watchful eye on Uriah.

'A report of a massive explosion out of Stainstrip, an Orlock research facility. It occurred last week. I'm sure you know about the explosion?'

'And?' Kaden asked.

"You wish to answer that, or shall I?' Uriah asked Percal.

Percal said nothing. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers and waited for Uriah to speak.

Very well,' Uriah said. 'Stainstrip is where Slag sent the implant he recovered to be studied and tested.'

'Still not following you.'

'All right,' Uriah said. 'Let's take this back several steps. Soren was a Van Saar tech selling secrets to us.'

'I'm not that lost,' Kaden said.

'Well, Soren was also greedy. He was selling the same secrets to the Orlocks.'

'I'd already figured that out seeing as how the Soul-splitters were always around.'

'Soren was on his way to sell us the latest batch of implants when someone murdered him and scavenged his parts, selling them to the bio-surgeon Cantrall.'

You haven't lost me yet.'

'Yes, well this part I bet you didn't know. The implants we recovered were of older technology. Hardly Van Saar's finest.'

'What? Somebody switched the tech on us?'

'Exactly The technology given to Cantrall was not the technology promised to us. They weren't Soren's implants. Just sold as such with enough of Soren's flesh to give us a genetic match.'

'Damn it!' Kaden said. "You mean we did this for nothing?'

'Depends on your definition of nothing,' Uriah said, smiling and maintaining his gaze on Percal.

'I don't get your meaning,' Kaden said. You know where the implants are?'

Yes I do,' Uriah said. They're safe back at House Van Saar.'

'Come again?'

The Van Saar orchestrated all this,' Uriah said. They discovered Soren's betrayal, so they hunted him down and killed him. Then they switched implants.'

Then what's with the implants sold to Cantrall and all those gangers?' Kaden asked.

The Van Saar idea of retribution. They wanted us scrambling to retrieve the implants. So they baited us by sending the implants to Cantrall and telling him they were top-of-the-line technology taken from Soren's body.'

'And we bought it,' Kaden said. 'But what's this got to do with the explosions at Stainstrip. I mean why even go through the effort of all this?'

The Van Saar booby-trapped the implants. Each implant contained an explosive mat was designed to detonate when someone tried tampering with its innards.'

Kaden's eyes shot to the lung device on the desk. 'Like that thing? It's got a bomb inside it?'

'Had,' Uriah replied. 'It had an explosive. And the reason they never activated when they were being attached or removed is because they'll only activate when taken apart and examined.'

Uriah allowed Kaden to absorb the information, though Percal was calm; this news had not been a surprise. Uriah thought back to Voice and how lucky she'd been to stumble across the explosive before it detonated. Someming had worried her about the device, so her first detailed examination used what she called a microscopic fibre-opto to explore the heart accelerant's interior. That's when she found the bomb.

'Hey!' Kaden said, suddenly fitting two pieces together. 'Is that why Rot-Tongue couldn't sell his eye back to the Van Saar?'

'Correct,' Uriah said. The Van Saar weren't about to take back a booby-trapped item. Not when they were desperate for the Orlocks or us to have them.'

'What about the implants you sent to the lab?' Kaden asked Percal.

Uriah smiled. 'He already knew they were rigged with explosives.'

'I *suspected,'* Percal said. 'It's standard Van Saar procedure to booby-trap technology and leave it behind for the curious. I warned our techs of the danger and they discovered the explosives.'

'Then why didn't you tell us?' Kaden said, indignant.

'Because you weren't going to open the implants for examination. Not unless you knew how to speak with the Machine Spirit?' With that, he shot a look at Uriah.

Kaden caught the glance and looked at Uriah as well. Uriah however, was enjoying this moment.

'Kaden,' Uriah said. 'Mind if I have a word with Percal alone?'

'Sure,' Kaden said, standing. 'Just don't forget you owe me.'

'I do at that,' Uriah said with a smile. He waited for Kaden to leave before sitting.

'I don't remember inviting you to sit. I still consider your role in this a failure.'

'I don't need permission to sit from you. Not anymore,' Uriah said. His smile vanished, replaced by a feral gaze that no longer kowtowed to Percal.

'Is that so?' Percal said. 'Be careful when crossing words with me, boy. I've been at this game far longer than you.'

'Does it help?' Uriah asked. 'Does it ease your conscience to call it a game?'

'Leave,' Percal said. 'You've outstayed your welcome and my good graces.'

'No,' Uriah said. 'Not until you understand me perfectly.'

'Oh, I think I understand you already,' Percal said. His face was turning red.

'And I understand you,' Uriah replied; he felt calm.

'Oh really?' Percal said, laughing. 'Please. *Enlighten* me.'

Той betrayed Soren. You told the Van Saar about his dealings with us and with the Orlocks.'

'If I did,' Percal said, 'should I not be the hero for revealing a double-agent willing to court the Orlocks? If I did, that is.'

'Keep playing your game,' Uriah said. 'I want no part of it.'

'Are you so naive as to think you can resign?' Percal asked, a bemused look on his face.

'Resign? No,' Uriah said. 'I'll still serve the House - as an independent with no affiliation to your operation. I've already made the request.'

Through whom?' Percal asked, his eyes narrowing.

Uriah smiled. The only thing I want from you is the necklace Kaden stole from my hab.'

ЛІ\Тю says I-'

'I said no more games. The necklace, Percal. It's mine and it's not something you want to start a war over. Trust me.'

Percal considered the matter before removing the tear-shaped, black diamond pendant necklace from somewhere inside his top drawer. 'Consider it a farewell present,' Percal said.

Uriah reached for it, but Percal pulled it away.

'I am curious, though,' he said. 'For old times sake, on whose neck does this belong?'

Uriah reached forward again. 'Her name is Bettyna,' Uriah said.

The smile on Percal's face evaporated. He shoved the pendant and chain into Uriah's hands. 'Leave,' Percal said. 'You are no longer welcome in my home.'

Your home,' Uriah repeated as he stood and headed for the door. 'Big word for a man .living alone.'

'YOU SAID THAT?' Derrik asked, in shock.

'I did at that,' Uriah said. 'But don't worry. I haven't told him that the Information Cullers and Requisition-ers sponsored me with House Delaque as a freelance operative.'

'He'll find out soon enough, if he doesn't already know. At least your life is no longer bound on Percal's word.'

'True,' Uriah said. 'But he almost had me, you know?'

'How so?'

'Aside from the obvious traps?' Uriah said. 'He was grooming me to be another sacrificial lamb. Another Elias.'

Derrik shot Uriah an inquisitive look as he poured them both a drink from the bottle and shot cups in his desk drawer.

'Percal sent me deep undercover into House Van Saar on repeated occasions,' Uriah said. 'He knew I'd generate an affinity for the House, for its practices. You can't be an effective undercover agent without developing empathy for your targets. And like an idiot, I did,' Uriah decided not to mention the Machine Spirit or Morgane, but the other examples were suitable enough. 'I became familiar with their technology and I even befriended Soren.'

Derrik nodded. 'I see,' he said. 'So if there was ever a need to question your loyalties-'

'My own actions would condemn me,' Uriah said. 'I looked and acted like a Van Saar. I used their equipment on occasion. So much the easier to try me for treason and divert attention away from his action.'

Derrik nodded. 'You think that's what happened to Elias?'

'I know you do,' Uriah said. With that, he downed the shot of rat-bile and nodded his thanks to Derrik.

URIAH PULLED MORGANE tighter into his embrace and smelled her hair. He was enjoying this moment in bed with her though they'd discussed much of the day's events in detail.

'Taking a chance, aren't you?' she asked.

'Perhaps, but Percal's revealed far too many of his tricks over the years for me not to recognize his hand in matters. He's crooked.'

'How so?' Morgane asked.

'A long time ago, he was subtle enough to obfuscate the truth,' Uriah said. 'Not any more. I know he warned the Soulsplitters that I'd be going after Corval and Jaffa Hur. He knew I'd investigated them both previously. And he knew Corval was the easiest to reach and kill to set up the ambush.'

You think he's working with the Orlocks?' Morgane asked.

'No, no, though at first, I couldn't figure out why he did it. I thought, perhaps he was trying to challenge me with greater obstacles, but that didn't ring true. He set Kaden and the Orlocks after me to keep me preoccupied and to prevent me from uncovering the truth.'

And the truth is?'

'He's working for your House,' Uriah said.

'Are you certain?' Morgane asked, surprised.

'Certain enough to voice my suspicions,' Uriah said. 'That's why he was grooming me to seem like the Van Saar spy, in case his identity was ever in danger. That's why your House knew about Soren. As soon as Percal realised Soren was also dealing with the Orlocks, he decided to have him terminated.'

'But why allow Soren to continue betraying the Van Saar? Why encourage him?'

'I've been making new friends at Shadowstrohm,' Uriah said. 'Powerful friends. They told me that they've never heard of half the inventions that Soren told me he brought to House Delaque. Percal has been screening the technology we receive.'

'So why betray you to the Orlocks again?'

'Because Percal had no choice. He was told to investigate Soren's disappearance by his superiors, but he knew if I dug too deep, I might uncover his involvement.'

'Ah. So Kaden and the Soulsplitters were to distract you.'

'Or possibly even kill me.'

'That seems extreme,' Morgane said.

'Only if you don't understand Percal,' Uriah said. 'I'm not the Handler he wanted. I wasn't Elias.'

"Who's Elias?'

'Percal's former protege. He was executed for betraying the House after Percal caught him selling secrets.'

'Sounds familiar,' Morgane said.

'Suspiciously so. It's likelier that Percal trained Elias as the sacrificial lamb to the point of unquestioning loyalty. Percal was the traitor and he'd indoctrinated Elias as well - I suspect he convinced Elias to take the fall for him when he could no longer hide.'

'You know Van Saar could use a man like you,' Morgane said.

'I know,' Uriah said. 'But that would put me back in Percal's court. Besides, if I'm to keep one step ahead of whatever retribution Percal has in mind I need to be inside House Delaque keeping an eye on him. I have allies now. They'll help me. Protect me.'

Morgane sighed and whispered, 'And I can't leave my position either.'

'I would never ask you to,' Uriah said, kissing Morgane. 'For now, we'll continue as we've done.'

To do that, we need a new home. A hideaway for just you and me.'

'I know,' Uriah said, 'but we can't for the while.'

'Why?'

'Because,' Uriah said. 'In no uncertain terms, I just declared war against a very conniving and deadly foe. I don't have enough proof to lodge an official accusation, but he has more than enough cause to have me killed.'

'I'm not scared,' Morgane said.

'I know. We will find a place for ourselves, but not yet not when my life is about to come under heavy scrutiny. Nothing I find will be safe.'

'Then I'll find something. You concentrate on your battles and on eliminating Percal.'

Uriah nodded. 'And I know where to start,' he said.

PERCAL SAT IN his chair, in the darkness of his office, staring at the shadows. A grim expression sat squarely on his face, one made more macabre by the hollow of his nose. He reviewed the entire affair from beginning to end; there was nothing written down, nothing to implicate him in matters. Everything he possessed sat in the reservoir of his thoughts, to be called up with crystal clarity and often, verbatim whenever he needed it,

Uriah had proven far more cunning than he'd anticipated. Percal had seen the slow shift in Uriah's loyalties months ago. He was questioning more and pursuing matters without consulting his Overseer. He was

acquiring help and equipment outside the regular channels, where Percal was once able to keep an eye on him.

Percal knew Uriah wasn't a House traitor, but it was a convenient lie he'd been trying to cultivate. Keep him isolated from everyone at Shadowstrohm to increase people's dislike of him, and send him on deep-cover assignments to where he'd start emulating Van Saar habits to survive, which he'd done. But Uriah's growing independent streak was troubling. Percal knew it was time to cut the strings that tied Uriah to House Delaque, but the entire Soren affair hadn't unfolded the way he'd intended. The Soulsplitters or Kaden should have eliminated Uriah and, in fact, had ample opportunity to do so. Instead, they'd failed.

I overestimated Slag's ability and underestimated Kaden's loyalties, Percal thought.

How Uriah had discovered the explosives, or the fact that the implants were fakes, or that Percal had orchestrated Soren's death was a mystery. Percal was using those events as his back-up plan to indict Uriah in betraying the House.

At the behest of his Van Saar handlers, Percal was ready to testify, Uriah Storm assassinated his friend Soren for betraying the Van Saar, and then knowingly brought booby-trapped implants into House Delaque. Had I not stopped him, his plan might have worked. I knew Uriah was the traitor when I saw him praying to the Machine Spirit and possessing Van Saar technology.

Now, however, Uriah had managed to protect himself from blame; he was under the aegis of the other gangs in Shadowstrohm; he'd revealed the presence of explosives in the implants himself, and he had exposed the Van Saar plot in the matter. Uriah was safe for the time being. Anything Percal did against him would heap suspicion back on himself.

With a sigh, Percal stood and headed over to the regicide board. Percal ignored his next move and instead pressed in sequence the tiles for D-3, F-8, C-6, H-5, F-2, and B-7. The pieces flickered. A moment later, a crackling voice emerged through hidden speakers.

'Did you receive my report?' Percal asked.

'We did,' the male voice said.

'My position here is in danger,' Percal said. 'You promised me a home should I need to leave this place.'

'And the promise stands,' the voice said. 'But you aren't in danger yet. Compromised, maybe, but I doubt they know enough to launch an investigation. If they did, we wouldn't be speaking. We still need you there.'

Percal sighed. 'I need to eliminate Uriah.'

'Yes,' the voice said. 'But not just yet. The timing must be right to remove you from suspicion. But you knew that already.'

'I did. And I need to start planning. I can't draw upon any Delaque resources to do it, either. I don't want any trails leading back to me. I need help from you. Technology and men, whatever you can spare.'

Any way House Van Saar can help, consider it done,' the voice said.

With that, the voice cut out, leaving Percal standing over the board. A slow, unexpected smile crept across his face, and for the first time, Percal realised he was actually giddy.

It had been a long time since he'd entered the fray as a combatant. He was looking forward to playing the game once more.

VOICE AWOKE WITH a start and immediately groaned. The skin staples were still tight and her broken leg itched.

'Shh, shh, It's just me,' Uriah said, coming closer to her bed.

'Uriah. You scared me,' Voice said, admonishing the Handler.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'How are you feeling?'

'Feeling? I hurt when I blink - that Mother is a tyrant.'

'I know,' Uriah said, smiling. 'I like her too.'

Voice chuckled. It was good to see her smile, despite the constant scowl she wore. Voice realised Uriah was studying her.

'What?' she asked.

'Nothing - well, truthfully, you're not at all how I imagined.'

'And how did you imagine me?' she asked.

Taller. More hair, but black. I did expect the scowl, though.'

'Did you now? Uriah, what are you doing here?'

'I, uh, wanted to say I understand now.'

'Understand what?'

'Fleshworks,' he replied. 'For the want of tech, Soren sold his scruples and died in the exchange. I was betrayed and now a little more of me is

artificial,' Uriah tapped his torso where two implants had replaced two shattered ribs. 'I'm less flesh then I was.'

'Told you. I'm always right. Anything else?' she asked with a smile.

'Actually, I was hoping you'd come work for me on a permanent basis.'

Voice laughed. 'Given our last enterprise?'

'I know,' Uriah said. 'But you're particularly gifted with machines. And to tell you the truth, I could use the help. I've made some powerful enemies and, I'd like to think, equally valuable friends.'

Voice shrugged.

'What say you?' Uriah asked.

'Offer the terms, but I'd likely say yes.'

'Excellent,' Uriah said slapping his knees. 'First thing we need to do when you're up and about is break into a certain person's regicide board. I'm sure he's using it to communicate with someone inside House Van Saar.'

Very well,' Voice said, uncertain.

'Oh, and welcome to the shadowy world of House Delaque.'

'What?'. Hey! No! Wait!' Voice stammered. 'I never agreed-'

'Trust me, you'll love the experience,' Uriah said walking away.

'No, I don't like Houses. That's why I left-'

'The benefits are great,' Uriah said, walking for the door. 'They have to be with all the backbiting.'

'But I don't-'

'And you'll love Derrik. He can't wait to meet you. Has a thing for Escher women. Actually, women in general.'

'Jester,' Voice shouted after him. 'Get back here. *Jester!'*

'You said yes,' Uriah said, leaving the room. 'Can't back out now.'

'Uriah!' Voice shouted.

'Welcome to the Game, Voice! It's about to get interesting.'

A NECROMUNDA NOVEL

BACK FROM THE DEAD

NICK KYME

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOODED FIGURE dogged his thoughts – slashes of colour through a narrow vision slit. Then Bane's world exploded into white fury as the gaoler exercised his brutality.

Erik Bane drew a ragged breath. With waking came pain. His head hurt so badly that he thought the pipe they had hit hint with must have bent on impact. A tooth had been dislodged and the copper tang of blood filled his mouth. Tenderised and raw, he felt like he had been pounded on a meat-vendor's block.

His arms were a dead weight and Bane was vaguely aware they were suspended above him. Rubber hose bit into his wrists, binding them. The floor was cold against his bare feet. Numb, they were tucked beneath his legs. He was kneeling, his head slumped forward and his eyes closed in an ironic parody of a penitent man.

Though he could not open his eyes, Bane knew he was being held in a small utility chamber. The close confines of his cell exacerbated the stink of stale sweat and stagnant water. Directly above, a mined moisture condenser dripped languidly. The deposits from the broken unit ran onto the ridges of his face and chilled his naked torso. A drop landed in Bane's eye. He blinked. Light flared, bright and angry. He shut his eyes, waiting for the painful afterimage to subside. It was a halogen lamp; he could hear the faint buzz of its power cell. Outside was a wall of silence. I us captors usually taunted, promising beatings and blood-duels. They were never silent. Something was wrong.

'Hey!' His voice was a choked rasp. 'Hey!' Louder this time, echoing off the metal cell interior. 'Bastards, get this lamp out of my face. I'm awake.'

Silence answered. The sporadic drip of the moisture condenser seemed abruptly louder, almost maddening.

‘Are you scavving listening?’

Bane paused. He made out a dull machine noise, far off and muted by plascrete. His unease grew. The room became unbearable and he panicked. Struggling to his feet, he kicked at the door, thrusting his head forward.

‘Let me out’ lie cried, straining at his bonds. ‘You bastards,’ he screamed, his false bravado disintegrating. ‘Answer me.’

He thrashed hack and forth until his head struck the halogen lamp and he sank to the ground, his hysteria exhausted. The lamp hit the floor and went out.

Outside, the persistent drone of the distant machinery mocked him.

In the darkness, he gasped foetid air. Opening his eyes, he saw a faint half-light issuing through the door slit. More light spilled through the gap where a hinge had been shot out. A large dent in the bottom left corner had not been there before. It was as if something big had been driven hard into it, almost forcing off the other hinge. Bane could kick it open. Free of his bonds, he could get out! Heart pumping, Bane arched his neck, ignoring the stiffness and pain. Eyes adjusting to the darkness, he saw the hose binding his wrists. A single length held them both, wound around a thick metal bolt jutting out of the wall. The dripping water had perished it slightly. Bane listened again for any sign of disturbance. Nothing.

Bracing himself against the cold metal wall with his feet, Kane pushed. A sharp creak of rubber as the hose stretched, but it did not give. Torsion slammed hint back into the wall. Head pounding from the effort, he breathed in and tried again. Mustering all his strength, Bane heaved until his face touched the vision slit. With the sound of rubber slapping metal, the hose split and snapped. Bane slumped forward and blacked out.

BLOOD SEEPING BACK into his arms woke him. They tingled and then burned, as sensation slowly retuned. He tested his grip. Weak but it would do. Crawling hack up onto his knees, Bane wondered how long he had been out.

Silence still endured.

Head heavy against a rusting side wall, more of Bane’s memory started to return. Fragments at first, slices of sibilant non-sequiter punctuated by the ominous din of a slamming metal door - the sound that heralded

another beating. He saw a girl's face. She was about sixteen. Almond shaped eyes seemed to pierce his soul, and the olive skin on arms marred by gang tats. One on her left cheek looked like a cattle brand.

'Alicia,' he gasped, and was abruptly alert. It was his botched rescue attempt that had got him here. But she had escaped. His last memory was of her running for the gate that he had opened with bolt croppers. If she'd made it to Former Glory, perhaps there was still a chance. The Razors had beaten him night and day for that information, it was the only reason they had kept him alive. They wanted her back real bad. He had held out though, bent but not broken. He had given them nothing. Now he had to find her.

Bane willed his body up. Using the shaft of light spilling through the door as a guide, he kicked the hinge. A spike of agony shot up his leg. He bit the exposed flesh of his arm to stop from crying out. Another kick. The same pain but this same the door shifted. Lathered in a veneer of sweat, he booted with the other leg and the door gave at last, rusted hinges cracking. A clang echoed through the darkened corridor as the door hit plascrete.

Exhausted, pain kept him moving. That and the desire to find Alicia. She needed him.

Damn it! Where had he told her to go? He was so hung-over he could not think. The Salvation, that was it.

'Get to the Salvation, it's a bar in Former Glory,' he had said. 'I'll find you.'

Had Bane faith, he would have prayed. Yet it was redemption he was looking for. As it was, he wished he had a drink to steel his courage. He could not lose Alicia. Not again.

He limped from his cell and was faced with a long, narrow corridor stretching put in front of him. Thick pipes ran its length on either side, corroded by moisture and age. Bloody marks stained the floor, left by his dragging feet after the blood-duels; brutal one-on-one, to the death battles between prisoners. He had killed six men down here. Six innocent men.

Overhead, raw halogen lamps hung at intervals from a networked cable array. Caked in filth they shed little light, but through the gloom he discerned two bodies. The first was a few feet from the cell. Bane almost tripped over it. Head caved in, it looked like it had been used as a human battering ram, though he faced away from the door as if he had crawled on

his belly. The bloody device in his skull was the fatal wound. Close-range, blunt force trauma with a pick or axe. It spoiled a thick green mohican, jutting from an otherwise glabrous skull. He wore a torn leather jacket, sleeves ripped off at the shoulders. Gang tats covered his arms. The symbol of a black skull with a blade lodged in the forehead was most prominent.

It was the motif of the Razorheads, a house Goliath gang, the frikkers who had subjected Bane to who knows how many days and nights of torture in this hole. Other than that, he wore grey factory-issue fatigues and black steel-toed boots – nutcrackers.

Halfway down the corridor, its back against the wall, was another Razorhead corpse. Feet sticking out at impossible angles, his legs were obviously broken. Head shaved, a chain ran from his left nostril to his ear and into the back of his skull. He was similarly attired but only a thick chain crossed his otherwise naked torso, which was riddled by long, knotted scars. A stomach wound had killed him. Something big, high calibre and close. It looked like the blast had tossed him into the wall, away from the exit ahead. Most of his chest was gone, leaving a gaping crimson void in its wake. Both bodies reeked of decay. They had been dead a while.

Bane stubbed his toe against something on the ground. It was a crowbar, probably dropped by one of the now-dead Goliaths. Bane picked it up and carried on. Bullet holes pockmarked the walls further down the corridor, shell casings and chipped plascrete crunched underfoot. No guns lying around though. With a gun he would need to be careful. Without one, if he met a live ganger, he was screwed.

Ahead the corridor branched to the right. A steel ladder ran up the wall on his left. It led to a hatch that could open onto the roof. He was not ready for a climb. Besides, up on the roof he would be completely exposed, so he pressed on down the right branch. Walking became easier with each step. The movement in his muscles, however painful, was returning.

Another few feet of corridor, and he found a half open door. An upturned oil drum and some plastek packing crates made for a poor barricade. Blood stained the walls and floor. An impact spatter on the left side looked like it was from a head shot. Bane examined it. The blood was congealed, like whoever had been shot was already dead. No bodies though.

Something had happened while he had been unconscious. A hit from a rival gang? Bane dismissed it instantly. The Razorheads had enemies for sure, but they were the most powerful gang in this part of the Underhive. No one could touch them. No, this was something else. Gripping the crowbar, Bane used it to rake a plastek crate aside. Then, as quietly as he could, he edged through the door.

Bane stood in a large square room. The sheer size made him feel small and vulnerable. The machine noise was louder in here. An overturned wooden table had spilled a deck of cards onto the floor. Two stools lay nearby, one with its legs broken as if it had been used as a weapon. A bent mattress was crammed against the far wall, stained with sweat and blood. It faced a large holo-pict viewer, a downmarket 2D variant that spat white noise into the room.

Wan light crept in from the right, where an anteroom led off away from the wretched gloom. Opposite was another room, wreathed in darkness. In front was a closed door. Bane made for the right anteroom.

A sickly yellow glare from a single naked bulb threw shadows from where it hung in the ceiling. It revealed a wooden bench. Clamped to it were a rotary saw and a grinding block, a workshop of some sort. An empty tool chest spilled its guts in the dark beneath the bench: a few rusty spanners, some nails, bolts and a bent screwdriver were all that remained. A cracked mirror was bolted roughly to the facing wall. Bane looked into it. A thin, dishevelled wretch looked back, eyes red-ringed and bloodshot, chin covered with white stubble. Ugly bruises, shallow cuts and red-raw bums ravaged his body. A roughly shaved head reflected the Light. Burst capillaries were visible beneath the skin where it had been pinched by clamps, manifesting as dark, crimson wheals.

Averting his gaze, Bane noticed a stool in the corner. A white muscle-vest lay over the top and it propped up a shotgun. He pulled on the vest. With his skinny frame it was a good fit. Bane checked the shotgun, but it was empty and the barrel ruined. It had been left for fixing. There was nothing else of any use here, so he crossed the main room to the second antechamber.

He saw a small burning lamp on a scorched metal table. It was a narco-lab. It had been days since his last stimm and he felt the sudden craving like a hammer-blow. Hands trembling, throat like ash, he licked his lips

and searched the table. He found a scalpel, foil dishes, paper gauze and flare goggles. Raking them aside, he went through a set of drawers beneath with growing fervour. One was empty, barring some stub rounds - no good for the shotgun, so Bane ignored them. The second drawer was locked. With frantic abandon, he smashed it with the crowbar. There were plans inside, dome maps. He slumped against the table despairingly. He needed a fix badly. He tried to focus, to think about Alicia. He got up and staggered back out, trying to pull himself together.

With regained composure came renewed fear. Where the hell was everyone? Bane opened the last door slowly and wished dearly he had a gun.

A vast work-yard, stretched out before him. As he entered, the machine noise grew louder and he realised this was where the noise was coming from. Two industrial-sized fans droned and whirred in eerie unison, kicking up a decaying stench in their blast drafts. Bane held his breath against the foetid air pumping into the room.

Only one half of the yard was visible, a faulty overhead strip light providing a flickering vista that hinted at more beyond the light's reach. A large gang motif was revealed by the stuttering light daubed in red paint - the skull with the razor in its forehead. It covered most of the floor area. Fresh handprints overlaid it, darker than the paint.

Huge stone slabs delineated a body-building area. House Goliath valued brawn over brains, and the Razors were adherents to that tenet. The raw, muscle-temple of hulking weight benches, lift bars and punch sacks was a testament to that. A massive metal tri-frame dominated the space, bolted into the stone slabs. A sturdy pulley system was set at its apex and monstrous plascrete blocks were attached via steam-bolted chains. Whoever was capable of lifting it would be capable of crushing a man like he was styrene. Drawing closer, Bane saw a clutch of dumb bells at the foot of the tri-frame; one was coated in a veneer of gore and matter. He suppressed the urge to flee. He had to find a way out and the only way to do that was to stay calm.

Dismantled weapons were everywhere, lined up on ranks of tables. Racks of lasguns, stubbers and autoguns were in abundance. Those that were assembled were locked in metal cages. Belt-fed ammunition, solid rounds and power packs, grenades and other munitions sat in piles.

Moving closer, Bane saw large metal packing crates containing heavier weapons: rotary cannons, stubb-killers and other high-calibre arms. The Razors had been planning something big. They had enough firepower to lay siege to a city.

Bane tried to open one of the cages but the lock would not yield. It was high end security and a crowbar was not going to prevail. He doubted he could remember how to reassemble a lasgun or autogun. Even if he could, his trembling hands made that task impossible. He was wasting time. He had to get out.

He eyed the darkness warily, unwilling to stray into it. Closer to the edge, the stench grew stronger. Then he saw the power array. Fixed into a wall, its sputtering wires cast tiny iridescent sparks into the darkness that fizzled and died as they struck the floor. Bane was no technician but he had seen enough to know a good, hard whack often got results. He struck the power array with the crowbar. With stuttering reluctance, a vast bank of strip lights lining the length of the work-yard came to life. As they did so, they revealed what the darkness had hidden. The entire Razorhead gang was here, all of them dead.

The scene was of a grisly massacre. At least fifty bodies stretched the width of the room. Two were slumped head first in a raised water sill that looked like it provided for the whole complex. Three more lay in the open, raked by bullet wounds, clutching knives and rusted cleavers in cadaverous fingers. Bane wandered tentatively into the carnage. Body piled on body greeted him as he moved slowly across the yard. Ahead were the outer walls of the Razorheads' lair, thick plascrete drilled by bullet holes and seared by las-burns. A chain-link gate bisected the wall in the middle, crowned by coiling razor wire. Another body was entangled in it. It looked like he had been trying to climb over. Overlooking it was a makeshift watch tower. Whatever had killed these bastards would do for him too if it found him here. If the Razors could not kill it, he doubted a stimm addict with a crowbar could. He ran quickly to check the gate, covering his nose and mouth against the stink of death.

Locked.

He shook it hard but the chain was strong and looked new. What he would not give for some bolt-croppers. One of the corpses might have the key. He approached the nearest body. A gaping neck wound hung open like

a second mouth, caused by what looked like a bite, with teeth marks that looked human. Bane forced the thought out of his mind and worked quickly. Patting the body down, he found nothing.

He moved to another. As he got nearer, he recognised him. Nagorn, the Razorheads' leader. They had met a long time ago. Thin strips of metal embedded in his forehead spelt his name. There were no obvious signs of his demise, but he was definitely dead. Lividity around the eyes and dilated pupils told their own story. The stench was overpowering. Bane retched before he could examine him. His heart leapt when he saw the key chain around Nagorn's neck, but his attention was drawn to something else. Tucked in the ganger's belt was a pistol. It was black and well-made, with a gold fist insignia on the stock. It might have been a fine weapon once, but it was tarnished and in need of repair. Bane recognised it. It was an Enforcement service pistol. Only officers who gave twenty years service got one. It belonged to him. He reached over the corpse and took it, but as he pulled the weapon free he felt something twitch.

Nagorn was looking at him! Heart thundering in his chest, Bane shrank away as Nagorn sat up, reaching out to seize Bane's wrist. He tried to break free but the dead man's grip was strong. Bane aimed the pistol point-blank at Nagorn's chest, squeezing the trigger. Nothing happened. Age and neglect had rendered the weapon useless. The other corpses stirred, moaning balefully as they dragged their bodies up out of the dirt. Horrified, Bane lashed out with the crowbar as Nagorn lunged to bite him. The blow crushed the ganger's cheek, ripping off his jaw. A second blow broke his arm and, prising away the dead fingers, Bane hurried to his feet. Nagorn did not stay down, he lumbered upright unsteadily on twisted limbs, reaching out for Bane with dirt-encrusted claws.

Bane backed away, disbelieving. Another zombie got close, eyes wide, jaw slack. The flesh on its face had rotted away, revealing bone. Bane struck it with the crowbar, smashing the thing to its knees. A third was in front of him, its skull caved in. Bane battered it. Then another moved up, a gaping torso wound exposing black putrefied innards. He cracked its skull with an overhand swipe and there was an audible crunch. Bane was tiring. His arms burned and he could not breathe in the miasma of decay. All the while the living dead shuffled closer, regarding him from around the work yard with malicious, hungry eyes.

Adrenaline fuelling his body, Bane ran urgently for the entry door. Those things blocked the gate and filled the yard - he had to go back.

Bane smashed the door aside as he bolted through it. The zombies converged on him, the promise of fresh meat driving them. Inside the large room, Bane dragged the mattress over to block the door he had come through. Moments after he had rammed the mattress into place, a heavy impact made the door shudder. It popped open a few inches. Dead fingers reached around the crack. Bane kicked it shut, severing them. The holopict viewer hissed at him. Wrenching it from the wall, wires spitting sparks, he heaved it across the door.

Backing out of the room, Bane watched the door give. Front the gloom beyond, the zombies pressed through the opening, two and three at a time, the mattress clawed aside and the holopict viewer crushed underfoot. Growing in vigour, they almost reached the next door before Bane could slam it.

He was back in the corridor. He kicked over drums and crates, launching one behind him in a vain effort to impede his pursuers. He barrelled around the corner, hearing the second door smash open. A wailing chorus of deep and terrifying groans came with it. In the long corridor he saw the ladder to the roof. He ran to it, limping. As he grabbed the first rung his leg was yanked back. The shaven-headed Razor he had left there snarled as it crawled toward him on its belly, tearing at his ankle. A bone crunching kick snapped the creature's neck and it lay still, releasing its grip. But the rest of the horde was almost upon him. Panting for breath, Bane pulled himself up the ladder, rung by painful rung. All the while, the corpse by the cell door lay dormant. Unable and unwilling to think on it further. Bane climbed madly, smashing the ceiling grille open with the crowbar. Heaving himself onto the roof, he took one last look below before shutting the hatch. Faces, deathly grey with rotten flesh and sunken eyes, glared back. They clawed at the air, snarling and moaning.

There was a freight elevator on the roof. Former Glory was ten kilometres away. He only hoped it reached that far. As Bane hobbled over to it, the roof hatch was thrown open. The zombies came crawling forth, shambling towards him with even greater vigour.

Staggering inside the elevator, Bane raked the concertina door shut. He fell back as the first of the zombies hurtled into it, hissing curses and

clawing through the slits in the gate. Then another came, and another, reaching, snarling. At this rate they would pound the gate down with sheer weight of numbers.

Beside him, a control panel hung down from a thick cable. There were only three operation symbols. Bane pressed the one to make the elevator go up. With shriek of protesting servos and rusted gears, the elevator car began its grinding ascent. At first the creatures held on, the deathly pallor of their misshapen visages staring wildly. But as the car increased its speed they fell away, eerily silent, into the void below. As the elevator rose, Bane tried to stop his heart hammering so loudly in his chest. lie slid down the corrugated metal siding, fingers slipping off the controls as he sank to the floor. Foetid air washed over him, faster and faster as the car picked up speed. Operational warning lamps were a hazy amber blur. They cast intermittent slashes across Bane's face. The steady *thwump* of the rising elevator car filled his senses. On his back the twinkling lights of uphive were like dying stars.

Exhausted, he drifted into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER TWO

THE VAPOUR FROM the massive precipitators fell like rain, wetting Alicia's hair and clothes. She looked up but could not see the huge machines. Many levels above, at the lowest point of Hive City, they gathered moisture from the air. Stored in vast wells, it was made chemically safe and farmed out by the Hydro-X guilders to those with creds to pay for it.

It was known as 'Fresh', though it was anything but. Yet it drew a high price and many guildsmen had grown fat on its profits. There were no such luxuries in Alicia's life. Born on the streets of lower hive, she had to take what she needed to survive. Petty theft led to worse, until she ran with a very bad crowd: Underhivers, the Razorheads. She had wanted out and she had got out. At least for now...

Alicia had been running madly, through claustrophobic access pipes and tunnels as black as sump tar. Her lungs burned. It had been five days since she had escaped. Five days sleeping half-awake in shadowed corners. Five days bunking under plas-sheeting when the precipitators vented and the turbine fans blew hard and cold through the skeleton of the Underhive, circulating stagnant air.

A morose wind from the turbine fans whipped through the underpass beneath where Alicia sheltered to avoid the rain. She hugged her storm cloak tighter around her body, flicking her hair out of her eyes. Ahead, dark structures soared into a false firmament of winking lights. It was not how he had described it. She was lost.

'Hey baby,' a lascivious male voice said from behind her. She turned towards it, heart thumping. A male juve, his bandana too big for him, stood a few feet away, legs slightly apart. She had not seen him crouching quietly in the shadows. He walked towards her, into the flickering glare of a halogen lamp. He was Alicia's height and wore black fatigues. A battered

crimson jacket hung on his wiry frame. A longing glint in his eyes held with it the promise of something dark as he appreciated her pretty, young face. When he pulled out the combat knife from behind his back, Alicia realised what that was.

‘C’mon sweetheart,’ he said, bringing up the blade so she could see. ‘Let’s have some fun.’

Alicia straightened up, opening her legs to adopt a more promiscuous stance.

‘You man enough for that?’ she purred, swishing one half of the storm cloak aside, revealing a long and supple leg. For added effect she put one hand on her hip.

Juve-boy was a little taken aback by her brashness and he faltered.

‘Well, are you?’ She leaned towards him, pursing her lips as she said it, her voice little more than a whisper.

Juve-boy recovered his composure, smiling as he advanced.

When he was almost next to her, Alicia threw open the storm cloak. Underneath, all she wore was a pair of skin-tight booty pants and a leather top that hugged her breasts and left her midriff exposed. The juve’s eyes widened. When Alicia pulled the stub pistol from a leather garter, they widened further.

‘Oh sh-’

Alicia smacked the knife from the dumbstruck ganger’s hand with the pistol butt. It clattered uselessly to the floor as she pressed the business end of the stub gun into his face.

‘Listen, you little twip,’ she breathed, voice low and menacing. ‘See that?’ She turned her left cheek, brandishing the tattoo on it like a badge. ‘You know that mark right?’ Juve-boy nodded.

‘And you know what they do to little twips like you?’

He nodded again, tears welling.

‘Well it’s nothing compared to what I’ll do if you don’t leave me the frik alone.’ She grabbed his crotch with her free hand and squeezed hard. Juve-boy stifled a yelp.

She fixed him her best ‘don’t frikk with me’ glance, sniffed derisively and cracked the pistol butt over the back of his head. He sank like a sump rat, hitting the floor hard, and stayed down.

Dropping to her knees, Alicia checked the Juve. He was out cold. She searched his pockets, tucking an errant strand of pink hair behind her ear as she did so. She found three stimm-sticks, a knife sheath and an igniter. She took all of it, dumping the stimm-sticks and the igniter in a pouch inside her storm cloak. She strapped the sheath to her leg. Stooping over his body, she stowed the knife and tucked the stub pistol back into her garter. Glancing round quickly, she made sure there was no one else lurking. Then, she wrapped herself in the storm cloak tugging the hood on, and fled out into the rain.

ALICIA STOPPED RUNNING when she reached the settlement. She saw a rusted, weather-beaten sign. It creaked on chains hung from a steel arch. Former Glory - population 10,065.

The number on the sign had been slashed through recently with black paint and modified to 10,049 in an untidy scrawl.

Her heart leapt. This was it.

Large tenement blocks rose up around her. They housed the multitudes that lived here and, she supposed, must teem with people.

It was late, and a vendor whose premises were opposite one of the tenements drew a heavy steel security curtain over a grimy-window. It looked like some kind of eatery; fusion dried cuisine and mystery meat were the big sellers.

‘Hey,’ Alicia called out, shivering as she ran over to him. The vendor took one glance at her bloodied, disheveled appearance and gang tat and stepped back into the eatery. Shutting a second gate down behind him.

‘Hey,’ she said. ‘I just want some food. I have creds.’

She pushed her breasts against the security bars, hoping for a reaction.

‘Closed,’ was the dour response. The door to the eatery slammed shut.

‘At least tell me where I can find the Salvation bar,’ she hollered.

No answer.

‘Frik-head,’ Alicia spat, kicking the gate, making it shudder.

She was about to turn when she saw her reflection in the filthy glass of the eatery window. It was the first time she had seen it in five days.

She looked drawn and thin. Grime smeared her face. Her make-up was ruined, long streaks of pink merged with blue. There was dirt under her

fingernails and blood from several small cuts had dried hard and black on her face. Lank from the precipitant rain, she tucked her pink hair back under the storm cloak's hood and shrugged. She had looked worse.

The promise of food had made Alicia hungry. Her stomach growled as she trudged away. She needed to find that bar. She needed to find Erik.

Alicia ran the narrow strip between the vendor and the tenement habs. Hammering on doors, she tried to rouse people but was met with the sound of sliding bolts. She moved on, heading down an alley. She was tired, but had to keep going. No way was she going to get caught again. She tugged her hood down further over her eyes to ward off the worst of the rain. Head down, she ploughed through the alley. In her urgency, she failed to notice a tramp huddled among some packing crates and plas-sheeting. She ran straight into him and fell. The storm cloak parted, revealing her glistening legs.

The tramp gazed at her as he picked himself up, his expression hungry. Alicia quickly covered up but it was too late. The tramp struggled out of the trash and staggered towards her, hands outstretched, fingers twitching. A wretched, filthy sack barely covered his body, and he had plas-sheeting tied around his feet with wire for makeshift boots. Alicia backed away on her hands and knees, until she felt the alley wall at her back.

'Back off, skank,' she snarled. If he touched her, she would bust him up good.

He ignored her and was almost upon her when she yanked the stub gun out from her garter.

'Don't!' she cried. Closing her eyes, she fired three times. The first shot ricocheted harmlessly off the wall, but the second two caught him in the shoulder and chest. He was spun off his feet and lay still. Alicia thought he was dead. She had never killed anyone before.

She got up and walked over to him tentatively. Some plas-sheeting covered his face. She had to move it aside. Hand outstretched she took hold of it and pulled it back slowly.

The tramp jerked his hand towards her, snarling as he tried to take a bite out of her hand. Alicia screamed, recoiling. He lurched up and she kicked hard. His head snapped back, but he was up again in seconds. Alicia ran, the tramp groaning balefully in her wake.

A stairway leading to the overhead walkway loomed ahead. She took it, scaling the stairs two at a time.

That frekker should be dead,' she whispered to herself. 'He should be dead.'

She ran hard, the metal gantry clanking loudly. Bolting around a corner, she barrelled smack into a bunch of disused cables hanging from an upper level and nearly lost her footing. No way down, so she drove at them, trying to work them aside with her arms. They were thick and she got entangled and slipped on the slick metal, tearing down a thick wad of cables as she struggled for purchase. Her hands slid off the rest and she fell.

A vendor's awning broke her fall. She ripped through it and struck the ground. Fire surged through her leg as she landed badly, breaking a boot heel. Gasping for breath, running on adrenaline, she tried to get up. Her leg buckled and she went down. Her vision blurred, tiny dark spots emerging at the periphery. She was blacking out. She fought it, trying to focus, to stay calm. It passed.

Her leg was broken and she was stranded in the back alleys of nowhere. Alicia cast a fearful glance in both directions but there was no sign of anyone. Shouting for help would probably be a mistake. She checked the load in the stub pistol. Only two rounds. She crawled up against the wall, biting her lip against the pain, trying to figure out what to do. A shadow fell across her. She looked up, gripping the stubber. It was a man. He was wearing long, tan leather robes. The top half of his face was hidden by shadow. Religious symbols hung from a cord of rope around his waist and he wore sandals on his feet.

'Are you lost, my child?' he asked benevolently, voice low and languid. He bent down as he said it, into the lamplight. As he spoke, his perfect teeth flashed and Alicia saw that the darkness hid an actual mask, the dull gold glinting. It was strangely hypnotic. Her grip on the stubber loosened but not of her own volition.

Her mouth felt numb. All she could manage was, 'I'm looking for salvation.'

The man smiled, wending a hand to her with long, claw-like manicured nails. 'You have found it.'

CHAPTER THREE

BANE DRIFTED IN and out of consciousness. Tunnels, vents and cable conduits flicked by in a myriad of colour and sound. The hardness of the floor was the only constant as he lay prone on the elevator deck. Former Glory was miles up and traversing the old Underhive freight channels would take time. Arching his head to one side, his vision darkened. Old memories gnawed at him. He was slipping back. Powerless, he went under and remembered. Three years ago, another place, another life...

DUST DRIFTED DOWN from uphive in swathes, thick and grey, dislodged by heavy machine activity above. Matt-black smocks repelled the worst of it, keeping the fine particles out of their weapons and equipment. Beneath the smocks was a solid mass of carapace armour, shoulder-slung combat shotguns and hip-holstered bolt pistols. Each man was a towering sentinel of honed musculature and violent potential. With their heads encased in combat helmets, visors down and respirators active, they were faceless. Intimidating, powerful, silver precinct shields gleaming, they were the ultimate custodians of Necromundan law they were Bane's men. His enforcers.

Bane waited silently as the dust fell. Upright, strong and determined, he was the very model of Enforcer machismo. You could have slapped a slogan beneath his clean-shaven, chiselled stone jaw that read 'Join up now!' and the Enforcer ranks would have swelled. He was the original poster child. The ideal.

On Bane's left was Proctor Vaughn. A capable officer, Vaughn had sped up the ranks with gusto. Next to him was Dugan, a heavy auto-loading slobber cradled lovingly in his immense grasp. Vincent and Lorimir stood alongside him. Both were big men, but they were dwarfed by Dugan. On Bane's right stood Zan, a weapons specialist, favouring a grenade launcher

tonight. Choke gas and lethal rounds filled a belt around his waist. Heske, Rannon and Keller were alert beside him. The nine men stood in a semi-circle in front of a large disused warehouse, waiting.

Out of the darkness a tenth enforcer emerged, Nabedde, a tech-adept. He held a pair of high-intensity magnoculars in one hand.

‘Thermal imaging confirmed, sir,' he said.

Bane nodded. 'Flow Many?’ His tone was deep and resonant through the respirator.

'Six, plus our target.'

If Bane felt anything, he did not show it. 'Our target is on your internal display. Miss Alcana Ran-Lo.'

A tiny screen inside Bane's visor crackled to life. An image of a young girl appeared, around sixteen, pretty and obviously Spirebom. She had to be, no way anyone but the ruling elite of Necromunda could requisition enforcers. Backed onto green-screen, the grainy image flickered - a result of the dust interfering with the Precint House uplink.

'We are tasked with her live extraction.' Bane continued without emotion. 'Lethal force against the Razorheads has been sanctioned. That is all.’

An audible click and the voxponder link died. Comm-silence from here on in.

Ahead, the massive derelict structure of Toomis Pre-fab Residential loomed high. Twin plasteel reinforced doors baited their advance, leading to a cargo docking zone. Enforcer mission tacticians had deemed this the best point of entry.

Switching to signal communication, Bane motioned to Nabedde.

The tech-adept hurried to the reinforced doors and brought a high-end lascutter to bear. The lock offered no resistance to the super-heated beam, burning through in seconds. The sound of the doors creaking open was muffled by their helmets.

Bane held up his left arm. Making a fist, he flicked out his fore and index fingers and pointed towards the door.

Rannon and Keller hurried over to it. Nabedde stepped aside as, edging the door wider, the two men made visual checks. Rannon gave a thumbs-up, whilst Keller maintained a vigil at the door. Bane and the rest advanced.

Bane approached Nabedde. He held a holo-pict viewer, flat screen, high-resolution, displaying a schematic of the building. The location of the gangers was denoted by a red triangular symbol. Two separate channels, divided by a thick plascrete wedge, led to them – perfect assault positions.

Bane allowed himself a smile beneath his respirator. The bastards wouldn't know what hit them.

Bane was first through the doors, the rest of his men following in his wake. Nabedde brought up the rear, closing the doors. With the room sealed, Bane removed his respirator. The rest of the patrol team did likewise.

The cargo docking zone was a reinforced plascrete square at least a hundred metres across. Slim gantries ran in a 'U' shape along the side and back walls, forty metres above the docking floor. Dead-bolted trapdoors were inset into the corrugated ceiling another forty metres after that, leading up to the roof. Numerous walkways stretched across the gulf of space between one end of the docking floor and the other, suspended by hefty chains. Overhead strip lighting cast stark light onto the packing crates, plas-tubing and cable drums scattered thickly across the cargo zone floor. Power-haulers, servo-lifters and mechanised arms lay dormant throughout. An exo-loader slumped in one corner. A tracked design, its operator's harness was bent and split, both loader arms slack and lifeless. From the torso up it was vaguely humanoid, the tracks below crude and functional. Covered in a layer of dogging dust it was like some ancient mechanised soldier, forgotten and disconsolate.

Offices and caged equipment bays branched off from the gantries. Bane doubted there was anything left in them. The disused building had been that way for years. Once part of a frontier district, the Underhive had risen up and swallowed it. It had become gang territory. The broken glass, graffiti and scorch marks left by fires were a testament to the looting. Toomis was long dead. His legacy, this building, was just another rotting wound in which the disease of Lawlessness could fester.

The upper levels did not concern Bane. He was certain the Razors were down here. The sergeant turned to Vaughn, raised a fist, splayed out his lingers and pointed sharply to the right channel as indicated by Nabedde's schematic.

Vaughn nodded and turned to the rest of the men, indicating Zan, Lorimir, Vincent and Keller, who followed him as he moved quickly but cautiously down the right channel in silence.

Bane took the left, the rest of the squad with him.

About fifteen metres down the left channel, the strip lighting gave out with the sound of sputtering circuits. A grey gloom covered everything and the packing crates and disused machinery became dark shapes in it.

Bane pressed the night vision rune on his helmet's control array and a green spectrum overlaid his visor. The men followed suit.

Another ten metres and they rounded a sharp bend. Immediately ahead were metal packing crates, stacked high and deep, and machine junk blocked their path. Bane bent down to examine the drag marks still visible in the plascrete. They were recent Gunfire and shouting echoed distantly ahead, emanating from the right channel.

'Oh crap. Vaughn,' Kane breathed.

They'd been set up.

The warehouse exploded with roaring gunfire and muzzle flashes. From the gantries above, silhouettes of the Razorheads poured down hell and hot lead.

Nabedde was hit twice in the chest. Another shot in the leg put him down.

'Hug the walls,' Bane bellowed over the raucous din of exchanged fire, strafing the left gantry with his bolt pistol. From across the docking floor the throaty retort of enforcer combat shotguns erupted.

'Back to the junction. Go!' Bane cried, squeezing off a couple of rounds. One of their shadowy assailants screamed and fell.

Dugan withered the suspended walkway overhead with his heavy stubber, severing suspension chains. More screaming as three silhouettes fell into the blackness. As he backed up the corridor, suppressing fire echoing a batch of wooden crates on his left burst open. The splinter storm enveloped Dugan, taking him down.

Through the settling dust and carnage, an exo-loader lumbered into view. A Razorhead sat in the harness. It blocked their escape. With hissing servos and screeching machine metal, Heske took a hit to the chest with one of the loader's hulking pneumatic arms. Ripped off his feet by the impact he was smashed into a junk pile and lay still.

Bane drove at the machine, ignoring a stub round as it ricocheted oh his carapace shoulder guard, strafing the harness with a full clip. The shots exploded in a shower of sparks and metal debris. A head shot killed the driver instantly. He slumped, held upright by the harness and the machine sagged on its tracks.

Bane did not stop. He found Heske, and heaved him to his feet. He was spitting blood and screamed in agony.

Dugan got up, the bottom half of his face a patchwork of savage cuts. His cannon roared as it raked the gantries above, keeping the Razors at bay while they fled the firestorm. On the deck, Nabedde wasn't moving.

Rannon reached the junction. Bane could see him as he dragged Heske along, the wounded enforcer protesting loudly. Dugan followed, backing off as he pummelled the gantries. The belt-feed in his stubber grew hot and shell casings cascaded.

‘Nabedde?’ Bane asked as they converged on the junction. They crouched at the plascrete wedge. The gantries did not reach this far so they had a brief reprise, Dugan, the last to arrive, shook his head.

Bane swore beneath his breath and said a prayer for Nabedde. He looked to the door, acutely aware of the approaching Razors and the gunfire still echoing from the right channel.

The door had been sealed with some kind of super-heated torch.

Bane looked at Heske and then Rannon and Dugan

‘You two are with me. We weren't meant to get out of that corridor We back up Vaughn and his team and break through to the girl.'

'What about Hes-' Dugan's words caught in his mouth. Heske stared ahead blindly. He was dead.

Bane returned his grim expression. ‘We get her out and reconnoitre here.' Dugan and Rannon nodded.

Bane rammed a full clip into his bolt pistol and took Heske's shotgun before all three men headed down the right flank.

It did not take long to find Vaughn and the others.

They were bottled in and blasting at the overhead gantries Muzzle flashes lit up the scene. Vaughn was wounded, his left leg shot tip and useless. He dragged it after him as he tried to find cover. The rest of the enforcers were on their feet - they had faired better than Nabedde and Heske.

Bane ran, firing his bolt pistol. A silhouette fell with a grunt. Dugan and Rannon bagged three more.

For a moment all was silent, gun smoke descending like a veil.

Suddenly, shots exploded out of the gloom. Lorimar took one in the neck, the impact ripping off his respirator. It came from the docking floor. They had moved down; the gantries were no longer safe as they were riddled with gunfire.

'Damn it, sir,' Vaughn cried above the din. Vincent supported him. 'We're getting crucified.'

Bane paused a moment, thinking. He knew it was only a matter of time before the rest of the hive gangers boxed them in.

'There's no going back,' he snarled, gritting his teeth as a shot exploded overhead. The fire coming from the Razorheads was fearsome.

Vaughn had to shout above it to he heard. 'And the girl?'

Bane could not leave her. He spoke to Dugan through the voxponder. 'Bring that cannon up.'

'Affirmative, sir,' Dugan replied.

Bane turned hark to Vaughn 'She's coming too.' The captain focused his attention on Zan who was ripping down more crates to improve the barricade. 'Gas that corridor,' Bane ordered. We're gonna rush 'em.'

Zan nodded, fixing a choke round in the chamber of his grenade launcher.

'And stay alive,' Bane added. 'You're our exit.'

'Dugan,' Bane bellowed 'Covering fire!'

Dugan stepped up and let rip on full auto. Vaughn stayed with him and fired his combat shotgun.

There was a hollow *thwump*, air expelled from a thick tube, as Zan fired. Gas engulfed the Razorheads coming down the narrow cordon towards them.

Bane was first to leap over the barrier.

'Keep low and to the sides,' he growled through the voxponder.

Fire spitting over their heads, the rest of the enforcers advanced, ducking in and out of packing crates and machinery. Through their visors, they could penetrate the gas cloud and find targets. Overhead, Dugan's heavy stubber sounded like a battle cry.

The Razors were everywhere. Through the darkness and dissipating gas, Bane fired repeatedly as target after target presented itself. The room where Altana Ran-Lo was being held was not far away. He did not know who had made it through the fusillade. Dugan’s cannon still roared behind him and he thought he saw Rannon and Vincent.

He reached the end of the cargo docking zone. There was a door. He kicked it down. Two Razors loomed through the murk; they'd shattered the overhead strip light. Bane killed them both. He advanced. Vincent was a way behind him. He heard him shout Rannon's name.

His nerves were raw. He was reacting on instinct alone. From his left, another shadow darted towards him. Bane turned to it and fired.

A girl's scream echoed in his mind, clear as ice in the confusion.

Alcana Ran-Lo seemed to fall in slow motion. Banes legs were leaden as he threw down the smoking bolt pistol and tried to reach her.

Hitting the ground where she had sprawled, Bane felt time return to normal. Mood oozed from Alcana's frail body. She was breathing rapidly and turned her head slowly to face the man who had shot her. Bane looked back as he tried desperately to staunch the bleeding.

'Stay with me. Stay alive,' he begged.

She looked up at him, her eyes cold, pleading, her gaze seemed to pierce his very soul. 'No,' he gasped. His hands were slick with her blood. The noise of the gun battle around them sounded like muted thunder.

The light in Alcana's eyes faded and she was still.

'No...'

BANE AWOKE, AWASH with sweat. A stranger loomed over him. He stank of stale body odour and urine. he started as Bane came round. A filthy coat covered his body. He wore fabric glows, fingerless and stained and his boots were too big. Around his neck were numerous icons and symbols - too many for one person. He was a corpse tinker, a wretched skank who stole from the dead.

Bane got to his feet, even as the tinker retreated. Wasted as he was, Bane was still bigger and towered above the scrawny man.

'Your coat, boots,' he said with the raw insistence of a man with nothing left to lose. 'Hand 'em over.'

'Frik you,' spat the tinker, trying to sound confident.

The service pistol was suddenly in Bane's hand. He thrust it forward with intent. 'Hand 'em over.'

The tinker shrugged off the coat. Beneath it he was naked from the waist up and as filthy as his attire. He kicked off the boots, eyes on Bane the whole time. A wag of the gun and he ran out into the darkness.

When he was long gone, Bane tucked the pistol back in his trousers, pulled on the coat and boots and tried not to hate himself. Funny really, he'd just robbed the skank with a defective gun. The poor bastard would probably freeze to death.

As Bane stepped out of the elevator, the nightmare persisted. He shook his head, trying to quash it. Alcana was dead, but Alicia lived. A second chance. His redemption.

He had to get to her. He knew the Razors were dogged, had seen enough corpses dead by their handiwork and people who had tried to elude them, but to reach out from beyond the grave... How do you kill the already killed? It did not seem possible. He suppressed a shudder at remembering the creatures and tried to crush that memory too. He really needed a drink.

The elevator had stopped abruptly, the winch's power cell exhausted. A deserted service tunnel stretched in front of him. An oil-smeared sign in front of it indicated that Former Glory was three kilometres up.

Mane gave a long sigh.

He would have to go the rest of the way on foot.

BY THE TIME Bane reached Former Glory, his arms and legs burned. The long climb had toughened his muscles, but had not helped his head. It pounded relentlessly, the nagging ache gnawing at his resolve.

He had entered via the township's mining district. Little better than a slum, it was rammed with lofty tenements and saloons for the numerous ore prospectors passing through. Soup kitchens and seedy vendors were the norm here, but today the streets were deserted. Stalls were overturned and trashed, habs and refineries lifeless and dark. Bane's anxiety increased.

Somewhere along the way he had lost the crowbar, so it was with tentative steps that Bane walked past the first high-rise tenements.

Heading further into the settlement, he noticed that the sector lamps were down. At first he thought it was a power outage, but he was soon aware that they had been smashed. Oil drum fires littered the streets, casting the nearby buildings in sickly, flickering orange. They were beacons to skanks, strays and other lowlifes, but they were deserted. Bane wandered past a saloon called Kreegan's. He knew it. They did not serve him anymore because of some trouble a few months back. It looked like Kreegan had gone out of business. The door was boarded up. Same for the window but it had been ripped open and large splints of wood were still bolted to the plascrete like jagged teeth.

There was blood on them.

A machete lay in the dirt. It looked like it might have been used to get in the window. There was blood on it and the blade was still tacky. As he crouched to examine it, Bane had the feeling he was being watched. He looked around quickly.

There was no one there.

He listened hard. Somewhere in the darkness he heard a faint sound, scraping or shuffling - he could not be certain which.

The pistol in his pants was useless, so he wiped the machete on his coat and took it. Bane hurried quickly to the shadows, hugging the wall as he peered nervously into the dark. Salvation was only a few streets ahead.

The further he went, the more dilapidated Former Glory became. Buildings and habs were little more than burned out ruins. The town had always been a hole, no question, but this was a frikking war zone.

Above, he heard a muffled din like thunder. The precipitators were venting again. Vapour came down in sporadic droplets, hissing as it struck the drum fires. Gradually, the light shower became a barrage. Bane had no desire to be stuck out in it. He knew what chemical reactants were in the untreated run-off. A door to a tenement block hung open. Bane hurried through it.

The room of the tenement was dark, lit only by the ambient light spilling in through the open doorway. It was some kind of lobby area. Bane kicked something as he entered. It was a small halogen lamp. It refused to work, so he smacked its power cell with the palm of his hand. Three more jolts and it sparked into life.

It was running virtually on empty so the lamp's glow was weak. It looked like skanks had been slumming here. Filth raked the walls and the detritus of broken glass and furniture lay underfoot. One of the walls had a blood smear going all the way up to the ceiling. Bane gripped the machete tighter.

Swinging the lamp over into the corner, he noticed a small pack, the kind ore-prospectors used to carry rations while they dug. He opened the pack up. There were dark spots on it that might have been blood. Bane's heart leapt when he saw the contents. It still held miner's rations: thin wafer cakes and meat strips. The wafers were thy and the meat tough like leather, but Bane devoured it anyway. Pity there was no liquor, and he had not met a prospector yet who was a stimm- head, so no joy there either.

Wiping his mouth as he cast the pack aside. Bane carried on further into the lobby. He had got his bearings. The lobby was long and shaped like a lozenge. Walls that might once have been white were yellowed with age and filth. Paper peeled off in places, exposing damp and hefty cracks. Three doors on either side led off into other rooms. Bane decided to take the first on the left.

Barely inches from the doorway, the lamp gave out and darkness engulfed him. Bane smacked the power cell but nothing happened. He tried again. Still nothing. He dumped the lamp with the ration pack.

Edging inside, the drumming of the precipitant rain was crushed by the sound of Bane's beating heart. He was shaking, from withdrawal or fear, he could not tell. A strange sensation came over him. His legs seemed reluctant to move and every shadow held a threat. He clutched the machete to his chest. 'Someone in here?'

Something moved in the far corner. Swathed in darkness, Bane could not tell what it was. Maybe it was Alicia? Perhaps she had got lost and squatted here.

Bane came forward a pace. 'Alicia?'

Whatever it was shifted again. In fact, there were several of them. A low and menacing hiss emanated from the corner of the room. It was not Alicia.

Bane ran out into the lobby and tripped on the discarded ration pack. Cursing, he got up quickly and fled out of the tenement into the rain.

After a few metres, he stopped, crouching in a boarded-up vendor's doorway, while he caught his breath. Lungs burning, he looked behind him. He could not see a thing in the darkness. He waited but nothing happened. He could see the Salvation ahead. It looked quiet, almost dead.

‘Where the frik is everyone?' he muttered.

In the distance he heard the same shuffling, scraping sound again but could not place its origin. He suddenly had no desire to stay there. Venturing from the doorway, he made for the bar quickly, praying that Alicia would be waiting for him.

UP-CLOSE, BANE SAW that all the doors and windows to The Salvation were boarded up. He peered through a crack in one of the windows. It was totally dark inside. There was someone in there, he could hear them breathing. Whispers too. He could not tell what they were saying, but they sounded fearful, as if they knew he was out there but were too scared to reveal their presence.

Bane moved to the door. He cast another look into the darkness behind him. It seemed quiet but something nagged at his raw nerves. tie needed to get off the streets. right now.

Bane hammered at the door. In the darkness behind him came the shuffling, scraping sound, only louder. He flashed a glance back. Blinking away the rain he saw something move. Bane hammered harder. 'Let me in, damn it!' He glanced back around. There was definitely something there. It was coming towards him...

The door in front of Bane was thrust open. Hands grabbed him roughly and yanked him inside. The door thudded shut in his wake and darkness surrounded him.

Bane was slammed onto his back and disarmed. A small oil lamp was thrust into his face. He tried to get up, swipe the lamp out of his face, but strong gloved hands held him down. He made out two large men. Thick scarves covered their faces. He opened his mouth to speak but one of the men shoved a thick wad of cloth into it.

'Is he bit?' a tremulous voice hissed from the back of the room.

'Dunno. Bring the dog,' It sounded muffled; must have been one of the men holding him. Heavy footsteps came over as a fourth man brought a

snarling mastiff over. Its breath assaulted Bane's nostrils and flicked saliva felt wet on his chin and neck. The brutish beast sniffed him vigorously and then backed off. He heard the leash fall slack.

'He's clean,' said the fourth man, his voice gruff and old. Bane recognised it. Bane felt the pressure on his arms lift as he was released. The lamp withdrew and he saw the people hiding out in the bar for the first time.

The two men holding him down wore the garb of ore prospectors: thick clothes, lots of layers with robust-looking gloves and boots. Both wore oil-smeared caps and pulled the scarves down from their faces once they realised Bane was not a threat.

A little further back a tall, heavy-set man regarded him. He wore a brown leather apron over a pale blue shirt and dark leggings. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing brawny arms covered in thick hair. With his balding pate and handlebar moustache, he was every inch the frontier barman. The mastiff's leash was balled around his fist and in the other hand he held a shotgun pointing straight at Bane.

'Gilligan.' Bane said, smiling as he recognised the face that went with the voice. 'Is that any way to treat your best customer?'

Gilligan snorted contemptuously and lowered the shotgun.

'Gil,' Bane said, taking in the faces around the room. 'What the hell is going on?'

'Survival, that's what's going on,' he said, barely containing his disgust. 'And hell is right. Hell on the streets.'

Drama. Gilligan had a talent for it. He used to be a brawler. Underhivers paid hard creds to watch him fight in the pits. No augmetics, just brawn and balls. He whipped up the crowds with his antics. But time was inexorable and pit fighting was a young man's game, so when he won his freedom he opted for the 'easy' life and became a barman. He told that story every night, least those that Bane could recall through the alcoholic haze. Gilligan liked regaling his customers with stories, but this was no tale.

'What are you talking about?' A bottle of grain liquor sat half empty on the ban Bane walked towards it.

'While you were gone something happened,' Gilligan began. In the frail light from the oil lamp his eyes seemed on fire. 'People got sick and died.

No one knew why. But they didn't stay dead. They came back.'

Bane's stomach lurched and his heart quickened as he thought back to his ordeal in the Razorheads' lair. He reached for the bottle but Gilligan grabbed it and held it down.

'People fought,' Gilligan continued. 'They fought with everything they had. Mothers and children fought with sticks and rocks but how can you kill the already killed?' Bane's own words echoed in his mind.

'One bite,' Gilligan said, looming closer. 'Just one, that's all it takes, and you're one of them.' The barman paused, allowing it to sink in as he fixed Bane with a stem glare. 'Far as I know, we're all that's left.'

He let go of the bottle.

Bane brought it to his lips a little too quickly and supped deep. The liquor burned as it gushed down his throat.

‘I see some things haven't changed,’ Gilligan said accusingly, leaning back.

Bane gave him a rueful look as he wiped his mouth and set the bottle down.

'I've seen 'em too, but way down-hive. It must've spread.'

'For sure,' Gilligan's voice was edged with sarcasm. 'That's why we're hiding here. The streets ain't safe.'

'Gil,' Bane moved towards the barman as he said it, his voice urgent 'have you seen a girl come through here. I was supposed to meet her. Young, pretty, gang tats on her arms.'

Gilligan was disgusted and recoiled, 'Damn it Bane, I knew you were low but this...

What is she, a streetwalker, or another junkie like you?'

'It's not like that,' Bane protested. 'She's called Alicia, has she been here?'

Gilligan snorted in surprise. 'You went after that girl?'

'Have you seen her?' Bane insisted.

'No,' Gilligan shook his head. 'No, she hasn't been here.'

Bane's heart sank. He had hoped she might be in another room or that maybe she had fled when all this started and left him a message. Instead he had nothing. He was no closer to finding her than when he was a prisoner.

'Why do you care?'

'I just do,' he said curtly. He looked around the room. 'Who are these people?' Bane asked, indicating the group of survivors.

'Name's Lyle.' One of the prospectors came forward, average height but well-built. He had a scar down one side of his face, probably from a cutting tool accident.

Bane nodded to him.

‘The big fella's Oheb,' said Lyle, jerking a thumb in the direction of the second prospector, a dark-skinned giant, with hands like shovels and skin that shimmered like oil. Oheb gave an almost imperceptible nod. He looked like the kind of guy who only moved when he had to, but when he did it was fast and with all the force of a piston-driven hammer.

'You know my daughter, Jarla,’ Gilligan said. A timid little girl appeared from behind her father's bulk. She was sixteen, just like Alicia. She did not have Alicia's savvy or toughness though. Her father had cosseted her, tried to shield her from the depravity and terror of the Underhive. No way could he do that now.

Jarla's innocent eyes held fear enough for all of them and she clutched Gilligan's tabard, knuckles whitening. The big man laid a hand lovingly on his daughter's head and she seemed to relax.

'Doctor Halem Mavro,' Gilligan indicated a small, weedy looking man hunched in a long tan coat. He had thinning, straggly black hair and stubble around his neck and chin. He toyed with a razorblade, rolling it across his knuckles and between his fingers. Behind wire frame spectacles, his beady, vermin-like eyes narrowed and a thin smile split across his lips as he recognised Bane.

'Mr Bane and I are already acquainted.' His voice was naturally insinuating.

Bane clenched his fists and tried to keep his expression impassive.

'Who's the guy in the comer?' he asked, changing the subject.

'Ratz. He's an outlands scavenger, far as I know,' said Gilligan.

Ratz had the dark tan and bone totems of a Ratskin. Bands of them roamed the outlands.

Most thought of them as savages who were not to be trusted, but Ratskins had travelled most of the Underhive and beyond and were excellent guides. This particular specimen did not look in the mood to be

guiding anyone. He rocked back and forth, staring straight ahead, muttering constantly beneath his breath.

'I found it, they took it,’he said. 'I found it and it spoke to me.' Poor bastard was raving.

What's his problem?' Bane asked.

‘Dunno. We found him like that. Couldn't just leave him out there to be eaten by those...' Gilligan stopped. There was a noise outside, like a dull thud.

'What-' Bane began but Gilligan hissed him quiet.

Lyle tossed Bane the machete and took out a large rockcrete hammer. Oheb hefted his much larger hammer and, for a big man, moved quickly to the back of the room and put his hand over Ratz's mouth, who was wide-eyed and looked like he was about to pop.

Mavro cowered in the corner, twisting his razorblade more vigorously as he squatted next to a dust-ridden synth-organ. Jarla was sent to hide behind the bar, while Gilligan primed his shotgun. The mastiff at his heel sat stock still, ears pricked up, a low growl in its gullet.

They waited in the darkness for several minutes. The silence persisted until Gilligan's shoulders slumped down again and they all relaxed.

The big barman exhaled loudly, moving behind the bar to pour a drink.

Bane noticed that the bar floor had been totally cleared. The tables and chain now served as barricades over the doors and windows. The only entrance not barred was the one Bane had come in by, but even that was bolted and boarded. The only piece of furniture in the room that had not been moved was the synth-organ. It was bolted to the floor.

'Noise and light attracts them,' Gilligan whispered, knocking back the liquor. He grimaced as it went down. They hunt in packs. If they knew we were in here...' he paused, noticing the fearful look in Jarla's eyes. 'Well, you know what could happen.'

'So what's your plan? You're gonna hole up in here until what? Until help arrives?' Gilligan was about to answer, but the words caught in his throat. He had no plan. He had only got this far out of necessity.

Bane looked beneath the shelving and through the drawers behind the bar.

'What the hell are you doing?' Gilligan asked. These two bottles are all the booze I've got left.'

Bane looked up at him. 'You got any more weapons in this dung-hole?'

'Just the shotgun, and what you mean by dung-hole?'

Bane ignored him. 'We can't stay here. It's not safe.'

'Since when do you tell us what we can and can't do?' It was Lyle walking up to the bar with Oheb towering behind him like a slab of pure muscle.

Bane looked up and was about to answer when he felt suddenly dizzy. The liquor had gone straight to his head. He was sweating profusely as another stimm craving took hold. He gripped the edge of the bar to stop from falling over.

'Besides,' Lyle continued, not noticing Bane's discomfort. 'The Watch'll come looking for us. They'll be clearing the streets right now.'

Bane sniffed derisively and shook his head. He spoke through gritted teeth. 'I am the Watch.'

Lyle looked over to Gilligan. who, expression grim, just nodded.

'He's talking about *real* watchmen, Bane,' the barman countered. 'Ones who uphold the law.'

'No one's coming,' Bane told him, straightening up as the craving started to pass. This plague is spreading fast. Who knows how far it's got. By now, this whole sub-level could be overrun. Frontiers in the Underhive change all the time. If a settlement is consumed by gangers or plague or whatever, then another will crop up somewhere else. If you want to survive, we need to get off this level and we can't do that without weapons.'

'So what are you suggesting, lawman?' Gilligan's annoyance at Bane's audacity was palpable.

'We get out of this building and head for the Watch House. It's fortified, maybe those things haven't got in there yet,' he said. There's an armoury. We get tooled-up and head uphive.'

'We can't survive out there,' Gilligan hissed with an involuntary glance at his daughter. All the while he and Bane spoke, Mavro continued to manipulate the razorblade. He was yet to settle down after the earlier scare and was not paying attention to the conversation. His eyes were on the doors and windows. Metal flashed in the lamp light as the blade danced faster and faster across his knuckles.

The shine caught Bane's eye and he grimaced.

'Will you frikking cut that out?' he growled.

'Huh?' Mavro looked up and then winced in pain as the blade cut him. He dropped it and it fell into the synth-organ. Without thinking he groped into it to retrieve his obsessive-compulsive trinket but he activated the ancient device and it roared spectacularly, terribly into life.

The room filled with noise, a tinny ditty that crackled and cracked. Bright lights flared out of the organ as the tune played.

'No!' Gilligan gasped. He raced across the bar room floor, heaving aside Mavro who came up clutching the razorblade.

'It's lucky,' he blathered.

It took all of Gilligan's resolve not to strike him. He scowled, a look that promised a later reckoning. Desperately, he tried to switch the machine off but was struggling in the dark and panic.

‘Turn it off, turn it off!' Jarla cried, huddled behind the bar and peering around the corner.

'They took it! They took it!' Ratz whooped, bouncing up and down.

Bane advanced, about to intervene, when there was a mighty chunk and the noise abruptly stopped. Oheb stood over a crackling, hissing synth-organ, a small pall of smoke gathering around him. The blow from the rockcrete hammer had destroyed the device utterly.

Silence descended again. No one moved. They barely breathed.

After a few moments, Gilligan relaxed. Then it happened.

Thick splinters of wood tore into the room as one of the boarded up windows was destroyed. Faces, skin sloughed, eyes sunken in their sockets, peered back through the gap left behind. They reached in, scrabbling desperately, driven by unnatural hunger as they tried to force their way inside.

The shotgun roared. Lyle ducked to avoid its blast, and a zombie who had made it as far in as his torso exploded. Gore and blood showered them. Jana screamed. All the while, the mastiff strained at its leash, barking loudly at the grim intruders.

'Seal it,' Gilligan bellowed. Oheb grabbed a strewn table from one of the bard-cadet and rammed it hard against the window. Bones cracked and shattered with the impact. Heavy thuds rammed against it instantly as the creatures battered it. Oheb witted his teeth as he fought to keep them at bay.

A second window caved in. Gilligan swung his shotgun around, fired and missed, the scatter peppering the wall. A zombie, clothes torn, skin pallid grey, lurched inside. Gilligan brought the shotgun up again as the thing lumbered towards him, hissing and snarling.

There was a click. The shotgun had jammed.

Gilligan worked at the loading mechanism, trying to clear it as the zombie came at him. Bane ran forward, beheading the creature with a brutal swipe of his machete. Behind him, a third window was rent open and the door rattled so hard it almost came off its hinges. 'We can't stay here,' Bane told him. Lyle rushed to the window. He smashed a zombie with his hammer. 'Our only chance is to get to the Watch House.' Gilligan licked the sweat off his top lip and nodded.

Bane looked around the room, quickly. Jarla was still crouched at the bar. Mavro had dragged Ratz to his feet and the two of them stood next to her. Lyle and Oheb were doing their best to hold the creatures off.

'Is there another way out?' Bane asked, shouting to be heard.

Gilligan paused, trying not to look at the things fighting to get in.

'Come on,' Bane urged.

The cellar,' Gilligan gasped. 'It leads out into the street. It's around the other side of the bar. It might be clear.'

'Good enough. Get them out, we'll follow,' Bane ordered, pointing at Mavro, Ratz and Jarla.

Gilligan nodded. He whispered a few words to his daughter as he lovingly cradled her cheek.

The cellar was located behind the bar where an iron trapdoor led into a tunnel. It was a couple of metres across and opened up into a delivery bay that led to the street. Gilligan yanked open the trapdoor with one hand. Hefting Jarla onto his shoulder, leash and shotgun in his free hand, he descended into it, the others following closely behind.

In the bar room, Lyle cried out. The window was breached, he could not hold them off and they were getting inside. The back door too was almost torn open; a horde of terrible faces regarded them through the widening crack.

'We move, now!' Bane bellowed, rushing forward to cut down a zombie that was tearing at the door.

Lyle backed away. He swung wildly, but there were too many getting through. Bane grabbed the scruff of his collar and heaved him back as the growing horde within the room slowly advanced. They fell back to the bar, calling to Oheb to do the same.

The giant looked behind him at the zombies shuffling forward. He was cut off. Roaring he whirled round, allowing the table he was using to block the window to fall. He dived into the horde, rockcrete hammer swinging to the stomach-churning chorus of crushing bones.

'Get out' he yelled. ‘I’ll follow.' His deep voice was like a clap of thunder, but it lacked conviction.

As Bane backed away, dragging Lyle who was screaming for his friend, he crushed feelings of remorse. Oheb was doomed. From behind him, more of the zombies surged. They hooked onto his back with filthy talons and gored him with their teeth. The first he shrugged off, heaving it into the wall with his mighty shoulders, but then came a second and a third. They swarmed over him, front and back. He bellowed defiantly, the sound muffled by the press of bodies assailing him.

Averting his gaze, Bane heaved the trapdoor to the cellar shut. The last thing he heard was the dull thud of Oheb's rockcrete hammer falling to the floor. Above the shuffling and scraping overhead, he could hear other sounds - tearing and sucking. Oheb was a big man with lots of meat on the bone. Eating him would take time, hopefully enough to get to the street before the horde came looking for them. Bane shut off his mind to the imagined horror above and, together with Lyle, headed down the cellar tunnel to find the others.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT WAS DARK in the tunnel and Bane was glad of it. It smothered his thoughts, made it so none of what he had just witnessed was real. Lyle's hard breathing alongside him was a reminder though. Still, at least he didn't have to make eye contact. Bane thought of Alicia and he crushed the memory quickly.

Gilligan had kept the light off deliberately. A shaft of light emanating from the chinks in the metal exit door that led to the street would attract the creatures. There was a chill too; Bane felt it on his bare skin. The stink of stale alcohol pricked his nostrils. A few bottles of grain liquor would go down well right about now. Dense metal racking was aligned either side so he used it to find his way.

After a few minutes of charged silence, he saw figures ahead.

'That you, Bane?' Gilligan whispered.

Bane let his heartbeat steady before he answered.

'It's me.'

They clustered together like sump cattle. Gilligan was at the centre, shotgun in hand, one big arm wrapped protectively around his daughter. Mavro skulked nearby. He held Ratz by the scruff of the neck and the ratskin muttered quietly into the darkness.

They hovered at the foot of a rockcrete exit ramp, beneath the twin metal doors that led to the street. Light, grey and weak filtered in from above, casting them in monochrome. Bane and Lyle stepped into it.

'Where's Oheb?' asked Gilligan.

Lyle looked down. Bane gave the faintest shake of his head and Gilligan's face fell. Bane walked past the huddled group, up the ramp.

'Dead?' Mavro muttered. 'He's frikking dead. They killed him? He was a giant.'

Mavro released Ratz's collar and stalked up the ramp after Bane. 'What chance do the rest of us have?' he said. He was right in his face.

Bane ignored him, instead he listened outside.

'I'm talking to you,' Mavro said. 'You drag us out of the Salvation, where we were safe and anonymous. Now were on the run, without protection.'

Bane blocked his voice out.

Incensed, Mavro put a hand on him. It was a mistake.

Bane lashed out, faster than a man exhausted and hung-over should have been able to, and clamped his hand around the scrawny doctor's neck.

'Be quiet,' Bane snarled between gritted teeth. He nodded surreptitiously towards Jarla, cowering at her father's side. 'You're scaring her.'

Bane leaned closer, this was just for Mavro. 'And if you force me to touch you again,' he said, voice low and menacing, 'I'll break you.'

Bane let off and Mavro slumped to his knees, choking.

'You finished?' Gilligan asked.

Bane returned his dark impression.

'Whatever's between you, keep it that way,' Gilligan warned him. 'Don't forget, to me you're still just a damn drunk.'

Bane sniffed. 'Just help me lift this.'

Bane pushed at one of the metal overhead doors. Gilligan heaved with him. Lyle joined them, peering through the small gap that had been made onto the street beyond.

'It's clear,' he whispered. Whatever remorse he felt for Oheb he held in check. The desire for survival overrode it.

Bane nodded, breathing hard front the effort. His voice was strained. 'Ok, push.'

THE CELLAR TUNNEL opened up on the other side of the Salvation. They scurried from the hatch quickly, into the shadow cast by a neighbouring building. Gilligan looked back across the gloom at his bar. He knew his livelihood was gone.

There were signs of movement within. Shadowy forms lurked around the periphery. Their hunger briefly sated, the plague zombies milled about in

groups. As more of the creatures joined them, crawling out of the gaping windows, sloping awkwardly through the broken doorway. Bane realised they were not wandering about in some random fashion.

They were waiting for the others.

'Did you see that?' Bane muttered.

'See what?' Gilligan's reply was caustic. 'What the hell you talking about Bane? Let's just get to the damn Watch House.'

Bane looked back. The others were already on the move, hugging the walls as they went. Most of them had lived in Former Glory for years, eking what meagre existence they could, whilst all around them gangbangers fought tooth and nail. Frontiers fell, territories were swept away, engulfed by fire and violence, yet they had endured. It was a way of life. It was the Necromundan way.

Lyle glanced over his shoulder at Bane. His expression turned to horror and he pointed.

Bane turned back around to where they had come.

'Oh shit,' he breathed.

They had been seen. Or rather *sensed* .

'Run,' Bane bellowed.

Packed together like foetid deck rats on a sewer cruiser, the zombie horde came at them, slow and shambling at first. Then it was as if a light had been switched on in their dim and primal consciousness, and they ran.

Ratz stumbled, half-crazed, half-comatose. Gilligan hoisted Jarla onto his back, the snarling mutt straining at the leash in his other hand. Lyle urged on the doctor, who kept glancing back. It slowed them down and gave Bane a chance to catch up. It also meant the creatures were gaining.

'There,' Bane said, pointing to an alley.

The alleyway was narrow; a tight cordon might slow the zombies down. Rain dripped from a slick metal gantry and further down, thick cables obscured it. Some were torn and littered the street below as if they had been ripped loose.

Ahead, a clutter of packing crates and plas-sheeting debris impeded them. Lyle was first to it, the prospector leaving Mavro behind. He kicked away a packing crate. As he heaved away another, something dark that had been hiding flew out of the sheeting at him.

Lyle was pitched over by the sudden attack. On his back in the grime and filth of the alley, he wrestled with his assailant.

‘Get this frikker off me,’ he cried.

Hunkered over him, the wretched thing snarled and clawed, trying to bite the prospector. It was clad in rags of factory-grade sacking. Bane noticed the serial numbers etched into it before he kicked the dreg in the face.

Lyle scuffled back on his elbows, kicking with his legs for purchase. When he was far enough away, he got to his feet. So did the dreg.

Bane’s kick was good. He heard bone crunch. The dreg’s jaw hung loose. It lolled up and down as it snarled and hissed, like a marionette with half its strings cut.

‘It’s one of them,’ Lyle shouted.

The thing came back at him, claws outstretched, teeth bared, broken jaw distended. Bane stood in front of the prospector and swung the machete. It caught the creature’s arm, digging deep into withered flesh. But it felt no pain and drove on, this time at Bane.

‘They’re coming,’ Jarla cried.

Bane gripped the machete, struggling against the creature’s swinging arm. Lyle held the other hand back, head turned away as spittle and blood flicked out of the creature’s mouth. Bane risked a look back as he fought. The horde had found the alley. They were right behind them.

‘Gilligan-’ he began, but was cut off by the booming report of the shotgun. Bane felt shot, sharp and hot, graze his ear. He heard Lyle scream in pain, turning away instinctively as the creature’s head exploded.

Ears buzzing, Bane felt a strong hand lift him to his feet.

‘Get up,’ Gilligan urged, his voice sounded smothered as if he were speaking to him underwater.

Senses returning, Bane was running again. Lyle was next to him. The prospector’s right side was covered in blood. A long gash ran down it where the shot had nicked him. Powder bums raked his neck. It looked like he had got the worst of it.

They burst out of the alley and down Vendor’s Row, a seedy district of lofty tenements, subsistence emporiums and soup kitchens. Former Glory had three entrances and exits, and this was one of them. A huge metal sign swung over the gate. A low-riser access tunnel from this main

thoroughfare would take them to the Former Glory's epicentre and the Watch House.

They were nearly there.

That's when Bane saw the doors to the tenement buildings open. Zombies rushed out in a flood of pallid flesh and snarling voices, but without the same purpose as the others.

Merely a few metres away, the sudden attack startled Gilligan. The leash slipped from his grasp. Already straining hard, the mastiff raced off towards the nearest creatures, barking wildly.

'Boy,' he cried. 'Boy!' He put Jarla down. In their flight, the group of survivors had become separated and ranged along both sides of the street. Mavro, Ratz, Gilligan and Jarla hugged the tenements, with Bane, Lyle and the vendors on the other side. When Gilligan turned, it was the doctor who was closest.

'Take this,' he urged, thrusting the shotgun into his hands. 'Get her away. I've got to get my dog.'

'Gilligan, no,' Bane said. He tried to cross the street, to get to him. The mutt had reached the zombies coming from the tenement barking and snarling. One of the creatures held a thick lead pipe. Bane closed his eyes when he heard the poor thing yelp.

Mavro backed away. Surrounded by the glaring faces of the undead filled with malignant and cannibalistic intent, he was paralysed. The shotgun felt awkward in his hands. He held it up, retreating steadily. No way was he going back for the girl. She was forgotten the moment he saw those things emerge.

Gilligan bellowed in anguish, pausing momentarily as he saw the mastiff felled. The lead pipe rising and falling, slick with dark red matter, was permanently etched on his memory. Gilligan had rage in his heart and a desire for vengeance. He drove on at the creatures. Bane realised he was not going to stop.

Gilligan reached the first zombie which had shambled ahead of the group. He gripped it hard around the waist. Heaving it up above his head, he smashed the creature down across his knee. The spine crunched.

He floored a second with a heavy punch to the jaw, breaking its neck, but the numbers around him were growing and he was fighting blindly, tears in his eyes.

‘Shoot, Mavro,’ Bane shouted, as the zombies started to encircle the barman.

The doctor started at the order. He twitched and the gun went off in his hands, severing a link in the chained sign that rocked above him.

There was a crack and then the sound of lurching metal as the sign swung free, hoisted by what was left of the chain on the other side and driven by the impetus of its own weight. Bane reached Mavro and threw himself at him, bringing him down as the massive sign swung overhead. He watched as it continued across the street, ploughing deep into the dirt, the stink of wet metal wafting in its wake, a sudden rush of air passing his ear. It was headed straight for Gilligan.

‘Gil,’ Bane cried.

The barman turned. The rage in his eyes turned to shock and then panic as the hefty sign smashed into him. It was only a glancing blow, but it was enough to take him off his feet. Mercifully, the impact threw him dear of the hordes, out into the street where he lay still.

Lying on his stomach, Bane heard Jarla scream before he saw the sign mash into the tenement, sending chunks of plascrete and debris flying. A moment passed. Then there was a harsh cracking, splitting noise and the throaty rumble of shifting stone as the building started to collapse. Chunks of masonry fell from the highest apartments above. Two zombies were crushed as they wandered into its path. A pillar split and toppled, and then the entire tenement collapsed. It buried the zombies beneath as the roof fell straight down, the supporting walls, reinforced steel rods bending under the immense pressure, cascading outwards. The tenements were some of the highest buildings in Former Glory, built without safety in mind, only the need to pack in as many bodies as possible. It came crashing down like a felled tower of cards. It was a fitting, if ironic, tomb for the living dead.

Huge clouds of dust kicked up by the fall gushed into the air, covering everything nearby. The demolition closed off most of the street, the rubble so high it granted them a reprieve. The shambling horde would have to scramble over the debris to get to them.

Bane spat out a mouthful of dust-clogged air as he dragged himself to his feet. He ran over to Gilligan. Jarla was already there, kneeling at her father’s side. Incredibly, the barman was conscious.

‘Thought you were dead,’ Bane said.

‘Get me up,’ Gilligan spat. His face was pale, smeared with blood from a cut across his forehead and half-coated in dust. The cut was a flesh wound, the real damage inside and to his leg. Bane could see the impact marks where the sign had hit him. It had torn his clothes, even gone through the leather apron he wore. A purple bruise blossomed beneath. It was bad. If the sign had hit him full, he would probably be dead.

‘Can you walk?’ Bane asked, vaguely aware of Jarla’s faint sobbing next to him. Despite everything, she was holding together.

Gilligan heaved himself up with a massive effort, so he was close to Bane’s ear. ‘Just get me up,’ he snarled. ‘I’ll do the rest.’

‘Lyle,’ Bane called the prospector over. ‘We need to get him moving’ Bane said, flashing a glance at the dust settling over the rubble. ‘I don’t know how much time we’ve got.’

Gilligan cried out when they lifted him and they nearly fell. Though not as big as Oheb, the barman was still bulky and at first he could not take his own weight. Bane was exhausted and Lyle injured and the two of them struggled to hold him upright, although the thought of the zombie horde leant strength to their muscles.

Gilligan swallowed the pain, remembering back to those last few fights in the pits, when he knew his body could not take it anymore. It was screaming at him now to stop, to rest, even to give in, but he was defiant and with gritted teeth he hobbled onwards.

‘Where’s Jarla?’ he breathed. She was ahead, scavenging in the wreckage of another dilapidated building. Finding what she was looking for, she ran across to him.

‘Father,’ she said, appearing meekly at his side. She clutched a bent steel rod in her hand and was wrapping a wad of thick cloth around the l-shaped end. Take this.’ Bane helped Gilligan put the makeshift crutch under his arm to support the broken leg. It was a good fit.

‘Nothing my little girl can’t fix,’ he said lovingly, stroking her cheek with his free hand. The pain from the effort made him wince and Jarla’s face became knotted with concern.

Bane picked up the shotgun from where Mavro had dropped it. Looking up, he noticed shapes emerging through the dust. On bent, misshapen

limbs, the zombies clambered across fallen stone, shattered piping and the pitiful belongings once owned by the now plague-addled occupants.

'Get moving' he ordered. 'Into the access tunnel.'

They reached it before any of the zombies made it into the street. A rusty, wire-link fence barred their advance at the mouth of the tunnel. The fence had a gate. A crude padlock held it shut, a thick chain wreathed through it.

Bane hammered the lock free with two blows from the shotgun's stock. The broken lock fell to the ground. Bane dragged the chain free and yanked open the fence. Once they were all on the other side, he shut it again, wrapping the chain back around.

'Lyle, your hammer,' he said. Lyle left Gilligan propping himself up with the makeshift crutch. The barman had got used to walking with it and could do so unassisted.

Bane took the hammer and wrapped each end of the chain around the two ends of the long haft. The heavy hammer made it hard work. Once he was satisfied that the chain was attached, he began winding it clockwise. The chain dragged in with each successive rotation. Lyle saw Bane's plan and gripped one end of the hammer. The two men then proceeded to wind the hammer end over end, the chain tightening gradually as they did so. Once it was taut they gave it a few more, laboured turns, heaving hard to make the gate secure.

Bane leant his back against it, the wire rattling against his weight. Gasping for breath, he looked up into the gloom. Overhead, an electrical storm raged, massive power conduits shorting and thick energy cables sparking with life, filling the sky with iridescent amethyst and azure. High above, hive technicians would be working frantically to stabilize the power fluctuations. To the Underhivers far below it was the closest thing to nature's wrath they would ever see.

The sporadic energy bursts hinted at the vast skeleton of superstructure above, the foundations of higher levels built on top of those below. It lit up great gouts of cloud and noxious gas lingering in the false stratosphere. Huge atmosphere compressors and suction vents in Hive City many miles above pumped them downwards into the Underhive. Banks of filtration units raised high on the stalks of lofty metal towers were meant to dissipate the gas, but were prone to malfunction. Particularly bad

malfunctions would result in a dense fog. It was called ‘creeper’, on account of it clinging to the ground due to the gaseous combination’s density. Warning clarions would be sounded, signalling people to get indoors, to put on re-breathers if they had them. It looked like a creeper fog was imminent, but there was no one to sound the alarm. The living dead roamed the Underhive, and no breath passed through their lungs, nor was there compassion in their still hearts or jealously of the privileged masses above. Only hunger drove them. They were less than beasts.

Bane looked down at the bedraggled band of survivors. They were looking at him too, for guidance, for leadership. It was an alien feeling.

Why am I doing this, he thought as he regarded their faces? I don’t need them. I can find Alicia by myself. They’re slowing me down. He could leave them once they got to the Watch House. It wouldn’t be hard, just hunker down for the night and fortify the building. He could tool up and slip out unnoticed. They couldn’t follow. Gilligan could barely walk and Lyle’s wound slowed him too. Of the able bodied, Jarla was a sixteen year-old girl who wouldn’t leave her father and Mavro was a spineless bastard who’d be dead in a heartbeat without them. As for Ratz, he was just frikking crazy. It would be easy. But then he thought of Alicia. She was why he was here. She was his chance at redemption. But it wasn’t just her, maybe this was part of it too.

‘Come on,’ Bane said at last, ‘they can’t be far behind. The Watch House isn’t much farther.’ He checked the ammo in the shotgun. There were three rounds. ‘We can all rest there.’

As he walked past, Gilligan gripped his shoulder. Bane turned to find him looking him in the eye. He found sincerity there.

‘ I misjudged you. I’m sorry.’

It was a big thing for him to say. He had never known Gilligan to apologise. This man had always regarded him as a drunken skank. It made Bane’s answer all the harder.

‘No, you didn’t.’

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WATCH HOUSE was deserted. Outer walls circumventing the main building provided a plascrete perimeter. Razorwire crested it like some sharp and deadly crown. A steel gate with a viewing hatch led through to the Watch House itself. It was wide open, bent and twisted as if it had been pulled. There were blood stains on it.

Bane approached the gate. His head spun. His body burned. Whilst they had been fleeing for their lives, he had forgotten about the stimm-cravings and crushed them to almost nothing. Now they were back and he was feeling it. Withdrawal was tough.

The blood on the gate was dry, possibly a few days old, judging by the colour. Bane looked back at the group, a few metres away, scared yet hopeful. There was no way they could see how shifty he looked from here. If this was going to work if they were going to get out of Former Glory alive, he would need their confidence. He wiped the sweat from his face and neck with his jacket sleeve. He realised abruptly that he stank. Satisfied he looked fairly together, Bane hurried back to the group, keeping his head low.

'There's blood on the gate,' he admitted, aware of the sudden panic welling amongst the survivors. 'I think its old, a few days maybe.'

'Lyle,' he said, 'you and I are going to check it out.'

The prospector nodded.

'You got another weapon?' Bane asked him, unhitching his machete.

Lyle took out a small pick from his belt and swung it ably in one hand.

Bane turned to Mavro. 'You take this,' he told him, offering the shotgun. Mavro folded his arms and backed away. 'I won't touch it; he rasped, flashing a dark glance at Gilligan. 'Besides, won't you need it?'

'No,' Bane was emphatic. 'If we find anything in there we'll be running, not fighting. You'll be covering our escape and protecting yourselves if

those frikkers make it through the tunnel.'

'I won't touch it.' Mavro repeated, shaking his head.

Bane advanced clenching a fist.

'Give it to me,' Gilligan said.

Bane looked over to him. 'You sure?'

'I can handle it.'

Bane cocked it and gave him the shotgun. 'Three rounds left,' he warned.

'I understand.'

With that, Bane nodded to Lyle and the two of them scurried over to the gate.

The Watch House's exterior was a steel and plascrete composite. Thick buttresses supported three walls, and a tower with search light and heavy stubber emplacement rose twenty metres or so above them all. It was well fortified, although nothing like the Enforcer precincts uphive, but a bastion nonetheless, especially when compared with the diminutive labs and low-grade refineries that surrounded it. The zone was largely industrial. Gantries criss-crossed high overhead, pipes and access ladders ran up the steel walls of disused silos and as vented sporadically from vent grille relieving the pressure from heat conductors and cooling electrical relays that provided the area with power. At the centre of the area was the Watch louse; the cold, beating heart of the area.

A short run of steps led up to the main doors. On either side were large meshed windows. No light emanated from them. The main door was open.

Bane held up his hand, falling back on his signal code. He proceeded through the door, edging it open further with the tip of the machete blade. Darkness prevailed inside, a greyish haze invading through the mesh windows and a skylight overhead. Strips of amber emergency lighting winked intermittently on the floor, doing little to alleviate the gloom. Going further, Bane noticed more old blood smears on the floor. A desk was upturned. Two metal data-file cabinets lay on top of it at angles forming a barricade. Papers and holo-plates were littered underfoot. Bane cracked one as he stepped on it.

He froze, listening hard. His beating heart mocked him. A metal gun rack hung in ruins from a single bolt on a flanking wall. It was empty. Some shell casings were scattered around it, as if whoever had been

loading the weapons was in a hurry and had dropped them. Bane moved to the back of the office. Tentatively, he edged down a narrow corridor. A smashed halogen strip lamp above him, shattered plastek on the floor beneath. Two anterooms led off. They flanked each other in a kind of cross-junction. A bunk, latrine, a globe-lamp and a desk adorned with random junk were in each. Other than that, they were empty. The corridor went on for a few more metres. At the end was a thick metal trapdoor. The automated lock pict-display read in hazy crimson, 'SECURE'.

Bane sighed in relief. He moved quickly back through the room to the doorway where

Lyle was waiting anxiously.

'Wave 'em in. Its clear!'

THE WATCH HOUSE door closed with a dull thud. For a moment they waited in the darkness. They had all been like that for so long that it seemed unnatural to do anything else. A chorus of exhaling breath, exhaustion tinged with relief, accompanied the silence.

Bane wrinkled his nose at the stagnant air. It smelled like death. The creatures had been here. Some kind of battle had taken place. Moving over to a plastek unit on the wall, he flicked a switch. There was a shallow hum as atmospheric purifiers in the ceiling went to work.

'Get the blinds.' Bane's voice was deep and low.

Lyle and Mavro, standing near the two windows, obliged. Blinds engaged, Bane threw the main power switch. Flickering, stuttering halogen strip lights – those that had not been shattered – came to life. It was a dull light. Bane had made the necessary adjustments to ensure it, but at least they could see.

'Rest.' he told them. 'We're safe, at least for now.'

Gilligan slumped in a nearby chair. He looked pale and drawn, the chase having taken a lot out of him. Jarla crouched alongside her father as the others all found places to crash.

Bane called her over. He was going through a desk drawer. He found what he was looking for. Placing the medi-kit on the desk, he looked up at Jarla. She returned his look with silent resolve. Maybe she was not so coddled after all.

‘You know how to use this?’ Bane spoke softly, indicating the medi-kit.

Jarla nodded.

‘Good. Lyle has cuts that need patching up and burns that require ointment.’

‘I understand,’ she said, taking the box over to Lyle who resisted at first, claiming he was ok. At Jarla’s quiet insistence he relented.

Meanwhile, Bane went through the second drawer. A bottle of grain liquor lay nestled beneath some old paperwork. He licked his lips and reached for it. He stopped, a fingertip away, hand shaking. He glanced up at Gilligan, who had his eyes closed and was leaning back. The old man was breathing hard and heavy. Nothing in the kit could do anything for him. The barman’s words, his vouch of confidence in the tunnel came back to him. He shut the drawer slowly and swallowed.

‘Tempted?’ Mavro’s voice was insinuating. Bane had not even heard him slink over to him. He returned Bane’s initial shocked expression with one of quiet confidence and veiled malice. The razorblade was back in his hands and he flicked it back and forth, absent-mindedly.

Bane ignored him, turning back to look in the third drawer. There was a stub gun inside. He cradled it in his palm and checked the ammo – a full clip. That was good.

Then he smelled Mavro’s breath, sweet and sickly, and felt it on his cheek as the doctor got close. ‘Because if that liquor’s not enough, I’ve got something that’ll ease your pain.’

Bane turned to him again. He knew what Mavro was talking about. The craving came back, forceful and insistent. It gnawed at him. He felt it in his gut.

‘The pain you feel for that little girl,’ the doctor continued. The reason you’re even here,’ he spat beneath his breath, angry this time, eye-to-eye.

‘Back off,’ Bane warned, a little uncertainly. He jabbed the stub gun surreptitiously into Mavro’s stomach to emphasise the point.

The doctor looked down and almost gasped. The razor in his hand stopped abruptly but he clawed back his resolve. He backed away slowly. ‘You’ll be back’ he mouthed, before retreating into the comer.

Bane watched him go. He tucked the stub gun into the back of his trousers. It nestled next to his service pistol, which he had kept for some reason. Bane considered leaving it behind in the drawer but thought better

of it and cast his jacket behind him again, covering both weapons. Kneeling down, he started to sift through the papers and holopicts on the floor. Most of the picts were shattered and the papers revealed little, just arrest records and administrative data.

‘What are you looking for?’ It was Lyle. Jarla had done a good job. She had mopped up the blood and stitched the cut, sealing it with adhesive gel. The burn on the prospector’s neck still looked raw but at least it was clean, a thin gauze dressing covering the worst of it. Bane suspected she had used what was left of the roll.

‘Something about what the hell is happening.’ Bane answered. Watch Houses are the first and only link between Underhive settlements and the Enforcement Precinct houses uphive. If this neurone plague is as bad as I think it is, then they would issue an alert or there’d be clues, an upturn in cannibalistic crimes. But there’s no record, just something about increased raids on guilder caravans.’

‘Wouldn’t you already know?’ Lyle asked, ‘As the Watchman, I mean.’

‘I was held captive for three months before all this started. My deputy, MacDaur, should’ve dealt with any communication from the precincts.’

‘Your deputy? Where is he?’

Shuffling through some scattered papers. Bane saw another large blood smear ingrained in the floor.

‘I don’t know.’

Lyle went quiet when he saw the blood smear and realised what it implied. He quickly changed the subject.

‘Perhaps Doc Mavro should take a look at the barman,’ he suggested.

Bane looked over at Gilligan. He looked like he was asleep, chest rising erratically.

‘No point,’ he said, averting his gaze to Mavro, who was listening to them. ‘He’s not that kind of doctor.’

Bane got up and walked away before Lyle could question him further. End of conversation.

Bane went into one of the anterooms. Crouching down, he looked beneath the bunk and found a shallow, large metal chest. There was a clenched fist insignia rendered in gold-replica on the lid. The symbol of the Enforcement.

Bane unclasped the lid and slowly opened it. Within, transparent plas-sheeting covered a black jacket and trousers. Bane took them out and placed them reverently on top of the bunk. Beneath the attire was a pair of black boots, similarly preserved and polished. These too he put on the bunk.

Standing, he shrugged off the filthy, stinking corpse tinkers coat he had stolen and removed the worn boots and pants, setting both guns he had tucked there on the desk next to the globe-lamp. Both packages were wax sealed with the same insignia on the chest stamped onto them. Bane broke both seals carefully. He pulled out the jacket first, holding it up in the wan light cast by the globe. It was his service uniform. He had worn it only once before, when he had received his long service medal, the one that came with the pistol. The silver clasps that ran down the left breast still shone. The lapels bore his rank in gold threaded filigree. A plain belt finished the ensemble the clenched-fist insignia rendered in silver for a buckle. The rubric beneath read in tiny engraved script *Firmitas ex Justitia* – Strength from Justice.

It had been a long time since he had thought about those words.

Bane put it on and then the trousers that were adorned with diagonal slashes of gold thread down the outer seam. Donning the boots, he stood and clasped the jacket belt shut. There was no weapons harness, so both pistols went into the back of the trousers like before. It felt good not just because he had shed the wretched garments of the tinker. It felt as if he had made a choice – the first in many years.

Bane was about to re-join the group when a resonant clang, dull and distant, echoed beneath him. He stopped and listened. It happened again, coming from the trap-door. Bane was out in the corridor. Lyle joined him, Mavro loitering a way behind. Neither could conceal their reaction to Bane's attire. He ignored it.

'What's down there?' Lyle asked, realising it had come from the trapdoor.

The cells and armoury, but it's secure I checked it! Bane waited. The noise came again.

'Go get the shotgun,' he said, pulling out the stubber.

Lyle was back quickly, shotgun in hand. Mavro stayed back, Ratz had wandered over with him. 'They took it,' he mumbled. 'It spoke to me and

they took it.'

'Get him out of here and stay with Gilligan and his daughter,' Bane ordered. Mavro was too afraid to argue or backtalk this time. Instead, he grasped Ratz by the collar and hauled him away.

Once they were gone, Bane turned to Lyle. Both of them were crouching next to the trapdoor.

'I assume you're accustomed to tight spaces,' he said.

The prospector snorted his amusement. 'Home from home' he replied, griping the shotgun tightly.

Bane turned back to the trapdoor. A keypad operated the locking mechanism. It had been a while and a whole lot of liquor since he had last opened it.

The first attempt failed. He could feel the tension rising. He tried again. Another clank from below, but still nothing. Wiping sweat from his brow, he tried a third time. There was a faint clunk and the crimson display script changed to green.

Pneumatic wedges punctuated the trapdoor's bare metal surface at intervals. As Bane released each one there was a shallow hiss as the pressure was released. All four wedges disengaged and Bane slid the hatch open. A short stairway and a low sloping tunnel led down about three metres, the darkness beyond beckoning them.

'Ready,' he mouthed.

Lyle nodded and they entered. They reached the slope quickly. It was a narrow tunnel but Bane had enough room to hug the left wall, giving Lyle space to bring the shotgun to bear if needed. Bane kept his stub pistol outstretched in a two-handed grip. He hoped in the gloom that Lyle did not see his hands shaking.

After about ten metres, the slope flattened out and plastek cracked and crunched underfoot from broken overhead strip lighting. The sound was becoming a regular motif.

'Slowly,' Bane hissed, as loud as he dared, as they passed through the cells Bane checked left and right, moving into the middle of the tunnel, searching the darkness for movement, listening intently. The clanking, which now sounded more like hammering, continued in sporadic bursts.

They passed ten cells, five either side, all empty. There was a door ahead. Bane raised his fist when they were almost upon it. Lyle knew

enough to realise it meant stop. Then Bane raised his index finger on the same hand and circled it clockwise. Lyle understood and moved around to stand on Bane's right. The tunnel had branched out slightly into a wider cordon and the two of them could stand on either side of the door.

Bane crouched and listened at the door jam. Voices, faint, whispering. Two, maybe three men. One grunted as he struck something hard, metal on metal - that was the hammering sound they had heard.

The door was slightly ajar. Bane eased it open further, very slowly. He peered inside.

Three shadowy figures stood in a small anteroom, crowding around a fortified door that led off from the armoury. An access hatch led out from the back of the room. It was locked too. The vehicle yard lay beyond. One of the shadows, huge, almost as big as Oheb, worked at the fortified door with a long metal spike. It looked like a railing he had ripped straight out of the ground. Sparks flew with each massive blow aimed at the locking mechanism. Another shadow stood next to him, shorter but well-built, judging by the width of his shoulders, he carried a portable halo-lantern on low power, its faint blue radiance was just enough for the giant to see what he was doing. The feeble light cast them into silhouette. The third was tall and had a different bearing to the rest. He stood back observing.

Bane glanced up at the ceiling. The halogen strip unit was still intact. The room was sealed, no reason why they could not use it, probably force of habit. Light attracts them – it had become part of Bane's survival dogma.

Three against two, he did not like those odds. Then he saw something that would tip them in his favour.

ONCE HE WAS certain that Lyle was ready, Bane wrenched open the door and activated the strip light. Stark light blazed angrily into the room, exacerbated by the white wash interior. Bane opened his eyes and bellowed.

'Don't move!' He was in a crouched position. Lyle stood over him, shotgun covering all three. Wearing sleeveless, black jackets replete with iron shoulder plates, white waist sashes and bandanas discoloured at the slag face, they were every inch House Orlock.

They cowered against the sudden burst of light. Only one, the ganger who stood back from the other two, had drawn autopistols, one in each hand.

‘Hold your arms,’ Bane warned, finger on the trigger, heart thrashing in his chest.

In the light, he had a chance to examine them more closely. The big guy at the back had arms like girders. Smelting scars ravaged them, overlaying numerous tattoos beneath. His face was similarly adorned; a bird of prey, possibly a spire-hawk, dominated the entire left side like war paint. On the right a curved sword rendered in black, small, just under the eye. Thick, iron-shod boots covered his feet and a heavy bolter rig that could only be his lay on the floor a few feet away. The belt-feed was almost expended.

The second ganger, the one with the halo-lantern, had a knife at his belt but no other visible weapons. A shock of grey spiked hair jutted from his head where he wore a crown of iron. His nose was flat, as if it had been broken. It looked like the crown was bolted into his skull, bandana wrapped around it. Fewer scars and gang tatts this one, but with hairy arms.

The last was the leader. Slightly built but still muscular, something about the coldness in his ice blue eyes gave Bane pause. His hair was cut down to small jutting spikes and two, evenly spaced furrows shaved into it revealed bare skin. A long, sleeveless leather coat hung down to the floor. The twin autopistols never wavered in his grasp which was light and poised. Both weapons were trademark, not out of the weapon shops of House Orlock, possibly Van Saar tech with some personal customisation. Each stock was steel tipped and shaped into a skull. A gunfighter. All three wore factory-grade work pants, grey and coarse. Each bore the blade tattoo beneath their right eye. The leader had one on his shoulder too. Bane recognised it.

‘So what now officer?’ the leader asked. ‘We wait like this until we grow weary, or until you twitch and I shoot you both.’

Lyle re-adjusted his grip, anxious.

‘Easy Lyle,’ Bane assured him. ‘If they were going to shoot, they would’ve done it by now.’

‘Is that right?’ the leader purred. He had an accent, an ethnic hive settlement lilt that Bane could not place. Well spoken too, it suggested

Hive City education at the very least.

There was something about hint Bane had seen his face before.

‘I know you,’ he said.

‘And I’ve definitely heard of you,’ the Orlock returned. The calm of his demeanour was unnerving.

Bane sniffed dismissively. ‘I don’t doubt it. You’re Grakken Nark,’

‘Who?’

‘Leader of the Sabres, militant gang faction of House Orlock, an overlord, cold-blooded killer, gun fighter and wanted outlaw, and if you had any ammunition in those pistols we’d probably be dead already.’

‘Looks like I had you all wrong. I heard Sergeant Erik Bane, disgraced ex-enforcer, was a drunk and a stimm-freak, sump fodder for the lash worms. Yet here you are, decked in parade finest pulling your guns on me,’ Nark replied. ‘Of course, some of your information is erroneous.’

Bane’s heart skipped a beat and he kept his eyes fixed on Nark’s trigger fingers. ‘What would that be?’

‘I don’t kill in cold blood,’ he said smiling, returning both pistols, smoothly, expertly into a twin hip holster. His mood grew suddenly more serious. ‘Every man and woman I ever killed had a gun in their hand.’ Nark waited a moment. He let the silence grow, let it gnaw at the nerves. ‘So, I repeat,’ he said finally, smiling again. ‘What’s it to be?’

Bane thought a moment. His arm ached from holding out the stub pistol, knees too from being crouched. ‘Keep that shotgun on them. Lyle.’

The prospector nodded, mustering his courage.

Bane got to his feet, tucking the pistol back behind him.

‘Would I be right in thinking that pistol didn’t come with the formal attire?’ Nark gibed.

Bane ignored him.

You’ve seen what’s happening outside on the streets. The plague, I mean.’

‘I’ve seen it.’ Nark’s response was dark. ‘We fought them three levels down. Got separated from the rest of my crew. Reached this dump and the ammo ran dry. Only places that have still got any guns left are those that are locked tight. A Watch House seemed a good choice.’

‘I should arrest you,’Bane told him. ‘You’re a wanted criminal and it’s my duty to uphold-’

Nark cut him off. ‘You’re upholding nothing right now, friend. Did you find peace in that last bottle? I’ve got to tell you that uniform is fooling no one.’ Serious again. It was difficult to gauge his mood.

‘I assume this chipper is the best you’ve got’ the gang lord continued, looking at Lyle, ‘which means you got nothing.’ Nark came forward, utterly fearless considering a loaded shotgun was pointed at him. He got close. You need us. We need you.’

Bane opened his mouth to reply when a heavy thud came from beyond the door that the gangers were trying to wrench open.

All of them turned. Lyle swung the shotgun instinctively but dragged it back quick when he realised he was not covering the gangers. Bane had drawn his stubber. Nark too had both autopistols in his hands, even though they were empty – a conditioned reflex.

The big Sabre backed away from the door, holding the metal spike at his waist like a spear. The other one downed the halo-lantern and took out his knife. More thuds.

‘You want a truce?’ asked Bane, pistol trained on the door, heart pumping. ‘You’ve got one.’

‘Good,’ Nark replied. ‘The brute’s called Skudd,’ he added – the speanwielding Orlock nodded – ‘and that hairy bastard is Zeke the Wulf.’ Zeke responded with a wink.

‘You know me. That’s Lyle,’ Bane said, indicating the prospector. There are others upstairs, survivors.’

‘Now we’re all acquainted, you think we can open that damn door?’ Nark’s voice betrayed his fear, buried as it was beneath his cold bravado.

‘The code is “Elysium”,’ said Bane. ‘Input that into the panel. I assume you can read Necromundan-Gothic.’

Nark nodded at Skudd, the brute set the spike down and worked the keypad according to Bane’s instruction. A shallow hiss emanated from the locking mechanism and then came the scraping metal retort of retracting deadbolts. ‘Open it,’ Bane demanded, moving opposite the door.

Skudd looked to his leader, who nodded his approval. The big Orlock took hold of the inset handle and pulled.

The door lurched open, screeching loudly. Bane was about to move forward when a shot rang out from inside. He threw himself prone and rolled to the side, the shot narrowly missing as it imbedded harmlessly

into the plascrete wall behind him. Nark had already moved to the blind side of the opening, like Skudd, using the door as cover.

Another shot came from the dark within.

‘Cease fire!’ Bane cried, ‘Cease fire.’

A voice came out of the shadows at him. ‘Bane, is that you?’

Bane heaved a sigh of relief and let his head sag. Holstering the stubber, he got to his feet and approached the armoury door. A figure stepped out from the gloom brandishing a halogen strip lamp, re-breather hanging around his neck autogun in his hand.

‘Stand down,’ he said to Lyle and his new allies. ‘It’s my deputy, MacDaur.’

MACDAUR WAS YOUNG, barely mid-twenties with a thin rash of stubble around his chin and neck, and dark brown hair cropped short but not shaved. A long Watchman’s coat hung from broad shoulders, beneath it a worn, charcoal body glove. Leather, fingerless gloves covered both hands and a red neckerchief sat snug under his chin. The re-breather overlaid it. A belt of ammunition around his waist was barely touched. A small black tome was hanging by gold brocade at his hip, a clenched fist, etched in silver adorned the cover. It was a law codex – the legal bible for all Watchmen that cared to read it. Most did not bother.

His expression was one of surprise and relief ‘Bane, I thought you were dead.’ It quickly turned to shock and belligerence. ‘What the hell are you doing with gangers?’

A scream, muffled by layers of plascrete and steel, prevented Bane from answering. ‘They must be inside,’ he rasped. ‘Upstairs, now.’

MacDaur led the way, the Sabres followed at Bane’s insistence. They didn’t even have time to arm themselves. Skudd toted his metal spike and Zeke wielded a knife.

‘Here,’ Bane cried, tossing the machete to Nark who caught it effortlessly. Lyle, shotgun at the ready brought up the rear with Bane.

When Bane emerged from the trapdoor, MacDaur’s autogun was barking loudly. Skudd was at one of the windows, heaving a data-file cabinet to hold up the battered mesh. Beyond it, the zombies clawed and snarled. The

second window was already broken through, the mesh lay crushed and crumpled beneath it, torn blinds and shattered glass entangled with it.

MacDaur raked the gaping window. Plascrete chips flew and gore spattered the immediate area around it as hordes of the foul creatures poured in. Gilligan was on his back wrestling with a zombie, Jarla fought it too but it was impossible to see if they were winning. Nark and Zeke, back-to-back, cut a bloody swathe through the creatures surging into the room. Mavro cowered behind the upturned desk, holding Ratz down. The outlander screamed and wailed as if he was pumped with too much spook.

Clumsy and slow, the zombies were ineffective fighters, but there were so many. One bite and it was over. They needed space to keep clear of their undead assailants, something that inside the confines of the upper office of the Watch House was gradually diminishing. 'Help me get to Gilligan and Jade' Bane bellowed at Lyle, who was just coming up from the trapdoor.

Bane ran. The thunderous retort of the shotgun erupted behind him and a zombie in front of him lost an arm and part of its head. The thing slumped to die ground in a smoking ruin. A second lunged at him, arms outstretched, snarling to reveal blackened nubs for teeth. Another explosion. Bane felt fire at his cheek, and the creature was tossed into the air like a macabre doll. A third felled another zombie, destroying its legs and abdomen. Three shots. The shotgun was empty. He was on his own.

Bane approached the zombie torso which had heaved itself up onto its belly and begun crawling. Two sharp shots from the stub pistol and it lay still. He reached Gilligan and Jarla and kicked off the first zombie which was trying to take a chunk out of Gilligan's arm. Jarla held a second zombie at bay with the makeshift crutch. Bane shot it. Crouching down, he hooked an arm underneath Gilligan's shoulder and pulled. The barman cried out in pain. He was heavy and Bane could not get him to his feet. Jarla screamed. Another zombie came at them but one of its arms was broken, and it held the other out toward them. Bane fired twice and got it in the neck and eye, right before the stubber clicked empty.

They had to get out. No way could they fight them off, even with the extra muscle from the Sabres.

'Skudd,' Bane roared over the chaos. The big Orlock turned; he had since dropped the spike. Both arms were braced against the data-file cabinet he was using to block the first window. He understood instantly. He

pushed into the cabinet, mashing it through the bent mesh of the window crushing the zombies outside as it landed on them. He moved, quickly and certainly, picking up Gilligan in his stride but grimacing with the effort.

'Back to the armoury,' Bane said. 'Everyone.'

MacDaur covered the retreat, cutting into the vile press of living corpses swelling inside the room with his autogun. He and Bane were the last out. The trapdoor slammed shut and darkness engulfed them.

'Where's Lyle? Bane asked urgently. He had not seen him get inside.

'He didn't make it,' an impassive voice came from the blackness. It was Nark. The gang lord's eyes glinted. 'They dragged him down, easy meat, That's all any of us are now.'

'I didn't even see him,' Bane breathed. Above there was the *thunk* of flesh on metal as the zombies tried in vain to pound their way inside.

Bane ignored it and slumped against the cold wall of the tunnel, closed his eyes hard and clenched a fist. He breathed deep, thought about Alicia and found strength. Standing, he realised he was alone but still needed weapons. The armoury was ahead.

The Sabres were already tooling up. Skudd draped two belts of heavy bolter shells over each shoulder like the vestments of some violent priest. Zeke carried a lasgun and two stub pistols tucked in a weapons belt across his torso. He rammed power packs and clips into a large ammo pouch, throwing Nark two full clips for his autopistol. Four more went in with the other spare munitions.

Bane's instincts told him it was a mistake to let them raid the armoury, but what choice did he have? Lyle was dead, which left just him and MacDaur. It was not enough. He entered the fortified room and found it nearly stripped bare. A bolt pistol lay on a metal small arms rack. He took it along with three clips and some spare ammo for the stubber. MacDaur holstered another pistol, a snub-nosed las, and hoisted a shotgun onto his back.

A glass case at the back of the room got Bane's attention. Using the butt of the bolt pistol he smashed it open. Reaching inside, he took out a combat shotgun, shaking off the broken glass. Short stock, half barrel, complete with a black leather shoulder harness - a quick-loader. It bore the Enforcement insignia. No trigger guard meant quicker reaction time. A box of shells lay on red velvet next to it. Donning a Watchman's coat

dangling on a nearby hook. Bane emptied the shells into one of the pockets. Each tip was engraved with a tiny skull - Executioner rounds.

'Beyond that hatch is a sub-basement, the Watch house vehicle yard,' Bane's voice invaded the feverish activity as he nodded towards the exit at the back of the room. It got their attention. Securing his weapons, he turned to MacDaur. We still got the *Bull*?' MacDaur nodded.

'Good.'

THE SUB-BASEMENT WAS about thirty feet in all directions, with reinforced plas-steel walls. A key-pad was bolted to one of them, providing the only illumination in the pitch black. Bane threw an unseen switch. A hanging light array thudded into life above them. It revealed a stocky vehicle armour-plated on all sides with thick mesh over the forward arc vision slits and three meaty-looking, chain-tread reinforced wheels on either flank. A heavy, iron v-shield at its snout gave it its name, a prison transport - the *Bull*.

'The upper level will be swarming with those things,' Bane warned. 'We'll never make it on foot. This is our best chance at getting out of Former Glory.'

'Getting out to where, Bane?' Nark asked.

Bane's face grew dark. 'There's an Enforcer Precinct House a few levels up. They'll have troops and weapons. We head for that.' He fixed the gang lord with a stony gaze, shaking his head. 'I can't let you go Nark.'

Nark's eyes narrowed, his face unreadable. 'Sure, sure.' He headed over to the transport.

Gilligan lay on his back. They had put him in the prisoner bay in the main body of the vehicle. Jarla was with him, sitting on a metal bunk, clutching the makeshift crutch for security. She pulled at the sleeves of her jacket, anxious about her father's condition. Loose restraints hung above her on a long chain. The back section of the bay was cordoned off by thick bars, a mobile holding cell for particularly recalcitrant law breakers. Ratz and Mavro sat opposite the barman and his daughter, Skudd too. There was no room for him or his cannon up front in the cab. Mavro was dissatisfied about being thrown in with the 'sick insane and dangerous' - his words, hissed at Bane. Skudd overheard him and was doing his best to freak out

the scrawny doctor, intimidating him with his sheer bulk and violent potential.

'I have big hands,' he said, his tenor voice made deeper and more resonant by the metal confines. 'How big is your head friend?' he asked, clenching a mighty fist meaningfully as he stared over at Mavro.

The doctor shrank away but found he had nowhere to go.

A menacing grin split Skudd's tattooed features. 'Think I could fit it in my hand?'

Bane, MacDaur, Nark and Zeke sat up front in the cab. It was a tight squeeze, but there was little in the way of tech to crowd things further: elliptical steering unit, drive lever and three metal foot pedals. Coarse leather seats did little to cushion the bare metal of the cab. A diode readout displayed fuel, speed and engine temp in dull, green neon. It was stark cold, heavily industrialised and of House Orlock manufacture. MacDaur had the wheel.

'Sorry I shot at you, Bane,' he said. He knew it might be his last opportunity to say it.

Bane put a hand on his shoulder. 'Next time you're hiding in an armoured room, I'll knock. How long were you in there?'

'Soon as I heard the trapdoor opening, I got inside.'

'I saw blood smears,' Bane said.

'Not mine. I abandoned the upper level after the first sightings. Easier to stay fortified below.'

Bane thought about it for a moment, nodded and stood up, yanking open a metal hatch above him.

'Hold on,' he called below, tapping activation runes on the nearby wall panel. The light array gradually extinguished, powering down with an audible hum that decreased rapidly in pitch. Overhead, the dull whirr of mechanised servos ripped through the dark. The pressurised hiss of activated pneumatics followed. There was a hollow clank as four thick chains set at right angles to each other went suddenly taut. Resting on a rectangle of metal, chains steam-bolted securely to each corner, the *Bull* was rising. Four harness-winches, grinding and groaning against its weight, dragged the behemoth up.

Bane left the hatch open and a thin sliver of grey light appeared above him, growing steadily wider with each second. A shrieking protest of age-

old gears accompanied every inch. It was thirty feet from floor to ceiling. Their ascent was short-lived. As the *Bull* edged slowly into the light, Bane shut the hatch.

Looking through the forward viewing slit, his vista cut into small sections by the mesh, he saw the horde. The Watch House teemed with the creatures, surging through the gate and past the perimeter walls, roaming outside in hungry packs. The vehicle lift had brought them outside the perimeter wall. The drone of the winch array and the activation of the outer doors had alerted the zombies. They were coming.

'Start her up.' Bane's voice held a hint of urgency.

MacDaur gunned the ignition. The engine juddered, emitted a wailing protest and died.

There was a loud thud as a zombie threw itself against the armoured hull.

'Again!' Bane bellowed. The zombie snarled at the vision slit, biting and clawing at the mesh.

The engine juddered and died. Another corpse hit the *Bull*. Then another and another. They hammered at the outer hull, wielding pipes, crowbars and pieces of crudely torn metal.

'MacDaur, get us moving,' Bane urged. Something crawled on the roof. The front arc mesh bent and twisted as the zombies heaved at it.

'I'm trying.' He was sweating and wiped a swathe of it off his forehead. 'Come on, come on!' he cried and punched the starter hard with his fist.

Amidst screeching protests, the engine roared into life. The throaty rumble filled the cab and the massive rear exhausts rattled hard against the metal hull as they belched thick acrid smoke into the atmosphere.

'Go,' Bane cried. 'Give it everything.'

MacDaur slammed it into drive and smashed the fuel pedal. Tyres squealing, the stench of friction-burned rubber in their nostrils, they surged off the ramp and out into the street. The clinging zombies were thrown free by the sudden lurching movement, some crushed beneath the wheels, others thrown back into the mob surrounding them.

Rotting bodies were smashed aside as MacDaur ploughed through them to a chorus of crushing bone and squashed matter.

After a few minutes, once they were clear, Bane re-opened the ceiling hatch and looked out behind them. MacDaur was heading outwards at full

speed, towards the exit tunnels that would lead them up. In the blackening distance the horde was still visible. There were hundreds, too numerous to distinguish individually. A single undead mass bent on consuming all the living they came across.

MacDaur pumped the throttle as they ground up a sluice ramp once used as a sewer tributary. Rising higher, Bane saw that all of Former Glory had been consumed. Vendor's

Row, the longest strip in the entire settlement was overrun, a swarm engulfed the industrial sector and the low-riser tenements and even the slums were infected. Flames rose up randomly, surging from the smoke smothered structures. Bane could smell it on the turbine induced breeze, as the air whipped past his face. The smoke billowed high and dark coiling black tendrils reaching up. The foul stink of burning, decaying flesh came with it. No one could survive in that. Glory was lost. He only hoped that Alicia was not lost with it.

He came back down into the cab, shutting the hatch and listened to the monotonous engine drone, a slave to his own thoughts.

It felt like they'd been driving for hours. The drone of the engine was strangely soothing, like the dulcet tones of some slumbering nameless beast. Nearly everyone was asleep and those who were awake were quiet and fixated on their own thoughts. It was worth risking a glance.

The bite looked bad, worse than before. No one had seen it happen - it had been chaos in the Watch House - they'd have been killed by now if anyone had. The half-congealed blood wasn't clotting, the wound a sticky mass of gore and torn skin. They fought the temptation to lick it, taste a piece of flesh.

Someone stirred. They covered up quickly. Closing their eyes they feigned sleep. No one must know. No one must ever find out.

CHAPTER SIX

‘SO THE PLAGUE has infected the badzones too,’ Bane said, rattling around in the cab of the *Bull*. He was driving as MacDaur slept next to him. The deputy looked pale and sickly. Lack of sleep and nourishment will do that to you, Bane thought.

‘So it seems,’ Nark replied, staring out through a vision slit at the harsh grey light of the Underhive. He dug around in the top pocket of his gunslingers’ coat and pulled out a dark stick of organic matter. From another pocket he produced silver igniter with the Sabre motif.

‘Kalma-root,’ he said, wetting his lips and placing the root between them. A snap of the igniter and the root was lit. Nark took a deep drag, held it for a few seconds and blew a long, thin plume of purple smoke through the mesh. A grin cracked one side of his mouth while the other held the root in place.

‘Mellow, yet flavoursome. Want a taste?’ he asked.

Zeke who sat next to his leader chuckled under his breath. He was working the ends of stubber rounds with a small, flat-edged file, turning them into dum-dum bullets that were less reliable, but had more stopping power. He pushed each round back into its clip. Once a clip was full he dumped it back into the pouch resting between his legs. He scratched absently at the strip of iron on his head. Bane realised it harboured a skull chip. He made out scar tissue in the hazy light filtering into the cab.

‘Keep it,’ Bane said, eyes front. It was tempting. The cravings had diminished to a nagging ache at the back of his head and his throat was dry like grit. He needed to stay focused so he changed the subject. ‘What about the rest of your gang? Last count, I heard you were pushing fifty.’

‘Try eighty, split right across the Underhive.’

Bane turned to the gang lord in disbelief.

‘The Sabres, Ironhammers and Jack-ratchets were all mine,’ Nark continued. ‘I’ve got territories the length and breadth, believe me. Before all this Spire-damned shit happened we were in the middle of a turf war. The White Ghosts, whore-son Delaques, raided the Fire Stacks and Ironwater, my territories. We were returning the favour when the corpses showed up. You know the rest.’ Nark took another long drag and leaned back in his seat.

‘What about the Razorheads, ever get any trouble from them?’ Bane’s mind flicked back to their lair and his first encounter with the plague zombies. Maybe that was where it all started? The hooded figure rushed back into his thoughts.

‘Not for a while. They’re downhive, a kilometre or so above the sump, give or take. Rumour was they were connected.’

‘Connected?’ Bane’s interest was piqued.

‘Someone with influence or with the means to extort it,’ Nark explained.

Bane nodded. He suddenly remembered the plans he had found in the Razors’ narco-lab, but he could not recall any details.

A sudden jolt ripped through the *Bull*. A steady thud came from the left side as the vehicle lurched over. Screeching metal resonated within the interior as it started to slew out of control, the cab shaking violently. Bane jerked the steering wheel hard, trying to pull into the skid, but something had snagged them underneath and it would not budge. MacDaur was jarred awake. Nark lost his Kalma-root and it ended up in his lap. He batted frantically at the smouldering tip, perilously close to his crotch, as it rolled back and forth.

Bane felt his head smash into the low roof. White fire blazed for a split second, becoming a hot line of pain as something warm trickled down his face: blood.

‘Hold on,’ he screamed above the rising din and jammed on the brakes.

Smoke filled the cab through the mesh vents and there was more screeching as the brake blocks ground down to nothing. Eventually the *Bull* skidded to a stop, trawling over a mass of rusted girders and other industrial debris that kicked up into the vision slits as they ploughed through it.

Bane coughed the smoke out of his lungs, wafting it ineffectively out of his eyes and unhitched the ceiling hatch. Nark and Zeke kicked through the

mesh of the forward vision slits, unlatching the outer hatches from the inside. MacDaur crawled past the gangers as they heaved themselves out and yanked open the right side access panel. Bane dragged himself up and out of the roof hatch.

'Damn it,' he muttered. The two wheels on the left side were bent inwards and issuing smoke. Steam hissed from the engine block through the gaps in the riveted armour plates. Brake fluid, boiled almost to vapour, spurted from ruptured piping exposed as the undercarriage plating was torn away.

'Everybody out.'

'THE DRIVE SHAFT is all twisted and the undercarriage is tangled with razorwire.' Jarla's voice was muffled underneath the *Bull*. Skudd pulled her out, Gilligan watching all the time - she was the only one small enough to get under the wrecked transport to take a look. She also knew her way around vehicles.

'Found this embedded in one of the tyres,' she added, getting to her feet and wiping a streak of oil and grime from her face. She brandished a crude-looking iron spike in her hand.

'Stinger.' Nark's voice, nonchalant and confident, emanated from the gloom. 'It's designed to waylay for an ambush.' He was leaning back against the outer hull of the *Bull*, smoking Kalma-root.

Bane regarded their surroundings. They had stopped in a low-tunnel, wide enough to get through with room to spare. But it was dark and crammed with machine junk on either side, creating a predetermined route for a vehicle. In retrospect, the ideal place for an ambush.

'A remnant then,' Bane said. 'Whoever's trap this was is either dead or long gone.'

'Evidently,' Mavro breathed. It was the first time he had spoken since they had been joined by the Sabres.

Bane pretended not to notice. He walked over to Gilligan and spoke softly. 'We'll have to go the rest of the way on foot, Gil.' Bane's eyes held a question.

Ashen faced and bathed in sweat, the barman rasped through gritted teeth. 'I can make it.'

The knuckles on the hand that clutched his make-shift crutch had turned white.

‘You don’t look so good,’ Bane said. He was suddenly aware of the others listening, and swore he could feel Nark’s eyes burning into his back.

‘I can make it,’ he repeated earnestly.

Bane paused for a moment, searching Gilligan’s eyes and then nodded. ‘Ok.’ He turned to address the rest of the group.

The precinct house is about a kilometre up in that direction,’ he said, pointing towards the right fork at the end of the tunnel. ‘If we don’t stop we can reach it in two, maybe three hours.’ Bane turned, about to lead the way when Nark’s voice stopped him.

‘Sorry lawman but no, we’re not going to that precinct house,’ he stated calmly. Bane looked back at him suspiciously. His hand strayed near the bolt pistol.

‘What?’

‘I’ve no desire to head into an Enforcer facility where I’ll probably be interrogated, incarcerated and possibly executed,’ Nark continued, stepping towards Bane. ‘No. We take the opposite fork to Traitor’s Nest, Sabre territory. Most of my gang should already be there. We need reinforcements and I’ve also got to make sure no one has moved in on my turf.’

‘Nark if we don’t work together there’ll be no turf left to fight over,’ Bane urged. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. We’re fighting a war here. Survival, our survival, is the thing at stake.’

‘All the same,’ Nark replied, ‘we *are* going to Traitor’s Nest.’ There was a shallow *clank* as Skudd cranked a round into his heavy bolter trained on Bane.

MacDaur reached for the pistol in his belt. When he felt the bite of Zeke’s lasgun in his back, he put up his arms.

‘You can’t make it without us, Bane,’ Nark informed him. Two sharp clicks and he primed the twin autopistols that had suddenly appeared in his grasp.

Bane clenched a fist. He looked across to Gilligan, struggling to stand. Jarla, at his side, was faltering too. Mavro shrank back into the shadows, barely daring to look, whilst Ratz sat hunched against the tunnel wall, rocking back and forth and muttering to himself. Even MacDaur looked

ragged. Bane fixed Nark with a dark and meaningful glare and reluctantly withdrew his hand from the pistol.

The gang lord nodded his approval. ‘Wise choice,’ he said. ‘Now, hand over your weapons, nice and slow.’

NARK’S ROUTE TO Traitor’s Nest took them downhive into the creeping dark of Necromunda’s badzones. Hot, stagnant air wafted up through narrow tunnels and blackened crawl spaces, as well as fumes exuded by tar lakes and drift fires. The gang motifs of the Sabres, rendered in black, were daubed onto the dank, curved walls. Further vents and tunnels, branching off in all directions, punctuated the vast, vacuous space in which they made their descent, sealed by rusted grates and disused blast doors. There was no sign of the other Sabres though.

They walked in a tight column. Bane took the lead, carrying a halo-lantern. He kept the light weak and shone it at the floor. In the darkness of the Underhive, dead falls and sudden drops were rife and it paid to be careful. Even if the fall did not kill you, the creatures that dwell in the long-forgotten tunnels would. MacDaur walked behind him. Skudd watched them both with his heavy bolter, a few paces back. A pack strapped to his back contained their guns. Then came Gilligan, Mavro supporting him, grimacing with every step. Jarla and Ratz lingered nearby. Nark was at the back, watching the bedraggled survivors.

A dark figure appeared ahead. Bane held up the halo-lantern, risking a little more light. It was Zeke. The ganger rushed past, almost silently, to Nark.

‘The watch towers?’ asked Nark as Zeke approached.

‘Empty and stripped,’ Zeke returned darkly.

Nark thought for a moment and nodded for Zeke to go back. As the ganger disappeared into the gloom, he checked both his autopistols for the third time in the last half hour, and gave the order to move on.

THE TUNNEL OPENED onto a large, flat plaza. The first signs of Traitor’s Nest were the watch towers. They were set at either flank to the opening ramshackle structures held aloft by crude iron girders, a box of steel sheeting set on top of each, welded crudely and enclosed by a roof of

bent metal. Further in was a building wrought from steel bulkheads, sturdy and wide, that looked like a disused ore-processing plant. Three stacks rose up from it into a high shaft that was a crosshatch of broad gantries, interlinking pipes, thick industrial chains and half broken girders. Two of the stacks had collapsed, sprouting into the air like rotten teeth. A third remained, the metal rungs of an access ladder barely visible. Bane noticed it went as far as an exit hatch set into one of the conjoining pipes above.

Zeke was waiting for them in the shadows, crouched behind a stack of industrial debris, as they reached the outer threshold of the plant.

'Any sign?' Nark asked him, letting Skudd corral the others.

'Nothing.' Zeke replied, 'but this is as far as I got.'

'I don't like it,' he muttered. 'We should've seen someone by now.'

'Maybe they moved on?' Zeke suggested.

'Yeah, but why? I don't see any walking corpses.'

Zeke fell silent.

Nark turned to the group and looked at Bane and MacDaur.

'You two first.'

Bane stepped forward and then stopped.

'I'm not going in there without a gun, Nark' he said.

Nark thought about it for a moment. 'Skudd,' he said. The big Orlock nodded, reaching into his pack. He threw the stubber and MacDaur's laspistol at the men's feet.

As Bane stooped to pick the weapon up, he felt the cold metal of Nark's autopistol at the back of his neck.

'Now I know you won't shoot me in the back, Bane, it's not your style,' he said, 'but don't expect the same courtesy from me.'

Bane arched his head up deliberately so the pistol muzzle pressed harder into his neck and spoke through gritted teeth. 'I thought you never killed in cold blood.'

True. They all had a gun in their hands, but I never said we were face-to-face.' Nark straightened back up, letting the pistol drop to his side. 'Now get up.' Bane got to his feet and headed towards the complex, MacDaur right behind him, laspistol in hand.

'And remember,' Nark said. Sicudd's got your back.'

Bane did not need to turn to know that the heavy bolter was levelled at them both.

A WALL OF steel confronted them, bulkhead plates steam-riveted together. An immense concertina door granted access into the plant itself. Bane noticed a filthy security panel inset into one of the wall plates. He hammered the activation rune. The door retracted with agonising slowness, servos whining and finally clanking noisily into a holding position above.

Darkness beckoned within. Bane was reminded of Toomis Pre-fab Residential. He crushed the memory instantly, reaching for the heavy crank to activate the lights.

'Leave it,' Nark hissed. The gangers were right behind them.

Across a long stretch of bare plascrete, strewn with mechanical debris, rusted piping and other detritus, lay six low-rise smelting vats, visible in the ambient light cast through the open door. The shadows of the survivors were long, crude slashes. They shrank and eventually diminished as, with dunking monotony, the concertina unfurled downwards, shutting them all inside. Darkness prevailed and the sound of breathing and uncertain steps was exacerbated.

At Nark's urging, Bane went first, approaching the nearest smelting vat, drawn by a yellow diode winking in its activation slate. MacDaur ranged wide. Skudd followed, covering the angles with his heavy bolter, swinging it back and forth in slow, wide arcs. Nark was three steps behind Bane, eyes narrowed, searching the alcoves and crawl spaces afforded by the flanking walls. Zeke waited with the settlers at the gate.

Reaching the vat, Bane examined the activation slate. He waited for Nark to reach him and pointed at the glowing, yellow diode. It was active, reading low temperature. Not enough for the smelter to function at production capacity, but enough to generate significant heat to stay warm.

'We're not alone,' Bane breathed.

In the sickly yellow light. Nark's expression was grim.

They moved on and got as far as the second vat when they saw something slumped against the access ramp that led to the observation gantry circumventing the vat itself. Getting close, Nark recognised the body.

'One of mine,' he rasped, reaching over to touch it. 'Lukas.'

'Careful,' Bane warned, readying the stubber.

'Bite marks,' said Nark, tilting up the head to reveal the jugular.

Bane shifted back. He had seen this before.

'Bullet hole to the head,' Nark added.

Bane relaxed, crouching down next to Nark to examine the corpse.

'Rigor has set in,' he began. He pulled at the ganger's shirt, 'See that mark?' the light from the diode illuminated a dark patch of skin, 'It's livid. He died here.' Bane examined further. 'Something else too.'

'What is it?' Nark asked. Skudd and MacDaur congregated around the vat. Bane turned to Nark.

'He's been stripped of all his weapons and ammo. Recently, I think.'

The gang lord looked at Bane, searching for any hint of deception. When he spoke, he held his gaze without wavering.

'Remember Bane, there's a gun pointed at those settlers,' he said.

'I remember.'

Nark held Bane's gaze for another second, still thinking.

'Skudd,' he said at last 'give them back their guns.'

THEY MOVED SLOWLY across the rest of the work yard, inspecting all of the vats in turn but found no more bodies. They even risked the halo-lantern on its lowest setting to be sure. Zeke remained at the gate with the rest of the survivors and only Bane, Nark, Skudd and MacDaur advanced.

At the back of the work yard was another door, a huge sliding blast plate set into the right flanking wall. Nark crouched next to it, listening hard.

Nothing.

'Skudd,' he rasped. Skudd carefully unhitched his heavy bolter, belt-feed and all, and set it down quietly against the wall. In two meaty hands, he gripped the blast plate's entry bar. A glance at Nark to check they were ready. The halo-lantern was extinguished.

Nark nodded and Skudd heaved. The blast door shrieked open. Beyond, bleached white faces, eyes covered by thick black rubber goggles, stared at them in shock and disbelief.

'White Ghosts,' Nark spat maliciously, as if the words left a bitter taste.

'Stinkin' Sabres,' snarled one of them by way of riposte.

Silence descended. It shattered a split-second later into a bout of frantic weapon priming as a mutual threat was realised by both parties. Then the screaming started.

‘Don’t you frikkin’ move!’ bawled a Ghost autopistol quivering in his grasp. ‘I’ll shoot you, I’ll shoot you,’ MacDaur raved, thrusting the muzzle of his auto-gun towards the strangers threateningly.

‘You bastards opened the wrong frikkin’ door,’ another Ghost shouted.

‘Down, frikkers, put your weapons down,’ screamed Nark. You killed Lukas, you bastards!’

‘We didn’t kill nobody. That fool was already dead,’ the pistol toting Ghost protested.

You killed him and took his gun and ammo.’

‘We killed no one in here.’

Bane said nothing, just kept his gun up. There were three guns pointed at them. Skudd was unarmed, screaming with the rest and MacDaur looked about ready to snap. One was a skinny wretch with his teethed gritted. He was young and scared and might pull the trigger out of fear. If that happened... Bane had to do something.

‘Stop,’ he yelled. ‘Stop.’ He slowly set down his gun. ‘You know about the plague?’ he asked the middle Ghost, the trench coat he wore made him a Delaque. It was of a finer quality than the others which made him the leader.

‘We’ve seen it,’ he replied, face knotted with belligerence.

‘And you’re hiding out in here?’

‘Yeah, that’s right.’ Calmer this time, that was better.

‘There are a lot of those things out there,’ Bane told him, mastering his breathing. ‘Could be the entire Underhive is infected.’

‘What’s your point?’ A question. That was good. It meant he was listening.

‘Seven guns are better than three, am I right?’

The Ghost licked his lips. Bane could not see whether he was looking at him through the goggles, but he felt his gaze all the time. His trigger finger started to relax.

‘All right,’ Bane said, gesturing for them to lower their weapons. MacDaur obeyed instantly, setting his autogun down slow and easy, palm raised.

‘We’ve got another guy at the gate,’ Bane added. The Ghost leader flinched, yanking the gun back up. Bane showed his palms. ‘I’m telling

you so you know I'm giving you the truth. There's wounded too, just settlers, they need rest just like you.'

The tension persisted. At first neither side was willing to break the stalemate. Vitriol between the gangs ran deep, that was obvious, but there was a mutual goal here: survival. Scores could be settled later. The charged silence continued for a moment more.

Breathing hard, face-to-face, the gangers slowly lowered their weapons.

THEY SEALED THE room, blast doors yanked shut on either side. An uneasy silence descended, fuelled by fear, exhaustion or enmity, or all three at once. They were holed up in the chamber that housed the central blast furnace for the plant, the only functioning blast furnace left in the dilapidated ruin. The fire stack, as it was known, rose into the air, a plascrete sentinel with a heart of burning iron. It was used to melt down one surplus. A conveyor array once used to facilitate this purpose was dismantled and lay rusting about the chamber, junk like the rest of downhive. A gantry circumvented the stack and from that a ladder bolted to it provided access to higher levels. They had since rotted away to nothing and only a small plateau of rusted metal remained, drenched in a patina of dark soot, seared by burns. Beyond that, a second ladder led to a wide exit pipe in the ceiling.

The stack was the only significant feature in the room, which was vast. Plascrete columns, reinforced by riveted iron plates, stretched down from the ceiling, supporting the roof. A dense network of twisting coolant pipes gave shape to the outer perimeter and surrounded the massive furnace floor, creating hidden alcoves that harboured shadows. Signs, replete with warnings and industrial rubrics, hung down from chains attached to the ceiling. These trappings of order and habitation were disquieting.

Bane sat alone in the darkness. They had set up drum fires throughout the massive room, but he preferred to shun the light. His thoughts were dominated by Alicia. He believed she was dead and half expected to find her wielding a rusty pipe and shuffling toward him for a taste of his flesh. Maybe he would let her. Embrace the sweet, painless oblivion. Despair was a heavy weight to bear and Bane felt it rest about his shoulders like a

rusted chain. He looked around, trying to wrest himself free of his dark thoughts.

Huddled near the glow of the stack furnace, Gilligan slumbered fitfully on scavenged sacking. Skudd sat cross-legged on the bare plascrete, his heavy bolter dismantled in front of him. He cleaned it meticulously, piece by piece with oil and grease. Zeke stood nearby, back against one of the support columns, lasgun cradled in his hands like a security blanket. His eyes were closed, as if he was sleeping but he seemed oddly alert. MacDaur had crashed out near one of the drum fires. In the flickering light, he looked pale and cold, hugging his legs close to his chest.

The Delaques sat together, away from the rest, around a drum fire. The bright angry light shone off their bald pates.

House Delaque dealt in information and secrets as much as raw, tangible material. Bane hoped to question them once things had settled down some more. They might know something about the spread of the epidemic, or even its cause. Their leader, who called himself Malik, faced him. Black goggle lenses blazed with the reflected glow of the flames and he smiled, exposing cracked, misshapen teeth. Next to him another Ghost, Kepke, picked at his nails with a broad combat knife. The last of them, Spectre, was long-limbed and gaunt.

He looked like he was made from bent wire, wearing a trench coat too small for him that he constantly shrugged back over his bare wrists, only for his pointed shoulders to eke it back. He mumbled, counting off rounds in an autogun clip. Once he finished, he started anew, recounting the whole clip over again. It seemed like a maddening ritual, although sometimes that is all you have to keep you sane when the gunfire stops, the smokes dears and the real daemons make themselves known.

In the darkness beyond, sitting alone like Bane, was Nark. A stick of kalma-root smouldered between his lips, its ephemeral glare revealing Nark's narrow eyes intent on the Delaques. As Bane watched, the root burned to nothing. It must have seared Nark's fingers but he didn't acknowledge it, just took out another root and fired up, all the while his gaze fixed.

'Mr Bane,' a faint voice came out of the darkness.

It was Jarla.

‘Shouldn’t you be with your father?’ Bane returned. He did not want company. ‘He’s sleeping.’

‘I see.’

‘That girl you’re looking for, the one you mentioned at The Salvation. Is she your daughter?’ Jarla asked, sitting down next to him.

Bane did not have the energy to protest, so answered. ‘No, she isn’t.’

‘So why are you looking for her?’

Bane licked his lips, thinking. What the hell, he thought.

‘She came to me, to the Watch House, just over three months ago needing help,’ Bane explained, ‘She wanted protection from an Underhive gang. She wanted out but they didn’t want to give her up. Back then I was lost, a drunk and a wretch, just like your father said. In some ways, I still am.’

Jarla kept her expression impassive. Bane continued.

‘She reminded me of someone I failed to save a long time ago. It gave me hope of a second chance, brought me back, but the gang found her again and took her prisoner. I tracked them to their lair and tried to get her out.’ he said. ‘She got away, but I was caught.’ Bane told her of his incarceration at the hands of the Razorheads, leaving out the grim details of the beatings and the blood-duels of his escape, the plague zombies, and his eventual return to Former Glory.

Jarla listened quietly and intently throughout. ‘Do you think she’s still alive?’ she asked.

Bane paused for a second, looking into the flickering flames of a drum fire. ‘I don’t know,’ he said.

‘I hope you find her,’ Jarla said, getting to her feet.

‘So do I,’ Bane muttered as she walked away.

Malik was looking her up and down, lasciviously. She did not see him. When the ganger noticed Bane’s stern expression he blew him a mocking kiss. Bane’s fists clenched and he gritted his teeth. He turned away, raked some sacking across the floor towards him and lay down, eyes wide, looking into the darkness. He shifted uncomfortably and tried to lie on his side. It was no good, so he switched. Still no good. He returned to his back, exhaling his annoyance.

‘Trouble sleeping?’ Mavro asked.

‘How long you been standing there?’

The doctor emerged out of the shadows cast by one of the drum fires.

'What do you dream, Bane?' he asked, ignoring his question. Bane looked at him and then followed his gaze.

Ratz was curled up next to the furnace, on the opposite side to Gilligan, gathering warmth. Even in sleep he mumbled, his body afflicted by a rash of nervous affectations. Bane wondered what he was dreaming, whether it was any different to the Ratskin's waking hours.

'I've treated those who've ventured to the Abyss.' Mavro's voice interrupted Bane's thoughts. 'None of them ever survive; the horrors witnessed kill the mind you see.'

'You discover that before or after you were thrown out of Hive City?' Bane gibed. Mavro ignored him and slunk down next to him, getting close. 'All you can do is ease their pain,' he breathed. 'You know about that, don't you Bane?'

Bane opened his mouth to speak and then clamped it shut. The cravings came back, hard and insistent.

'I've got something to help you sleep,' Mavro said, goading. 'We both know what you dream about.'

Bane looked at him. Mavro opened his long coat. Inside was a flat metal rack adorned with vials. Sealed packets and thin blades that gave off faint iridescent hues in the weak light hung off the rack by slim hooks. He delved inside, produced a small glass bottle with a cork stopper, secured with wire. Within was what looked like a thick mould, ground up into a fine blue powder.

'You can owe me,' he said insidiously. 'It'll blow your mind.'

Bane reached out, hand quivering. Mavro's grinning visage was an unfocused blur in the background as the bottle came into stark resolution. His heart was pumping, body yearning. He closed his hand into a fist and dropped his head.

'Get away from me,' Bane breathed.

'What?' Mavro was incredulous. 'Bane, don't deny your desires.'

Bane looked up. He held the stubber, finger on the trigger. 'I'll kill you if you don't.'

Mavro's eyes grew wide when he saw the gun. It was the second time Bane had pulled it on him. This time was different. Bane's hand was shaking, desperation and fury in his expression. Mavro stood up quickly,

secreted the powdered stimms back into his coat and shrank away into the darkness.

Bane slumped down onto his back, gasping for breath, swallowing hard to lubricate a tongue that felt like chewed rat hide. He closed his eyes, clutched this gun to his chest and begged for sleep.

Curled up on the floor, he started to think about Alicia and the first time they had met.

A LOUD HAMMERING woke him. His head pounded with it, a deep and insistent throb that made him want to vomit. It was dark. Bane rolled out of the bed that was on the floor beneath his desk, and fumbled over to the Watch House door.

Where the hell's MacDaur? Then he remembered that his deputy was out on patrol. It couldn't be him hammering, he had a key.

Wearily, Bane pulled the door open - it could have been anyone out there, but he was so wasted he did not even have his gun. Bleary-eyed, he regarded the silhouette in front of him.

'What the hell is it?' he snarled, liquor-breath misting the cold night air.

That was when she stepped into the light.

'Please, help me,' she said.

When he saw her - pink hair, gang tats and all - Bane gasped, she had a more sobering effect than any caffeine.

He let her in, took a belt of grain whisky and listened to her story.

'So why do you want to leave them?' Bane asked the girl after she had finished. She had said her name was Alicia, which could not just be coincidence. 'Most gangers don't want out, they want leadership, status, a better gun.'

'It was different in the beginning,' Alicia told him, eyes far away as she seemed to look past the Watchman.

'How so?'

'I was starving, trying to scrape an existence just above Hive bottom. That was when Woden found me,' she explained, tucking a piece of errant hair behind her ear. She adopted a nervous posture, legs tight together but splayed out at the knees. She clasped her hands and lowered her head, looking up at Bane through tangled strands of pink, eye lashes fliddng.

‘Woden?’ Bane asked.

‘The Razorheads’ old leader,’ said Alicia. ‘He was a bastard, like all the rest but not to me. He looked after me. He’d had a daughter, but she’d died of sump pox. Maybe that’s how he saw me,’ she added. ‘Not as meat, like the others.’

Bane stared at her.

‘But he died. Nagom put a blade in him and killed him. Bled him ‘til there was nothing left.’ Alicia’s expression darkened, she looked at the floor. ‘Things changed. Nagorn didn’t see me as his daughter.’ Alicia looked bath up, into Bane’s eyes. ‘He gave me this,’ she said, brushing away the hair from her face, revealing the mark of a branding iron on her cheek. ‘And this,’ she pointed to her stomach.

Bane looked down, but could not see anything remarkable.

‘I’m fending for two, now,’ she said.

Bane understood and looked back up.

‘I need your help.’ Her eyes pleaded.

Bane rubbed his stubbly chin. He looked at her again and the resemblance was uncanny.

‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ Alicia’s tone was wary. She balled her fists.

Bane showed his palms. ‘Not for that,’ he said. You just remind me of someone, that’s all.’

Alicia relaxed and Bane got to his feet. He walked over to the window and peeked through the blinds. You can stay in the Watch House tonight,’ he said to the darkness outside, and then turned to Alicia again. ‘There’s a cot out back. The room has a door and you can lock it from inside. You won’t be disturbed.’

Alicia’s face lit up instantly and she gave him a long look.

The girl I remind you of,’ she said, so slight in Bane’s eyes, ‘was she your daughter?’

‘No... No she wasn’t.’

MAVRO FLED, THE image of the gun still in his mind.

That frikker’s gonna crack, he thought. Like that deputy of his. That bastard looks more strung-out with each passing hour.

He had seen it many times during his medical tenure in Hive City, before he had realised he could scam more creds pedalling illicit substances to stimm-heads, spur-fiends and spook-jadcers. It was Bane who had brought him down. Ironic, that after his fall from grace their paths had crossed again, in entirely different, more lucrative circumstances.

Mavro allowed himself a smile at that and decided to have a walk around. He was bored and had no desire to speak to any of them. He was lamenting his current predicament, thrown in, as he was, with such pitiable wretches, when a strange stench assailed his nostrils.

A rotted coolant pipe, contents trickling on the floor beneath in a morass of silver-grey matter, exuded the stench. Mavro crouched next to it. The coolant mixture in the pipes must be gas permeable. Air was travelling through it, wafting down the stench. Mavro followed the pipe, determined to find the source, all thoughts of fear and anxiety vanishing as he sought the truth. It was an old feeling, one of the reasons he had become a doctor. He had forgotten what it was like.

The pipe stretched far into the distance. As Mavro traced its path, he lost sight of the others. He did not notice as he delved into the labyrinth of twisting metal. Venturing deeper, he found valves punctuating the pipes at random intervals, expelling the coolant mixture as gas and vapour, venting pressure. The sporadic bursts of super-freezing chemicals forced Mavro to duck and weave between them. After about fifteen minutes of frantically tracing the pipe's origin, he found the source of the stench: a busted vent, beneath a rack of pipes. The grate securing it had slipped, making an opening wide enough for someone to crawl through. The Delaques had checked the entire chamber and said it was sealed.

Drawing close, Mavro recognised the stench. Cloying and pungent, he gagged on it. It was decay, rancid decomposition in its earliest stages when organs blackened and liquefied, and skin became as parchment, soaked in the body's juices. Putrefaction. He saw marks on the floor, palm and knee prints, described in drying blood.

'Oh no,' Mavro breathed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HE WAS RUNNING, fast and hard. Shadows loomed like daemons, eyes ablaze in the darkness. The bolt pistol cracked and bucked as Bane fired in panic at his assailants, muzzle flare blaring like white noise. Smoke coiled about him, tendrils of it reaching out like claws. The dense pall obscured high towers of stacked metal crates and dust-dogged machinery that fell away in a blur of motion as Bane raced past.

He knew this place. He had been here before: Toomis Pre-fab Residential, their warehouse.

Gunfire burst suddenly into his senses, loud and threatening. Ahead was a door. It seemed like it was miles away, yet barely a second passed and he was upon it. The door swung open all by itself. Darkness beckoned. Gunfire noise crushed instantly by the deafening thump of a beating heart. It took a moment for Bane to realise it was his. Through the door, a hellish silence pervaded. Another shadow came from the dark coalescing in front of him. Bane raised his gun. It was massive in his grasp, cold and heavy like a tombstone. It came up with agonising slowness, an ear-shattering crunch as he chambered another round. Squeezing the trigger a fraction at a time, there was a belt of sound like breaking thunder as the round discharged.

The figure became Alcana Ran-Lo. Her scream shook the foundations of the warehouse and she fell, slow and heavy.

Bane was on his knees, surrounded by a welling pool of blood. Sobbing, he brushed away the hair covering her face. But it was Alicia that stared back at him with dead eyes as her blood soaked hair was swept aside.

Bane turned his hands over; his palms were drenched with blood. Tilting back his head, he screamed.

SCREAMING FILLED THE factory. Bane awoke and for a moment he thought he was still dreaming. No. He was back in the furnace chamber. The drum fires had died to nothing. It was dark. Only a faint glow came from the fire stack. There was no sign of Gilligan or the rest.

There was shouting, voices indistinct and urgent. Three shots exploded. Then silence. Bane got to his feet, bolt pistol clutched in his grasp, and ran towards the commotion.

The Delaques lay in a far off quarter of the chamber. Jarla was crawling away from them, Gilligan hobbling to her with painful steps. The others encircled the scene. Only Nark and Mavro were missing.

A weak shaft of light came down from the roof. Bane had not noticed it before. It fell on them in a washed-out haze. A grate above cut it into grainy squares where it touched the floor.

A small point of smouldering amber came out of the darkness beyond. Kalmaroot flared in his mouth as Nark emerged from the gloom, smoking auto-pistols in both hands.

Kepke and Spectre were dead, shot in the head. Malik took one in the back. Bane walked over to them – a dark glance at Nark – still unsure what had happened. The White Ghosts' leader was still moving. Blood oozed from the wound. He did not have long. Kneeling down next to the ganger, Bane heaved him over while all the others watched.

Malik was too numb to feel pain. His pistol fell out of his grasp. His goggles were smashed from the fall. He looked out through the shattered lenses and for the first time Bane saw his eyes. They were narrow and thin like slits. They looked hard at him, possessed of silent urging as they tried to convey a message. Malik's mouth opened and closed. His lungs were filling with fluid and all that came out was a deep gurgle. A bubble of blood burst on his lip, his head slumped back and he was still.

Bane looked up at Nark, anger etched on his face.

'They were going to harm the girl,' Nark said, holstering the pistols expertly. 'You know it,' he added. 'You saw them looking at her. So did I.'

Bane ignored him and turned to Jarla instead. She shrank away, averting her gaze from the bodies and nestled into her father's chest.

'What happened, Jarla?' Bane asked her. She looked sideways at him, as if scared to speak. She tugged on her jacket sleeves and pulled her hair down between her fingers – just a little girl again.

‘It’s all right,’ Bane assured her softly, moving over to sit with her and Gilligan. ‘I don’t know,’ she whispered. ‘I couldn’t sleep and I saw the light from the roof. I thought I saw something. It frightened me.’

Gilligan smoothed her hair, trying to reassure her. He looked bad, white and sickly.

‘When I looked back down I saw something moving towards me. I backed away and fell. That’s when I screamed. Then I heard the shots,’ she added.

‘He has a pistol in his hands, Bane, the frikker meant business,’ Nark said, waiting in the gloom, taking a long drag on the kalma-root.

‘Just like everyone you ever killed eh, Nark?’ Bane didn’t look at him, keeping his eyes down as he thought.

‘I don’t know what happened here,’ he said after a second, but I know you didn’t cap those poor frikkers because of Jarla.’ Bane fixed the gang lord with a meaningful glare. ‘You saw your opportunity to kill your enemies and you took it. You’ve been watching them all night, waiting for a chance.’

‘Yeah,’ Nark said, tossing the root down and crushing it underfoot, ‘and I’ve been listening too,’ he added, his tone accusatory.

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Still trying to be the detective Bane? Using us to find that damn girl so you can ease your frikking conscience,’ Nark snarled. Then you can be the big important law-maker again. I know your story. I’ve heard it a thousand times. And I know you killed that spire-bom girl wearing your Enforcer badge too, no booze or drugs to hide behind.’ Nark stepped up, got into Bane’s face and tried to goad him.

Bane stood still, fists clenched. He wanted to crush Nark, crush him to death with his bare hands and with him the memories of that night in the warehouse. ‘Besides,’ Nark hissed, a snide smile on his lips. ‘If I wanted to kill my enemies, why wouldn’t I shoot you, too?’

That was it. Bane snapped. He flung himself at the gang lord, seized his neck with both hands and squeezed. Nark choked and spluttered. A low punch, hard and fast in Bane’s ribs made him let go. A kick to the stomach doubled him over. Nark booted him again, hard on the shoulder, and put Bane on his back. Bane breathed hard. Nark was lean and wiry, his strength

born from years of hardship surviving in the Underhive. He pounced on Bane, pinning his arms with his legs and pressed an elbow into his gullet.

'Nothing to say?' he spat through gritted teeth.

MacDaur moved forward, about to intervene. He felt the cold muzzle of a lasgun in his back. He turned. Zeke smiled back at him, wagging his finger.

Gasping, Bane crushed his knee into Nark's groin. The gang lord squealed and released the elbow. Bane shoved him off. He rolled on his side, coughing and spluttering as he fought to drag air back into his lungs.

Skudd advanced, shouldering his way into the light, a hulking mass of muscle and bone.

He could kill Bane with one punch. Without Nark to restrain him, he was like a beast unleashed. He reached down towards Bane's head with a meaty hand.

'They're here,' a voice cried from the darkness. It made Skudd pause. 'Get out, 'they're here!' the voice said again.

Bane and Nark staggered to their feet. Mavro was running towards them, terrified.

'Get out, get out now,' he screamed.

'What the-' Zeke was cut short when he felt cold fingers dig into his neck. He whirled round, wincing in pain as the nails broke flesh, and was face-to-face with zombie. It had once been a Delaque ganger, maybe one of the White Ghosts. The thing was desiccated, with sunken cheeks pinned up by pointed bones, flesh pulled over them like sagging leather. The creature snarled, revealing three teeth in a tar black mouth and lunged forward. 'Crap!' Zeke stumbled back, fired two shots, burning the zombie's arm neck. MacDaur turned too, blasting it at short-range with an autogun burst. The thing's head exploded in a shower of gore and matter. Both men were covered in it.

Out of the darkness came the rest, a shambling horde of the undead that had been in the blast furnace chamber all the time, sleeping silently, awoken by gunfire and commotion.

'They're in the walls,' Mawo bellowed, reaching the group. More zombies shuffled behind him.

Bane looked around. They were everywhere, looming steadily out of the shadows. He saw one that looked like an Escher ganger, female with a

ragged mop of blood-matted hair tied around a spike. It scuttled towards him with a bloody grin on its lips, baring rotten teeth. A saw-toothed blade, dark and black with dried blood, was in her hand. Another, an Orlock, veins black in his forehead, carried a gore spattered bolt gun. There were more, many more. Hundreds.

'They're armed,' said Bane, backing away and unhitching his shotgun.

'So are we,' Nark returned. Fire flared in his hands as he let lip with the autopistols. The Escher exploded in a red mist and the Orlock was torn down before he could even raise another twisted limb. More zombies filled the void.

Bane fired into them, shotgun booming.

'Get behind me,' he cried to Gilligan and Jarla. Bane ushered the civilians behind him.

'MacDaur!'

'I've got him,' the deputy returned. He had Ratz by the scruff of the neck and the outlander wriggled and whooped insanely, fighting his grip, but MacDaur held on. Mavro scuffled behind him, wedged between the deputy and Zeke, who had one hand on his bloodied neck wound, the other firing his las from the hip into the zombies.

In the distance, a heavy-set Goliath ganger loomed. Clad in thick armour plates, dented and split, he hefted a heavy stubber in one hand, the bulk of the weapon chained to his torso and arm. Trigger finger twitching the gun exploded in sporadic bursts. It took the head and shoulders off a corpse straying too close to its firing arc. Another was felled where it stood as the bullets shattered both kneecaps. Strafing wildly, old instincts driving it, the Goliath stitched a line of crimson down Zeke's chest. The lasgun squeezed off two more rounds and went silent. MacDaur backed away, returning fire as Zeke hit the ground.

The horde fell upon him like starving sump rats, tearing at flesh and bone. MacDaur looked away, firing with his eyes closed. The survivors huddled into the grainy patch of light, forming a protective circle.

The *crump* of Skudd's heavy bolter joined the gunfire chorus. Almost like a drill, it bore a wide hole into the undead tide. Amongst others, the stubber-toting Goliath went down in a red ruin. The massive Orlock swept the weapon around, forging a big enough gap with the bolter's punishing staccato fury for them to slip through.

Bane saw it and yelled over the noise.

‘Head for the stack. It’s the only way out.’ Bane hefted Gilligan onto his left shoulder. He slung the shotgun over his back and yanked out the bolt pistol. Away from the light, in the fiery blaze of the pistol’s violent retorts, the zombies became stark silhouettes, shambling and lurching like grotesque marionettes. The zombies’ numbers thinned as Bane made for the fire stack. Skudd was in front of him, scything through the creatures, belt-feed screaming. MacDaur followed, keeping Ratz, Jarla and Mavro close, putting himself between them and the horde.

Nark came last. Every shot was a kill, every kill a bullet to the head. He raced through clips with calm expedience. He fired left and right, running as he did so, aim never wavering.

They shot their way back to the fire stack. Bane heaved Gilligan as far as the low gantry. Setting him down, he gripped the weary bar-tender’s shoulder hard enough to pinch. He had to be sure Gil was paying attention and understood.

‘Gilligan, can you climb?’ he asked urgently.

Gil was breathing hard, he looked up at the metal ladder rungs, worn and rusted. There was a slight movement which may have been a nod.

Bane gripped his shoulders tighter, the staccato frenzy of Skudd’s heavy bolter ringing in his ears. ‘Can you make it?’

‘Yes,’ Gil spat. ‘Just get me on that frikking ladder.’

Bane nodded and called to his deputy. MacDaur backed up, autogun blazing in his hands. He stopped firing when he reached Bane.

‘You first,’ Bane said, indicating the ladder. ‘Watch him,’ he warned. Then quieter, the next part just for MacDaur, he said, ‘If he falls, we all go.’

MacDaur nodded his understanding and got to the ladder. Between them, Bane and MacDaur got Gilligan up to the first rung.

‘Use your good leg and both arms, Gil,’ he said.

Gil responded with a grimace and began his painful ascent. Below, the zombies were closing in. Bane fired from the gantry, keeping the flanks clear. The sheer bulk of the fire stack kept them safe from the rear, but the creatures were growing in number and they could not keep them at bay forever. They had to make the climb.

Bane looked up. Gilligan was about halfway up. Bane held out a hand to Jarla and pulled her up to the gantry. Then came Ratz, urged on by Mavro who followed. That left Bane, Nark and Skudd.

The gang lord joined Bane on the gantry, muzzle flashes white hot as he burned rough clips with alarming frequency. ‘Up you go, lawman, Skudd and I are right behind you. It’s a promise,’ he shouted.

Bane glanced at him, blasted a creature looming in from the left side and then got onto the ladder and started climbing. Mercifully, Gilligan was just reaching be dilapidated platform above and MacDaur was helping him up and over. Skudd stood at the foot of the gantry, washing the horde in a swathe of explosive bolter shells.

‘Come on,’ he cried, lost in defiant fury.

‘We’re leaving, Skudd,’ shouted Nark, holstering his pistols a few feet behind Bane as he took to the ladder.

Skudd backed off, one foot at a time up to the gantry, footsteps resonating off the metal with his immense bulk. Continuing to roar a challenge at the creatures, Skudd got both feet on the gantry and the heavy bolter jammed. The loading mechanism whined in protest and smoke came off the barrel with the big Orlock’s insistent, desperate efforts. One of the zombies reached him so he swatted it with a massive fist and broke its neck. He threw the heavy bolter at another, crushing it. A third loomed before him. He didn’t see the fourth and fifth on the left, the sixth and seventh on the right, or the dozens more closing in around them.

He smashed the zombie in front of him with a two-handed hammer blow and tried to lift his arm up to fight off another. It was weighed down by two of the creatures. He bellowed in pain as they bit into his flesh. His other arm got pinned. Now he was screaming.

Bane watched from the platform as Skudd was dragged down into the snarling throng. He was transfixed as Skudd fought and thrashed but was slowly devoured. There was the sound of wrenching metal. Bane tore his eyes away from the horrific scene as the bolts that fixed the ladder to the plascrete stack came loose. Dust and fragments of it fell away into the massing horde below, swarming about the gantry like fevered ants.

Nark was only halfway up. He had stopped to shoot at the creatures, crying Skudd’s name as the big Orlock was torn down.

‘Nark,’ Bane cried. Lurching metal screeched against his voice.

The gang lord looked up, saw the ladder bolts ping out from their holdings the plascrete tower and watched in horror as the metal started to bend downward. Creaking and inexorable, its tensile resistance losing against Nark's weight. The ladder came down sharply. Nark dropped a metre and lost his grip on an autopistol, watching it tumble into a terrible mosaic of decaying faces beneath him. He climbed quickly, swinging up three rungs on his other arm, using body's momentum as leverage. He managed to get his footing when the ladder gave way completely. Nark leapt and found purchase on the edge of the platform as the metal ladder clanged into the darkness below. He looked down and a sea of grasping claws reached up hungrily, baying and snarling.

Bane leant over, offering his hand.

'Grab it,' he said.

Nark looked up at him and for the first time Bane saw fear in his eyes. He did not want to die. Not that way, not eaten alive, like that poor bastard, Skudd.

Nark swung his other arm up and gripped Bane around the wrist. He was about to pull him up, muscles burning from the strain, when he looked into Nark's eyes and hesitated.

'What's to stop you killing me, killing all of us?' he demanded, having to shout above the horrible moaning of a thousand damned voices.

Nark reached down with his other arm, beyond Bane's sight. The fear in his eyes vanished, hidden away behind a mask of dark confidence.

'Nothing' he shouted back, bringing up his other autopistol and pointing it at Bane's head. 'But those people won't survive without you. Pull me up now or I'll shoot and we both die.'

Bane thought about it for a second, thought about sending Nark to his doom below, but he was right. They needed him. He needed them. Reluctantly, he heaved Nark up.

Nark rolled onto the platform. As he did his guard was lowered momentarily and he was unable to keep his gun trained. Bane saw his chance and punched him hard in the stomach. He took the pistol from Nark's grasp and threw it away, spiralling it across the wasted metal. He pulled out his own gun and pressed the heavy muzzle of the bolt pistol against the ganger's forehead, pushing Nark down to his knees as he got to his feet. He stood over him, execution-style, and pulled the trigger.

Bane angled the pistol at the last second and the bullet missed. Nark winced as it scorched his ear, a smoking hole left in the metal platform. He brought the pistol back to Nark's forehead and crunched another round into the chamber, still thinking about it. He felt his finger squeeze the trigger again.

'No,' Nark said. 'Wait.'

Bane pressed the muzzle harder, there would be no warning shot this time.

'Wait,' Nark hissed loud and urgently. The girl you're looking for. I know where she is.'

'What?' Bane kept the pressure on. He was vaguely aware of the others watching him. He ignored them. This was between him and Nark.

'You're lying,' he snarled and pushed harder, squeezing another fraction. This close, the hammer pulling back would've been audible.

'I'm not. I swear it,' Nark urged. 'She's alive, least she was last I heard. Kill me and you'll never find her,' he told him, an earnest, desperate look in his eyes.

Bane looked at him hard, licking his lips as he considered the gang lord's words. If there was even a chance...

Bane's finger eased off the trigger. He lowered the gun, but still kept it trained on the Orlock.

'Take us to her,' he demanded.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The tunnel was dark. Dripping water from the venting precipitators was the only sound. It eked through the tunnel's seam in places where it was eroded, pooling beneath the largest cracks. The survivors hunkered down in the gloom, resting. The smelting plant was far below, just another dark memory. The infected was wide-awake. They heard the others close by. Most were asleep or lost in thought. Some ate the scraps of food they had scavenged. Alone, it did not want for food though it took it, but secreted it away so no one would know. Another hunger gripped them. The infected risked a glance at the wound. It was black around the edges and there was a smell too. A feeling was growing inside, nascent and festering. It became hard to remember the things that made them human, something else was smothering it, something deep and primal. They covered up the wound, and looked into the gloom, flying to suppress the dark, instinctive urges boiling steadily to the surface.

IF BANE FELT any guilt about leading them off course, he didn't show it. He had gone back into the Underhive to find Alicia and rescue her. To drag something out of the stinking mess that was his life. She needed him. If there was even a chance she had survived, he had to try. No one argued. They were either too tired to care or unwilling to challenge his single-minded determination. Even Doc Mavro's recalcitrant streak had ebbed. Mind-numbing terror will do that to a man, even a hard-edged bastard like him, but maybe it was something else.

There was a moment when Bane had Nark on his knees, finger on the trigger, when he would have killed him, and everyone knew it. He hoped then that his actions had not engendered a culture of fear within the group. That he had become the one thing he had, up to a point, fought against his entire life.

NARK WALKED SLOWLY at the head of the group, Bane's shotgun levelled at his back. He had been stripped of his weapons but his hands were unbound. Bane figured even he was not quick enough to dodge an Executioner shell. With his gangers dead, the balance of power had shifted away from the gang lord. Now he was a prisoner, and one Bane fully intended to bring to justice if they survived.

Any remorse Nark may have harboured for Skudd and Zeke was hidden. Leading them onward, he was as cold and unreadable as ever.

'How far is it?' Bane growled.

'Not far,' Nark replied, 'another level, at most.'

He led them to a large door of latticed metal. Wrenching it aside with both hands, the door collapsed on itself into a thick grey line revealing a commercial elevator. There was room enough for them all.

Once inside, Bane read the worn destinations written in Necromundan-Gothic, noticing the activation key glowing dully next to the first. The other five denoted higher levels and were extinguished.

'Used to go as far as Hive City,' Nark said as Bane shut the gate, hammering the lit rune. Lurching metal filled the vast car and the elevator ground upwards.

THEIR ASCENT LASTED only a few minutes, coming to an abrupt stop after only one level. Nark raked open the door and stepped outside.

'This is it,' he said.

The elevator opened out into what looked like a clerical district. Numerous small buildings, domes and shelters were packed tightly together. Ravaged by age and vandalism, the area was a ruin, little better than a shanty slum.

Bane noticed a derelict hall, an overhanging arch at its face supported by six baroque columns. Two of the columns had collapsed and the foundations were uprooted and split, doubtless by hive quakes. Part of the roof set on top of the arch had fallen in with them. A faded rubric still clung defiantly above the shattered entrance. Bane made out the words *Regium Bilbliotechas*. It was some kind of knowledge repository. Scrolls, broken data slates and ancient books fluttered weakly outside it, disturbed by a faint turbine breeze wafting through the sector.

Other buildings bore all the hallmarks of notary's offices, and other ex-municipal quarters. The whole area seemed incongruous amidst the cold industrial harshness of the lower levels. They must be close to the border with Hive City. This place had obviously once been a spike of it, jutting into the belly of the Underhive. Another of the frontier zones swallowed up in the struggle for territory, abandoned by those that once dwelled and worked there.

'It's up ahead,' Nark said, pointing to a looming structure in the distance.

It rose above the rest, more grandiose in both stature and design. There was something ancient about it. It was the only building not in a state of utter ruination.

As they got closer, Bane realised it was some kind of chapel, with religious iconography etched on the pale, age-stained walls. Stone effigies of saints, priests and martyrs were set into shallow alcoves at the entrance, barred by a single, stout wooden door. Some of the statues had been beheaded, others less pleasantly mutilated. One stood out from all the rest. It looked clean, as if it had been recently carved. Rendered in immaculate detail, the figure was that of a man, dressed in long, flowing robes. He looked larger than the rest, more austere. In his left hand he held a book and was open-mouthed as if preaching. Part of his face was covered by a mask. Beneath, upon a hexagonal plinth was an inscription. 'Varian Smite, father, leader, saviour.'

'What is this place, Nark?' Bane asked, starting to feel uneasy.

'A chapel,' Nark returned. 'I heard people were coining here for sanctuary. A group was seen canvassing the settlements, doomsaying and preaching any shit so as people would listen. They come like lambs to the slaughter.' Nark paused and turned to look at Bane. 'I heard your girl, the one with the Razorhead tattoos, was one of them,' he muttered darkly.

Bane met his gaze, trying to read the gang lord's intentions. 'Lead on.' he said. They reached the threshold of the chapel. Nark pushed against the wooden door that creaked open slowly on worn hinges. It was dark inside. A building this old would have no power and no link to the hive grid. Nark hesitated.

'I don't like this,' Mavro hissed, skulking behind Bane.

‘Neither do I,’ Bane agreed, but beckoned Nark onwards anyway. If Alicia was here, he had no other choice.

Once inside the chapel, Bane noticed the faintest light issuing like haze through an upper window. The window was set high into the facing wall and far off. Its light pushed away the dingy gloom smothering the room. There was the silhouette of what looked like a raised pulpit.

‘Close the door,’ Bane said quietly. ‘I don’t want anything else coming in behind us.’

As the door swung shut, darkness closed in. An eerie silence descended, the merest scuffling of feet the only sound.

‘MacDaur,’ Bane said. ‘See if you can find a lamp or torch or something, but stay near the door and keep the others together.’

The deputy kept his voice low. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Nark and I are going for a walk.’ He shoved the shotgun in the gang lord’s back.

Bane and Nark moved slowly and carefully down a long, narrow aisle. What looked like the edges of pews were just visible on either side. Bane used them to guide him as he and Nark got closer to the pulpit. In the blackness, the chapel seemed profoundly empty.

‘Nark if you’re lying to me,’ Bane warned, watching the gang lord. A sickening feeling was building in his gut.

‘I’ve found something.’ hissed MacDaur from the back of the chapel. ‘Feels like... chains.’ he said.

Bane was about to talk to MacDaur, but stumbled as his feet got caught up in something on the floor. He looked down instinctively but then noticed a flash of movement ahead.

It was Nark, darting off into the pews, swallowed abruptly by darkness.

‘Nark,’ Bane cried, veering off after him. He cranked a round into the shotgun. It was a moot gesture; Bane had made a mistake and he realised the gang lord was gone. Bane hurried forward, stumbled again and fell to his knees.

‘Nark, you bastard,’ he spat.

The floor was cold and hard between the pews. Bane’s fingers closed around something. It was charred and brittle. The scent of oil overlaid the stink of burned flesh. Bane realised suddenly what he had in his hand and all thoughts of Nark evaporated.

‘Get out of here!’ he cried. It was bone he held in his hands, the charred remains of human bones. ‘It’s not safe,’ he said. ‘MacDaur, get them out before-’

Light blazed into the chapel. It hurt Bane’s eyes, but he saw at least twenty figures stood around him. They were wearing metal masks, each etched out of shining brass, untarnished and grotesque. From behind the twisted features wrought upon them - exaggerated noses, pointed ears and eye slits - cold, human eyes regarded him. Dressed in long brown, simple robes and draped with ammo belts, shoulder slung guns and hip-holstered pistols, there could be no mistaking what they were: Redemptionists.

The grim feeling manifesting in Bane’s gut deepened. Without speaking he put his shotgun down and raised both hands, beckoning to MacDaur to do the same. Bane saw Nark a few feet in front him. He must have felt the autogun in his chest before he saw it. His hands were up.

The Redemptionists surrounded them. They had been hiding in the shallow alcoves in the walls, knowing that any intruders would overlook them as they made for the light cast upon the pulpit.

The stench of oil came from two things. Huge lamps set around twelve supporting columns, six each to the left and right flanks of the pews, blazed with the stuff. It was exacerbated by a secondary fuel stench. It came from the flamers that many of the Redemptors were toting. Burners at the snout of each weapon raged with blue flame. The merest spray of the liquid and a gout of super-heated mixture would strip the very flesh off the bones of a potential enemy, the fate of the poor bastards who were nothing but blackened bones at Bane’s feet.

‘Seek ye a benediction. weary travellers?’ a benevolent, yet sinister voice asked.

Bane turned to face the pulpit, where the voice had come from. A figure stood there. It took a moment for Bane to recognise him as Varian Smite, the subject of the statue outside. As Bane looked at him, he could swear the preacher’s eyes brightened. Even behind the mask, the unfettered glee was perceptible.

‘We’re lost,’ Bane said, carefully. Right now, the Redemptionists could kill them as easily as a gore-lizard devours a child. The fact that they had not, meant there was a still a chance to negotiate. The preacher was clearly the leader, so it was his attention and favour that Bane needed to curry.

‘As are all wayward travellers,’ said Smite, gesturing to the bones at Bane’s feet. Bane tried not to look again and spoke quickly.

‘We came here seeking someone whom we heard had come to you for sanctuary.’ he said Smite smiled, the lower part of his face visible beneath his mask – a dark parody of an angelic visage, rendered in gold.

‘Plague has ravaged the dark belly of the hive,’ he muttered.

Bane was not sure whether he was still addressing him or had begun a monologue to himself.

‘The unclean are shown for what they are,’ he continued. ‘Damned.’

‘You know of the outbreak?’ Bane ventured, keen to wrest Smite from the dark mood he was falling into.

Smite looked up, eyes alert. ‘Of course,’ he said, smiling again as if it were a needless question to ask. ‘This,’ he said, lifting up a leather-bound book, from the pulpit, ‘tells me all I need to know.’

Bane noticed the other silent Redemptors, in his peripheral vision, nod towards the tome. It was obviously an artefact they held in high regard, worn and scorched as if it had endured through ages. Smite got up off the pulpit and walked towards where Bane was standing.

Now Bane could see him fully. He was adorned with long, brown robes like the others, but with no weapons, just various religious symbols hanging down from a cord tied around his waist.

‘I saw your approach,’ he whispered into Bane’s ear, once they were opposite each other. ‘Your coming is foretold. It heralds our crusade into the dark belly of our world,’ he continued. ‘Your part is crucial, as is the part of the others in our care.’

‘Others?’ asked Bane, interrupting. ‘What others?’ He was aware of a faint, hissing noise but, in his urgency to learn of Alicia’s fate, he dismissed it.

Smite raised a finger, fixing Bane with his mesmerizing gaze. ‘Look,’ he breathed, opening the book. The pages were like thick, rough parchment. Curled up at the edges, they bore a familiar stench. As Smite turned the pages with slow deliberation, Bane realised it was not parchment at all, it was human skin. Despite his shock, it could not prepare him for what he saw next. Smite opened the book fully and pointed with a thin finger, claw-like manicured nails making a light tapping sound as he rapped the page.

Scribed in a thick, dark ink was an image. It was of seven figures, all clustered together, arms raised plaintively. He recognised all of them. The likenesses were unmistakable, the posing eerily uncanny. It was them. Bane, Nark and the others, standing exactly as they were now. It was a perfect, faultless rendering.

Bane suddenly wished that he had kept the shotgun and tried to fight his way out. 'How?' was all he could manage.

Smite pointed with one finger to his left eye. 'I told you,' he said, pulling down a pan of the mask that was hidden from view, it covered the lower part of his nose and mouth completely. The Redemptionists mimicked their leader.

'I saw it,' said Smite, voice muffled by the mask.

Bane realised suddenly that it was a respirator. With frantic alarm, he remembered the hissing sound. Looking to his feet, he saw dense gas filling the room, exuding from the bases of the ornate lamps. As the gas, manifesting as a yellowish mist, grew higher, the lamps died and darkness rushed back at him.

'No,' Bane gasped as his legs turned to lead and he fell. Spittle forming on his lips, he raised his head and reached for Smite. White fury raged in Bane's head as one of the preacher's cohorts struck him savagely. A thick needle of pain bore into his skull and he was vaguely aware that his face was touching the floor.

He looked up as dark spots crept over his vision, and made out Smite standing over him, the book cradled lovingly in his talon-like grasp.

'There is much I wish to discuss with you,' he said, voice fading into gradual oblivion. 'But not yet.'

Blackness consumed Bane utterly. Smite disappeared into a blur of nothing, his voice trailing into the ether of unconsciousness.

'No. Not yet.'

A POUNDING HEADACHE woke Bane from his enforced slumber. His muscles were stiff and his head fogged up. Dazed, he reached out, vision still blurred, and touched the side of the cot on which he lay. Hard, like plascrete, with musty sweat-stained sheets and dogged with dust. He rolled over onto his side, still trying to get his bearings. He remembered the gas,

creeping up at his feet like a jaundiced mist and the masks arrayed about him, grinning shining, grotesque.

Heaving his body up. Bane let both feet touch the floor. It was cold and hard. He realised his boots had been removed. Looking around he discovered he was in some kind of catacomb. Must be those that lay beneath the chapel. It was dark. Light streamed in weakly from latticed grates set into the ceiling, no bigger than the length and width of his forearm. He made out ornate arches that stretched right into the middle of the room. At the end of each was a face. not unlike those depicted on the Redemptor's masks. A tongue unfurled from each one. Bane swore they were mocking him.

Next to him. Bane noticed another cot. He caught his breath when he saw who lay in it. It was Alicia, sleeping soundly. He watched her chest rise and fall. On her forehead was a bruise, harsh and purple against her pale skin. Bane crouched down next to her and went to stroke her hair. He hesitated, afraid to touch her should she be only a dream. His hand was still shaking when he at last found the courage to touch her skin and confirm she was real. Warm. That was good. He brushed away the pink hair that partly shrouded her face. He moved it gently as a father would for a daughter. She looked so innocent lying there, alone in the cot. Bane was reminded that beneath the scars, gang tats and bravura was just a sixteen year-old girl. She, who had once wanted to be a part of one of the most powerful and dangerous gangs of the Underhive but who had then found the courage to defy them, was still just a girl.

'I found you,' he whispered, bowing his head as he held her hand. Now all he had to do was save her.

'She's been that way for days,' an unfamiliar voice said from the shadows. Bane started and snatched back his hand. He became alert, searching the dark for the speaker.

A figure stood a few feet from him. He was short and had once been immaculately dressed. Fine robes, fur trimmed, hung from his portly frame. They had once been black but were greyed with wear, and torn and spattered with filth and blood. The fine trim around the edges of the robes was frayed in places or ripped away entirely. The robes overlaid a deep crimson suit. Wide trousers were cut short, also frayed and sporting several shallow tears. Thick leather moccasins sat snugly on his feet. They

did not look like the footwear of your average Underhiver. He had an air about him, and stood upright and proud despite his dishevelled appearance. He had a dark grey beard but the rest of his head was completely bald. He peered at Bane through a monocle, and the azure lens gave his left eye an unearthly luminescence.

Bane could tell he was a guilder, by the timbre of his voice, and the gold sovereign ring upon his finger confirmed it. Although it was dark in the catacombs and Bane could not discern the exact details, he had seen enough guild rings in his time to know it bore a flattering resemblance of Lord Helmawr on the upper side, etched in profile and on the other the motif of that guilder's house, the family to which he belonged. But it was more than just a badge of office, a symbol of status – it had a practical application too.

The guild rings were encoded. Nano-chips within were better than any key. They granted access to parts of Hive Primus that the majority of the populace would never see. They allowed the guild to conduct clandestine meetings, ensure the safe passage of goods and sequester the services of certain official and unofficial bodies. Such a trinket was reserved for high-borns. No Underhive guilder could possess one. It meant this man had influence and wealth.

'Where are the others?' Bane demanded, standing up a little shakily.

'Two are in here with you.' The guilder gestured behind Bane. Gilligan slept fitfully on a cot, Jarla nestled next to him. Bane had not even noticed them. 'As for the rest,' the stranger continued. 'they are in the next room, awake but resting like you. You were struck very hard.'

Bane raised his left hand. There was a bump on his right temple and a spike of pain made him wince as he touched it.

'There was another empty cot, it didn't look like you were waking any time soon.'

'How long have we been down here?' Bane asked. He found his boots next to the bed and pulled them on.

'Myself? Or you and your party?'

'Both.' The response was terse. Bane was in no mood for the guilder's games. Most of those he had met in his life were selfish egotists, no action beneath them if it meant profit. Though how this particular guildsman had

ended up at the mercy of a bunch of Redemptionists was something he intended to discover.

‘I have been here for at least seven days, though that is an estimate. We have been fed whilst incarcerated, but enclosed like this there was no way to gauge the passage of time accurately, the guilder said.

Seven days was a long time to be held captive by outland fanatics. The guilder should have been dead by now. Then Bane remembered something the crazed preacher, Smite, had said. That he had been waiting for them. He alluded to some kind of plan for them all. Now Bane and the others were here. At first, Bane had just thought him mad, but now...? Then there was the book.

‘And us?’ Bane asked, fixing his boots so they fitted snugly and looking up.

‘You were only out for a few hours.’

Bane paused and looked back down to the floor, trying to think as his head throbbed painfully. ‘Who are you?’ he asked at last, eyes narrowing suspiciously as he regarded the guilder again. ‘You’re either brave or stupid, coming in here alone. How do you know I’m any better than those bastards above us?’

‘A prisoner, like you. My name is Archimedes Vaxillian,’ he said. ‘And to answer your second question, I am neither.’

Another figure much larger, wearing a half-mesh emerald body glove, partly concealed by a heavy storm cloak, emerged beside Archimedes.

‘As you can see,’ he said, gesturing to the man standing beside him, ‘I am not alone.’

The man was well-built with stimulant enhanced musculature rippling in his neck. His eyes were cold and hard. An empty black pistol holster was strapped to his leg and one arm was in a sling. The newcomer was a bodyguard, through and through. A pretty good one too – all the time they had been talking, Bane had not even heard him.

‘This,’ added Archimedes, ‘is Dietrich Meiser, my associate.’

Bane feigned indifference. He looked back down at Alicia slumbering quietly, and his features softened.

‘I assure you,’ said Archimedes, ‘she’s as comfortable as we can make her. Now, if you don’t mind, I have some questions.’

Bane looked back at the guilder, face set like stone. ‘So do I,’ he replied. ‘Now, take me to the others.’

A LOW ARCH led out of the first chamber and into a larger one. The others waited, sitting quietly on wooden benches arrayed around the edge of the room. Bane felt their gaze upon him. He had risked everything to come here, for his own selfish reasons, and now they were all prisoners at the whim of fanatical lunatics. Try as he might, he could not justify his actions. He had let them down.

MacDaur nodded a greeting at Bane. His deputy looked rough and his skin was grey. It seemed a nod was all he could manage. Mavro was nearby. He scowled as Bane walked past to sit down on a bench. Ratz crouched on the floor next to the doctor, staring vacantly.

Whether Bane liked it or not, all of them depended on him. He knew they had to get out of the chapel. The only safe haven was the Precinct House. All that mattered was getting there. True, they had escaped the plague for now, but it would catch them again. There was no way that a bunch of religious freaks could avert it, however righteous they believed their cause to be. Bane had no idea what the Redemptionists had in store for them, or how they fitted into Varlan Smite’s plans.

‘You’re doing a lot of thinking lawman.’ It was Nark. Bane had not seen him at first, sitting away from the group, smothered by the shadow cast by the door arch. The gang lord faced a set of stone steps that led up to a wooden trapdoor. It was the room’s only exit. For once, Nark was without a Kalma-root between his lips; the Redemptors must have taken them. In fact, now Bane thought about it, he realised that all of his weapons were gone too. He checked for the pistols in his belt. The bolt pistol was missing, but he still had his service piece. They must I have overlooked it. Ironic, as it was the only weapon that had no use whatsoever.

‘They’ve taken all the guns,’ Nark confirmed. ‘No way you’re shooting your way out of this one.’ He smiled languidly, leaning back against the wall as if already resigned to his fate. ‘What have you done?’ he asked mockingly.

‘You shut the scav up,’ Bane warned.

‘You going to make me?’ Nark said.

‘Gentlemen,’ said Archimedes. ‘I suggest we refrain from killing each other, despite our differing... backgrounds. If the Redemptors had wanted us dead, we would be already. There may yet be a way out of this. Besides,’ he added, ‘I still have questions.’

Bane gave Nark a dark glance, to which the gang lord responded with a wry smile. ‘You’re a member of the Merchant Guild,’ Bane said to Archimedes. ‘So what the hell are you doing so far downhive?’

Archimedes took a seat. Meiser stood next to him. ‘I don’t know if you are aware,’ the guilder began, ‘but over the last few months, guilder caravans have been ambushed on an inordinate number of occasions, despite our best efforts to ensure the contrary. Supplies of Fresh, hive rations, munitions, and all and sundry were stolen.’ Archimedes paused and leant forward to lend drama to his words. ‘Our routes are secret, Watchman. No one knows of them but the guild. Even the recipients have no idea how the goods get to them. House Greim is but one of the houses hit by these attacks. I have been employed to root out the source of their dismay.’

‘What? Taking out the attacking gang?’ Bane was not convinced.

‘No, of course not. By source, I mean the individual or individuals furnishing the Underhivers with our route plans. Guild activities, even those conducted at the highest level, require local contacts. It is not unheard of for such contacts to be *persuaded*, shall we say, to impart information. My enquiries were discreet yet they attracted certain unwanted attention from extremists affiliated with House Delaque. My bodyguards and I were visiting a corpseyard, in a slum town called *Dreyzer Glut*.

‘Healthy body parts, regardless of whether or not the owner is deceased, attract a high price uphive, particularly in the medical sector.’ Archimedes glanced towards Mavro. The doctor, who had been looking at the guilder up to this point, averted his gaze and stared at the floor. ‘I was questioning the yard master, unaware that he had hired protection, when a fight broke out. We were outgunned and I believed us to be in some peril. Then the firing stopped. At least, it was not directed at us. At first, I thought the Delaques had turned on each other. It is a common occurrence. But I was wrong. They were firing at another enemy, one that had risen up around them from the very bodies being processed in the corpseyard.’

‘I know Dreyzer Glut’ Bane said. ‘It’s on the opposite side of the dome. There are hundreds of shanty towns between there and Former Glory. Thousands could be infected.’

Archimedes nodded. ‘I’m afraid your theory is correct. It became apparent that the plague was not restricted merely to the premises but had spread from outside.’ Archimedes paused to wipe his brow, as if the memories were causing him to perspire. ‘I travelled with two bodyguards originally. Trevallian was killed during our escape. Our only recourse was to try to find a way back uphive. We reached as far as this chapel. It’s strange, but we all place false faith in holy symbols and believe they can protect us from evil. In truth, they seduce us. Lulled by their promises, promises of our own making, and so it was that I was lulled, believing the chapel to be a haven, when it was anything but. And so here we are.’

Bane regarded the guilder thoughtfully. His story sounded plausible enough, but his instincts told him that guilders were not to be trusted. Why are you still here Archimedes? Why aren’t your corpses charred on the floor of the chapel above, like those others?’

‘Truthfully, I don’t know.’

‘Those carcasses up there,’ said Bane, ‘they were killed recently. I could smell the stink of their flesh. I counted at least eight corpses. You didn’t come here alone did you?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ the guilder protested, a little uncertainly. He was hiding something. Whatever it was, it was bad. ‘I’ve answered your questions, now you owe me the same courtesy. For instance, what is so important about that damn girl in the other room? Where’re the rest of the enforcers? What are they doing about the outbreak?’

Bane opened his mouth to answer. A thick shaft of hazy light invading the room from above arrested his response. Bane looked up. A robed silhouette stood in the open trapdoor. He was big and had a conical shaped head. Leaning into the torch light, iron studs were revealed on a thick leather cowl that the Redemptor wore in lieu of a mask.

‘Come,’ his voice was so deep it was barely audible. ‘The father wishes to speak with you.’ It was directed at Bane.

He got to his feet. ‘Seems all I’m doing these days is talking.’ he said, and walked slowly up the stairs to the light of the trapdoor.

BANE WAS TAKEN by the Redemptor who had identified himself as Deacon Raine to an anteroom off the nave of the chapel. Raine left him there. Bane stood, hands bound with a leather strap, upon a circular, wooden platform. It was dark in the chamber, but Bane could see it was some kind of auditorium. Wooden seats arced around him in a semi-circle, three rows deep. Intersecting the semi-circle was a simple wooden podium, raised a few feet from ground level.

After a few moments, a figure stepped out of the gloom and onto the podium. As he did so, torches flared violently to life. Varian Smite stood before him, a lectern nearby cradling his book. Alongside the preacher was Raine, arms folded. In the fiery light, shadows ran down his mask in sharp slashes. It made him look eerie, death-like. The audience of Redemptionists sat above like a wall of grinning, gleaming metal.

'What is this?' Bane demanded, trying to stay calm. It looked very much like a trial. 'What the hell am I do-'

Smite raised a finger, cutting Bane off.

'You are not here to ask questions lawmaker,' he said, in an unnervingly benign manner. You are here to answer them.' Smite smiled and approached him.

'Clearly you have fallen from the path of righteousness,' he began. 'Yet, you I have survived the plague and reached this sanctuary. You have endured much, yes?'

Bane did not know how to respond. Did Smite want an answer? He was suddenly aware of the peril of his situation. The fact that the Redemptors were talking was good, but Smite was a madman with more than a trace of wyrd about him. Bane had to play this carefully, at least until he could gauge their intentions.

'We have suffered, yes.' he said.

'And through suffering do we begin the path to righteousness,' preached Smite. He turned to his congregation and swept his arm over them as if he were performing a benediction. For a moment, Bane thought he caught a glimpse of pink scar tissue, just visible beneath the mask. Smite turned back to face him and the Redemptionists nodded as one.

'Through suffering do we begin the path to righteousness.' It sounded like a mantra, a raft of dulcet voices without distinction.

‘Tell me, lawmaker.’ said Smite, drawing close. ‘How far has the plague spread? Are all sinners reaching from beyond the grave to claim the damned that still walk and breathe?’

Bane was about to confess his ignorance, but thought better of it. The Underhive has all but been consumed,’ he said. ‘There are thousands of them.’

Smite turned his back to him, stroking his chin as if thinking.

‘It is as I foresaw,’ Smite muttered. ‘An army of the dead that walks the earth.’ He straightened up and faced the congregation, but addressed Bane. ‘There is one whom I seek,’ he said. ‘Come from the very Abyss itself. His will... drives them. You know of what I speak,’ the preacher turned around to look Bane in the eye, as if examining him for any trace of deception.

At first, Bane had no idea what the crazed preacher was drivelling about. He thought it was more inane babble. Then he remembered the zombies at the Salvation. He remembered how they had paused outside the bar, deliberately gathering together as if waiting for something. As if waiting for instruction. There was something unearthly about the plague, the way it had grown and spread so quickly. Was it possible that there was more to it than a simple epidemic, and this madman knew about it? Bane thought for a moment and decided to take a gamble. He spoke quietly, so just Smite could hear him. ‘You must set me free. I have seen evidence of something driving these creatures. I must get a warning uphive and stop the contagion before it spreads further. before it cannot be stopped.’

Smite smiled. ‘No,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘You cannot leave this place.’

Bane’s heart thumped hard in alarm.

Smite retreated a little, shoulders sagging in resignation. He sighed. ‘I had hoped you would be the one to lead me to him.’ He turned away, talking to himself. ‘My vision was so clear. After all the others that failed, all those who were unworthy. I had hope for this one.’

‘Others? What others?’ Bane interrupted.

But Smite was not listening. He was locked in his monologue. The time has arrived. This man’s coming has heralded that if nothing else,’ he said, and turned around quickly to face Bane.

‘Tell me, enforcer,’ he said, ‘who do you pray to when all seems lost and the darkness is closing in around you?’

‘I...’ Bane stuttered, bad memories springing unbidden into his mind. He wondered whether or not Smite could sense them.

‘Is not faith a lawmaker’s greatest weapon?’ Smite went on. ‘His shield, his unswerving belief in what is truth and the power of the law.’

Bane closed his eyes, his head dropped and he spoke to the floor. ‘I have no faith,’ he admitted.

‘Then you must be cleansed,’ Smite concluded. ‘Just like all the rest.’

Bane opened his eyes and saw black scorch marks beneath him. He had not noticed them before. He was losing. He had hoped that he could reason with the preacher, maybe try and trick him into letting him go. Now he could see that was impossible. He did not have what Smite wanted, knowledge of this one of whom he spoke. The preacher approached and looked deep into Bane’s eyes. Bane realised at that moment that Smite was certain of that fact too.

Bane had to do something before he became another scorch mark on the ground. Somehow he knew that if he went back to the catacombs, it would be a death sentence for them all.

‘You listen to this madman?’ he cried, addressing the throng suddenly, ‘One that claims to see and hear thoughts and events yet to pass? You harbour a witch,’ he said accusingly. Bane reasoned that Smite’s will and prophecy kept the religious cult together. Perhaps if he could make them question, throw doubt onto their benefactor...

‘I am blessed,’ raged Smite, crushing Bane’s hopes instantly with his fervour and zealous charisma. ‘Given visions by powers from on high, to root out the sinful and purge the damned. And if they are at our gates, they will be judged.’

That was it, the last gambit. Bane had failed. It was over. There was only one course of action left. Go down fighting. He powered at Smite, leaning in with his shoulder for a body charge.

Deacon Raine stepped into his path and put him down hard with his huge bulk. Bane felt a shockwave of pain rush through his body.

Smite motioned to two Redemptors who stood nearby in shadowed alcoves. They grabbed Bane roughly by the arms and dragged him away.

‘You will all be judged!’ bellowed Smite, his voice ringing in Bane’s ears like a death knell, as he was thrown back down into the catacombs.

BANE HIT THE stone floor hard, sprawled out on all fours, the trapdoor booming shut in his wake. MacDaur went to his side. ‘Are you all right?’ he breathed, an unhealthy rasp to his voice.

‘I’ll live,’ Bane said, spitting out a gobbet of blood.

‘I take it the negotiations didn’t go well.’ Nark said snidely.

Bane glared at him.

‘What happened?’ Archimedes asked, his tone fearful. Cracks were appearing in his, until now, composed facade.

‘Smite is completely mad,’ Bane replied, sitting back down on one of the benches, ‘and I think he’s a wyrd too, some kind of prescient telepath.’

‘I thought the Redemption hunted and killed wyrds,’ said Mavro.

‘They do,’ Bane replied. ‘I tried to use that against him, but he has a hold over them, possibly some form of mental control. He’s seen the plague in some kind of vision and fervently believes he’s destined to go on some kind of crusade to crush the unholy, starting with the zombies.’

‘Those frikkers are all crazy,’ chipped in Nark.

‘There’s more,’ Bane told them. ‘He’s looking for someone, said he’d come from the Abyss.’ Bane flashed a glance at Ratz, who stared vacantly into space. He couuld not help thinking that whatever the Ratskin had unearthed was tied into this somehow. ‘Smite thought I knew where this someone was, seemed like he’d asked before too.’ Bane switched his gaze to Archimedes. The guilder was looking down, his head in his hands. Meiser remained impassive. ‘I couldn’t tell him what he wanted to know,’ Bane concluded.

‘So where does that leave us?’ Mavro asked.

‘Dead.’ The voice of Archimedes was little more than a whisper.

‘What?’ asked Mavro. There was a flash of silver as the razor came out, flashing the light. ‘What do you mean? They spared Bane, so maybe they’ll just leave us here and go on their crusade. Once they’re gone we can escape, get to the Precinct House.’ The doctor was smiling. It was a deluded expression as he tried to nvince himself they would be safe.

‘No,’ muttered Archimedes. He dropped his arms to the floor, defeated.

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’ Bane asked.

Archimedes looked up. He was pale, the thin veneer of confidence he had maintained thus far, stripped away to reveal a haggard old man resigned to his fate.

‘I lied,’ he said, with remorse. ‘We did not come here alone. When the neurone plague broke out, I mean *really* broke out, people fled in droves. Meiser, Trevallian and I were caught up in a mob as we tried to escape the Corpseyard. It was the mob that killed my bodyguard, crushed him to death as he fired on them, trying to protect me. In the end we allowed the wave of fleeing settlers to carry us. We came here. Some of those fleeing had heard about the priests canvassing the settlements, they knew this was where others were gathering,’ the guilder said, eyes intent as he regarded Bane especially.

‘We were not prepared for what we’d find here. The Redemptors herded us, like sump cattle, fifty people rammed in these chambers with no explanation as to what was going on.’ Archimedes paused, as if dredging up the courage to speak further. ‘It wasn’t long before they took the first,’ he said, his voice diminishing to a croak. The preacher questioned them about the plague, about the one he was seeking. Ignorance, fear and pleading were met with the torch. The bones you saw in the chapel are of the people Meiser and I came here with. One by one he took them, one by one they burned. The screams...’ Archimedes swallowed hard, trying to fight back his discomfort. They killed over forty like that. Then he came to the girl,’ he said, nodding at Bane.

‘When he touched her, something happened. He grabbed her wrist tightly and shook. She bore the brunt of his convulsions, thrown about like a doll as he thrashed. Her head struck one of the cots as he sagged into a heap. His brethren hoisted him up. He was muttering incoherently about his book. I realised later that he had scribed whatever he had seen in them, but the interrogations and the burnings stopped. There were just the three of us left, alone in the dark waiting for someone to arrive. When I saw you, the way you were looking at her, I knew you were the one the preacher was waiting for, the one who’d have the answers. I knew that you’d placate him and we’d be released. Now I realise that isn’t so, that we’ll die in this place.’ Archimedes fell silent, regarding Bane with hollow, lifeless eyes.

‘Smite is insane.’ Bane said at last, ‘He’s ingratiated himself into this cult, passing off his mutation as a blessing. He’s no priest and I don’t believe he would have let us go, even if I did have the answers he seeks – I saw it in his eyes.’

It was cold comfort, but the best he could do. Silence smothered the room, the direness of their fate sinking in.

‘So that’s it?’ Mavro bawled. The doctor got to his feet, shaking his head as he raced up the stone steps to the trapdoor. He hammered on the toughened wood furiously, knuckles white.

‘Listen to me,’ he cried at the trapdoor. ‘Listen, I can tell you what you want to know. Let me tell you,’ he raged, thumping hard with the balls of his fists.

Bane got to his feet. ‘Weren’t you listening Mavro? It doesn’t matter. Smite has no intention of letting us go. He never did.’

Mavro stopped hammering on the trapdoor. He turned around and looked at Bane with pleading eyes.

‘Then what the hell does he want with us?’ he whimpered.

A heady stench filled the air, thick and cloying.

Nark sniffed. ‘What is that smell?’ His voice betrayed a hint of fear.

Bane took a lungful, coughed and wiped his mouth. ‘Fuel,’ he breathed, hawking a thick gobbet of blood and phlegm onto the floor. He looked up to the small grates above. Thin wisps of smoke were exuding through them, growing in density.

‘Quickly,’ said Bane. ‘Clog those openings.’

There was a frantic bout of movement as the survivors tore urgently at their clothes, ripping off thin shreds from sleeves and tunics to staunch the flow of acrid smoke now surging into the chamber. Four separate grates were set into the ceiling. Bane, MacDaur, Nark and Mavro stood beneath each one, holding the makeshift wadding in place.

‘So, what now lawman?’ Nark asked, coughing.

Bane thought for a moment knowing that he had to act fast. He looked up at the smoke issuing through the cracks in the trapdoor and felt the heat from the room above. Bane used the wadding to cover his mouth.

‘What are you doing?’ Mavro screamed. We’ll be suffocated.’

‘Soon that’s not going to matter,’ Bane called back at him with grim finality. ‘Nark, with me.’

Nark knew when to argue and when to act without question. A lifetime in the Underhive had taught him that. He dropped the wadding and followed Bane into the anteroom.

Jarla was waking up, disturbed by the commotion, as Bane entered.

‘What’s happening?’ she asked sleepily. Her eyes widened when she saw the smoke filling the other room.

‘Get your father up;’ Bane told her. ‘We’re getting out of here.’

Above the coughing and the sounds of frantic desperation as the others fought to stop the smoke getting in and choking them all, Bane heard the harsh *snap* of burning wood in the chapel as the fire took hold.

Jarla had got Gilligan to his feet. The old barman was haggard, needing more than just sleep. They were at the door when Bane took hold of one of the stone cots. Nark saw his plan and moved quickly to the other side.

Bane heaved. It was damn heavy but between them they lifted it. Bane’s muscles tightened as he hefted the cot’s weight. Thick cords of vein stood out on his arms and he felt the same tension in his neck. As he and Nark took the cot through the door, Bane heard another sound above the eager conflagration: chanting. Numerous voices in perfect harmony. It was a ritual, and they were the sacrifice. Smite had wanted to anoint his crusade with blood. Pushing the thoughts into the back of his mind, Bane drove on.

They were through the door. Smoke choked the room. It was difficult to see through the grey miasma. Bane found the stone stairway. He took a step and coughed up another lungful of phlegm and blood. He heaved another step. The chanting grew louder, insistently demanding his attention. He heard Nark, breathing hard, choking and spluttering intermittently. Bane was exhausted, his arms and legs burning as if they were ablaze.

They reached the top of the stairs. The heat from beyond the trapdoor was searing Bane’s face. He could only just see it through the thick cloud of smoke.

‘What are you doing?’ Archimedes cried urgently. ‘They could still be out there.’

‘A chance I’m willing to take,’ Bane returned and looked at Nark. ‘Ready?’ he growled, trying to keep his head low and shifting his body so he held the cot at the side.

‘Do it,’ Nark coughed.

Bane tensed his muscles and with a huge effort, swung the cot back like a battering ram. Nark followed his lead. As it came forward with crushing force he roared. Nark’s own voice similarly defiant as the gang lord cried in unison. The cot smashed into the trapdoor with the blunt, decisive

aggression of an uphive trans-rail shuttle. The wooden trapdoor exploded against its fury, huge scorched chunks of it blasting outwards into the flames beyond.

Bane and Nark let go of the cot and it crashed through the gaping wound where the trapdoor had been, splinters framing the void like shattered teeth. The backwash of heat and pressure threw them down hard, crushing them onto the stairway. The intensity quickly abated and fire licked at the edges of the hole, turning the splinter teeth into blackened nubs.

Bane got to his feet and raised his hand over his eyes to ward off the heat of the flames. He edged out of the trapdoor to look around the chapel. Fire crawled up the walls and smothered the floor. The wooden pews crackled and roared with it. Like a bubbling wave, the roof was consumed and dusty tapestries dripped like wax. A narrow channel led through the conflagration. The Redemptionists were gone.

Bane ducked back into the chamber, turned to the others who were cloudy silhouettes below him and bellowed furiously. ‘Go, now!’

MacDaur went first, then Jarla and Mavro, who supported the ailing Gilligan. Then came Ratz hooting and whooping, a macabre grin etched on his face as the flames danced in his eyes. Last of all were Archimedes and his bodyguard.

‘Meiser,’ Bane shouted at him, the bodyguard at first a shadow as he cut through the smoke. ‘I need you to get Alicia.’

Archimedes, coughing and wheezing, was past Bane and almost through the hole, when he tumed and gripped his shoulder. ‘He stays with me.’ Meiser pushed Bane aside and followed his master out into the chapel.

Bane barrelled down the stairs, shoving Nark aside.

‘Leave her lawman or you’ll both be killed,’ the gang lord cried after him from the top of the stairs.

Bane was not listening. He had not come this far just to let her go. He fought his way through the smoke, feeling with his hands. Coughing and spluttering, he found his way into the anteroom. It was wreathed in acrid, black smoke. Eyes watering, Bane found he was out of breath and could not drag any air into his lungs. He was choking. He fell to his knees, pressed his head right down until it touched the floor, his nose and mouth just below the deepening pall of suffocating smoke, and heaved air into his

body. He crawled, knees and elbows raw as he pounded forward, heedlessly.

Reaching Alicia's cot, he dragged her to the floor. Lowering his head again, he took another breath. 1 le heaved Alicia onto his back and with a massive effort, stood up. Back bent, he staggered to where he thought the door was. In the billowing black tempest he might as well have been blind. After a few moments, a sudden panic gripped him. He could not find the door! In the smoke he could be right next to it and not see it. Pawing at the smoke madly, Bane felt a strong hand grip his shoulder and drag him out of the anteroom. Together they found the stairs, crawled up the first few and staggered up the rest. At the mouth of the trapdoor, fire sketched around it in a ragged circle, Bane saw his rescuer. It was Nark.

He could not keep the surprise from his face. Nark returned the look with grim indifference and slung Alicia's left arm over his right shoulder. Bane took the other side and they dragged her bodily out through the chapel as the flames tore into it. They surged outside and fell into a gasping, wheezing heap.

BANE WATCHED AS the chapel was devoured by fire, stone charring and cracking with the sheer heat of the blaze. He bent down to listen at Alicia's mouth, smoothing her hair out of the way. After a few seconds he heard her breathing. She was alive. He felt someone grasp his arm. It was Nark.

'Look' he said.

Bane followed his gaze and noticed the others all looking in the same direction. His eyes narrowed and he made out the robed forms of the Redemptionists, disappearing into the darkness of the Underhive, heading towards what Smite believed was their destiny. Heading towards a horde of thousands of creatures without remorse, who felt no pain and devoured the flesh of the living.

'Told you they were crazy.' Nark said.

'So what now?' Archimedes asked.

Bane scowled at him, remembering how he had left Alicia to bum. Meiser returned his look with steel in his eyes. I'll deal with you later, Bane thought.

‘Without any weapons, we have no choice,’ he said eventually. ‘We have to reach the Precinct House before the horde does.’ Bane swung his gaze around to the gang lord. That includes you, Nark.’

Nark sighed and said, ‘I’m gonna need a smoke.’

CHAPTER NINE

BANE SAT ALONE, swathed in the grey light issuing through a wide crack in the roof. The constant dripping of the dysfunctional precipitator nagged at him. It was a huge device, rusted and dilapidated but still impressive. It dominated the vaulted ceiling of the disused refinery, reaching up with ancient pipes, a dormant gyroscopic engine at its core. Thick coils of armoured tubing twisted from it like exposed intestine, conjoined to multiple banks of moisture condensers. Trapped water vapour was fed up the tube to a confluence at the zenith of the mighty machine, where a huge pressure sealed vat still existed. It was almost empty. All it contained was rusty sludge.

Bane cradled a battered shotgun in his lap. He had found it in a warden's lockbox when he had checked out the refinery. It had a full load of ammo: six standard solid slugs, plus one in the breech. Not enough, but something was better than nothing.

They had put a few miles between themselves and the chapel. The Precinct House was not far away, but Bane's detour had made the journey more arduous. With little knowledge of how far the plague had spread uphive and what safe zones still existed, they had had to take the most oblique route. Fatigue had set in quickly and the disused water refinery had seemed safe enough.

The others were resting in an old labour dorm. Nark was look-out. None of them had any weapons, except Bane who carried the shotgun and his dysfunctional service pistol, a weapon tarnished by age. It was an item that epitomised his failure, the symbol of it tarnished by memory.

He had thought about asking MacDaur to keep watch. He trusted his deputy more, but he looked weak and needed rest. He had railed against Banes decision at first. The young deputy hated the ganger. His vision of the law was an ideal, black and white, with no room for grey. Strange then,

how he had turned a blind eye to Bane's misdemeanours. Maybe he had not noticed. Funny what you see and do not see when you want to. In the end, MacDaur relented and the gang lord dutifully agreed.

It was a risk. Nark might make a run for it, but Bane had seen the fear in his eyes more than once. It seemed as if Nark was with them for the time being. What choice did he have? Out there, in the unknown darkness, predators stalked them. There was safety in numbers. Nark knew that. It was a dogma indoctrinated in every Underhive ganger. What would happen when they got closer to the Precinct House? Bane did not know. He resolved that was when the shotgun would come in most useful. He was taking Nark in, whether he liked it or not.

A sudden bout of the shakes made the shotgun jump from his lap. Bane breathed deeply and fought down nausea and the stimm-craving that felt like it was eating his gut. He felt sweat on his forehead.

There was someone else in the room with him, He made a fist to stop the shaking and gripped the shotgun quickly and raised it, aiming at the dark. His heart pounded, then, from the soft crump of their footfalls, Bane realised who it was. He lowered the weapon and went back to staring at the precipitator.

'You wish to talk, guilder?'

Archimedes sat down next to him on a packing crate. The girl is still unconscious,' he ventured.

Bane had left Alicia in the dorm. He had watched over her at first but found he could not do it for long. The sight of her like that was difficult to bear. He had left Jarla and Mavro to keep her safe and maintain the vigil in his absence.

'You never did explain why she is so important,' the guilder said.

'It's a long story,' Bane said after a few seconds. 'I see you have brought a friend,' he added.

Meiser's shadow loomed into the room. He stepped into the light, announcing wordlessly his presence and threat.

'Laconic as ever,' Bane gibed, turning to regard the bodyguard with a stony gaze. 'I haven't forgotten what happened in the chapel, guilder,' he said.

Archimedes ushered him away with a glance, Meiser disappearing into the shadows once more. Out of sight, but never far away. The guilder

sighed. ‘You have my apologies. In truth, I was afraid. Meiser is my only protection here in the slums.’

‘We are but a few hundred feet from Hive City,’ Bane countered.

‘It is a far cry from civilisation. You know that.’

Bane sniffed his agreement.

‘I didn’t know I could trust you, or the company you keep. I had to look to my own interests,’ Archimedes admitted.

‘How guilder-like of you,’ Bane returned darkly.

‘You were an enforcer once, weren’t you?’ the guilder said, changing tack after a moment of thoughtful silence.

Bane nodded.

‘It wasn’t from the uniform that I knew,’ Archimedes admitted. ‘You could’ve stolen that, or bought it. I’ve heard of you. Captain Erik Bane, one of the finest.’ ‘Seems everyone has.’ Bane’s retort was caustic.

‘You were disgraced, expelled from the service,’ Archimedes continued.

‘I know the stoty. I lived it. Is this history lesson going somewhere, Vaxillian?’ Bane turned his head to look at him, eyes narrowed contemptuously.

‘My point is, you were once a leader, and you’re leading these people now, like it or not.

On a small level, I think it gives you back some of the dignity you’ve lost. Maybe by saving that girl in there, you can start to feel like a worthwhile human being again. Only there’s a problem.’

‘What’s that?’ Bane’s voice was a little choked.

‘When you reach the Precinct House, all that will become a fallacy as you’re confronted by the very institution that cast you out.’

‘For someone who I met barely a few hours ago, you seem to think you know a lot about me.’ Bane stared off again into the shadows.

‘Its my business to know about people, to make a reckoning of them quickly and to know when they’re telling the truth,’ he said. ‘You are obviously the leader. You demonstrated that in the chapel but it is a burden you do not wish for. Why else do you sit here, alone in the shadows?’

‘Maybe I came here to get some peace and gather my thoughts.’ The insinuated request did not hold much weight, and Bane knew it.

‘And leave the girl alone, who you braved the depths of the Underhive to save? I don’t believe that. I’ve been talking with the others and I know

what you did to try and get her back. All that you risked. No, you're here alone because you can't face them. You can't face their expectant faces, the pressure that their desire to survive puts upon you. Even that ganger gives you grudging respect,' Archimedes concluded.

Silence fell. It endured for a minute before Bane responded.

'Archimedes, why are you saying this? Even if everything you've said is true, what does it matter?' Bane asked, anger in his eyes as he regarded the guilder.

'Because what happens when we reach the Precinct House and they turn us away?' he said.

'I...' Bane had to admit, it had crossed his mind. All the Enforcement knew of him now was that he was a drunk, left to die in some backwater settlement. Truth was, most who once knew him probably thought he was dead.

'If we get to their borders,' Archimedes said, after a time, 'take me with you. I will ensure our presence is met with cooperation, if you cannot.'

Bane was open mouthed. So many hard truths, from a virtual stranger, were difficult to bear. Was his psyche so easy to disentangle? In the end, he nodded. 'Thank you,' the guilder said.

'What for? Bane was incredulous.

'Your trust and now I shall trust you,' he added.

Bane sat up straighter. The confusion in his expression remained, but it was tempered with intrigue.

'House Greim was not the only caravan to lose its cargo,' Archimedes admitted. 'In fact several different houses have suffered similar fates. It was believed that the caravans were operating on secret trade routes, away from the badzones, and it wasn't supplies of Fresh and rations that were taken. It was all munitions. They were weapons, bought and sold by gangers throughout the Underhive. Some were mass produced, due for shipping off-world.' Archimedes paused. 'The firepower in those caravans could furnish a small army and there was only one band of perpetrators.'

'The Razorheads,' Bane spat.

'Yes. How did you know?' Now it was Archimedes turn to be wrong-footed.

'Alicia, the girl in the other room, was once part of the gang. She wanted out. I went in to get her.'

Archimedes nodded and smiled as he began to understand her significance.

‘She made it out, I didn’t,’ Bane continued. They held me for months – quite a prize to have an ex-enforcer as a captive, particularly one who had a history with them. I got out and found the Razors were all dead. I found the majority of the gang clustered together in some kind of central chamber. The weapons you spoke of were all there.’

‘Dead?’ Archimedes asked. ‘Killed by whom?’

‘I don’t know. They didn’t stay like that. They turned into those things we’ve been running from,’ Bane said, looking at the precipitator as he remembered. He saw the sill beneath it, used to catch any residue run-off. ‘I found two of them head first...’ He remembered the water still at the Razorheads’ lair. Remembered thinking it must have pumped throughout the complex. The hooded figure through the bars of his cell wasn’t one of them. Couldn’t be.

‘What is it?’ Archimedes asked. Bane had been thinking for about a minute.

Bane regarded the guilder. ‘I think it was deliberate.’ he said.

‘What?’

‘The plague. I think it started with the Razotheads, that the neurone disease was somehow made into a chemical and fed into their water supply. It was the only way to guarantee they were all infected,’ Bane explained.

‘But who could do that? Just infiltrate their stronghold and poison them? And why, why start a plague to do it?’ Archimedes said.

‘The Razor’s had an ally, who kept their identity secret,’ Bane began.

‘The one giving them the trade routes?’ Archimedes ventured, catching on.

‘Yes. But they were double-crossed. Whoever it was, wanted the Razorheads’ dead for some reason. The neurone plague would kill them before they even realised,’ Bane surmised.

‘But who?’ the guilder insisted. ‘My investigations produced nothing, not even a lead.’

Bane shook his head and looked away again. He crashed back to earth after his euphoric sleuthing. ‘I don’t know.’

‘And the way it has spread. You and I both know there is something unnatural at work. What about this one the preacher spoke of?’

Bane sighed in exasperation and defeat. ‘I don’t know,’ he repeated. ‘The best thing to do right now, is to get to the Precinct House and present our findings to the-’

An urgent cry interrupted Bane mid-sentence. It was Jarla’s voice. ‘Alicia,’ he breathed. He barrelled into the labour dorm without caution. He saw Alicia lying on one of the bunks. She was shaking, arms and legs thrashing as if of their own volition. Her eyes were closed as if by some kind of dream reflex. Spittle frothed on her lips. MacDaur was doing his best to hold her down, but he was weak and ready to collapse. Fruitlessly, the deputy Watchman tried to grasp an arm, but Alicia’s muscle spasms wrenched it away and it struck him hard in the face. MacDaur fell back, blood streaming from his mouth.

‘Alicia, it’s all right’ Bane soothed, holding her arms. His grip was stronger than MacDaur’s but still she thrashed, her body convulsing. Bane winced as her knee dug into his back.

‘Meiser,’ he cried. Archimedes had reached the end of the corridor, his bodyguard stepped into the labour dorm after him. The bodyguard flashed a glance at the guilder, who nodded nearly imperceptibly. He covered the distance to the bunk in three long strides and pushed Alicia down. She stopped thrashing, but she quivered, as if tiny jolts of electricity were going through her.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ Jarla asked with a horrified expression.

‘She’s having a seizure,’ Bane said. ‘Mavro!’ As the doctor aught Bane’s gaze, he backed off shaking his head.

‘Help her,’ Bane urged, aware that if she did not stop soon she was likely to break bones and maybe even hurt the one she carried.

‘I’m not a doctor anymore, you said so yourself,’ Mavro protested.

‘Do it,’ Bane bellowed. ‘Get the scav over here and give her something.’

Mavro felt strong fingers grip his shoulder. It was Nark. He had not even heard him approach. He must have returned from lookout duty when he heard the commotion.

‘Get over there,’ he hissed into Mavro’s ear, his tone threatening.

Mavro shrugged Nark’s hand away. He got to the bunk and started fiddling around inside his long coat, looking for a sedative.

‘Hurry up,’ Bane urged, panting as he fought with Alicia. Meiser showed no sign of discomfort or labour. He just held her, staring as if into space. He had not even broken a sweat.

Mavro kept on digging, nodding profusely and then exhaling his relief as he found what he sought. It was a vial of copper coloured fluid. He produced a syringe, plunged the needle into the vial and drew a measure out. He held it up to the weak yellow halogen light in the dorm, flicked it and squeezed out a fountain of the stuff, removing any air bubbles. Mavro gripped Alicia’s arm. ‘Keep her still,’ he breathed, wiping sweat from his brow with his sleeve. He bit his lip as he brought the needle close, ‘Just calm her down, right?’ Bane said. ‘If that shit gets her hooked, the plague will be the least of your worries.’

‘It’s mild,’ he breathed, returning Banes gaze. ‘It’ll relax the muscles. That’s all, I swear.’

Bane nodded. Massa concentrated on his work again. He turned Alicia’s left wrist over, smacked it a few times and plunged the needle in, pumping in the fluid. They waited, still she bucked and thrashed. The muscles in Bane’s arms and wrists were burning.

‘Thought you said it would relax her?’ Bane said.

‘Give it time to get through her system,’ Mavro said. He shrank away from her, eyes fixed on her body, watching the infinitesimal reaction of her nerve endings as the chemical took hold. Slowly the thrashing stopped, first the body, then the arms and finally the legs. She was still.

Meiser removed his hand from her stomach.

Bane released his grip. He had been holding her so tight that two dark bruises had blossomed on her skin. He felt shame gnaw at him but he crushed it.

‘Thank you,’ he rasped breathlessly.

Meiser nodded, his dark eyes unfathomable, and went to stand over by his master again. Bane looked at Alicia, wiping the froth from her lips. The room settled down as everyone started to relax. Bane slumped in one corner, eyes on Alicia. Two lives were at stake. He prayed she was not badly injured, her or her child. Nark’s voice arrested his thoughts.

‘We have a problem,’ he whispered, eyes on the others.

‘What is it?’

‘I found something.’

Nark led Bane to the back of the room and pointed to a bunk. The light hanging over it was smashed, plastek shards littering the floor covered by a thin patina of dust. It made that part of the room dark almost black. It looked innocuous, pretty much like the rest of the labour dorm – just another bunk, one of twenty-four arranged in three columns of eight ranks. There was a strip light for every four bunks, casting yellow and weak light. The walls and floor were grey and bare, and dust clogged the air. One door led to the rest of the complex, another led in from the precipitator room. Standing there, in the bland room, Bane had no idea what Nark was talking about.

'What am I looking at?'

Nark reached onto the bunk and dragged back the coarse top sheet.

A dark patch, about the size of a balled fist was visible beneath. It had been concealed.

'What is it?' Bane looked back as he said it, but no one else was paying them any attention.

'Smell it' Nark said.

'What?' Bane looked up at him, incredulous.

'Smell it and you'll see,' Nark repeated.

Casting the gang lord a wary glance Bane knelt down and sniffed the under sheeting. It was much thinner, a virtually thread bare cotton that had soaked through with the dark substance staining it.

'Blood,' Bane said.

'Not just blood. It's dead blood,' Nark corrected.

Bane knew instantly what Nark was driving at. 'This could've been here before we arrived.'

'It's fresh,' countered the gang lord.

Bane closed his eyes.

'It's not your girl,' Nark said. 'Someone has covered this up.'

'I know.' They had been in the refinery for two hours and people had slept as soon as they had found the labour dorm. Even Bane had been out of it for twenty minutes or so, plenty of time for someone to cough up a load of blood and conceal it. He remembered the blood on the walls of the Razorheads' lair. How it was congealed, how it had not spread like it should. It was a symptom. It left only one possible conclusion. Someone has been infected.'

‘Yep. So what do you plan on doing about it?’ Nark asked.

Bane thought for a moment. ‘Nothing.’

‘There’s blood on this damn sheet, Bane,’ Nark whispered, urgently. ‘Someone in here got bit and whoever it is wants to keep it secret. Now I know it isn’t me,’ he said, eyes wide and insistent, ‘and you haven’t been in here since we arrived, so that rules you out, but it could be any one of those other frikkers.’

Bane held Nark’s gaze.

‘Nark, we keep this to ourselves,’ Bane urged. ‘If the rest find out it will get real ugly, real fast.’

‘No scavving way,’ said Nark, shaking his head and walking away before walking back.

‘No way.’

Bane grabbed his shoulders. He was vaguely aware of some of the others taking notice of them. We can’t linger here. Infected or not, we have to get to the Precinct House. We won’t survive outside and we can’t risk the enforcers finding out. If they knew, they might kill us all.’

Nark shrugged himself free of Bane’s grasp and walked back and forth, trying to decide what to do. A few of the other survivors were stirring.

‘Judging by the blood, the neurone plague is already fairly advanced,’ Bane continued. ‘It’s going to be impossible to tell who has and who hasn’t been infected.’

‘And what if they tun?’ Nark asked.

‘Then we’ll know,’ Bane said simply. ‘We stick to the plan. We get to the Precinct House and try and figure it out then – it’s a hell of a lot safer there than it is here.’

Nark was not convinced, but Bane had the gun and that made him the boss. If only he and Bane knew about the infection, that gave him an edge over the rest – it could mean the difference between survival and the alternative. He remembered Skudd, screaming wildly as they tore him apart. In the end, Nark nodded his compliance.

‘One thing,’ he said, quietly.

Bane’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. No way was he letting Nark go.

‘I’ll come with you,’ he said, ‘but anyone looks at me in a way I don’t like, I won’t hesitate in putting them down.’

Nark walked away just as Archimedes approached. He pushed past the guilder with a meaningful glance and sat pensively in a corner where he could see everyone.

'What was that all about?' asked Archimedes.

Bane had already covered the bed back up. 'Nothing,' he lied.

SENTINEL LIGHTS, LOFTY and powerful, blazed into the gripping darkness of the Underhive fringe. It was known as the Frontier Land, which lay between the Underhive and Hive City, and in truth was neither.

Such was the ferocity of the lamp array, the blackness seemed to wither and retreat before it. It was white, absolute white, no more greys or grimmy yellows. In a world in which darkness was more commonplace than light, and where shadows provided anonymity and safe passage, such a beacon was a warning. A more potent one than any sign could muster. Each light array was fixed to a hexagonal metal tower, buttressed where it connected into the sector power supply. Thick steel plates were riveted around the base, the heavy armour designed to prevent siphoning from energy-thieves and charge-vendors. This avenue of illumination, several hundred metres long, had two lamp arrays every twenty metres, each consisting of eighteen separate units, combined in three blazing strips of six, was merely the outer reaches of the approach to the Precinct House, and from there to Hive City.

The lamps framed a long strip of cracked tarcrete, warning chevrons – yellow industrial, blast resistant paint – delineated it. The runway led to the Precinct House. Massive, like a fortress, the outer wall surged high into the false firmament. Winking lights bedecked its sleek, grey surface, angular shapes of reinforced plascrete jutting out from it at intervals. Razorwire wreathed the tops of the walls, so dense and thick it looked like black wool. Exacerbating the bastion-like image was a thick metal door, more like a drawbridge, set into the very centre of the wall. Upon it was wrought the symbol of the Enforcement, a clenched fist, an effigy of violent intent to would-be perpetrators of lawlessness, Bolts driven into the door, roughly the size of a man's fist, furthered the sense of impenetrability. The wall was nearly a hundred metres across and bore three watchtowers. Huge search lights contained within each one strafed

the ground beyond the runway, their beams grainy white, illuminating the periphery of the Precinct House's immediate domain.

The Precinct House was situated at an urban confluence. Its mighty wall filled a breech that led through to Hive City. Beyond it was a gulf of blackness where the level fell away to nothing. The Precinct House defended a comparatively narrow strip and the only access for several miles across. Behind its lofty walls, the multitudinous towers of Hive City soared, spikes of metal rectangles on rectangles and jutting platforms whose winking guide lights were like distant stars. Vast plateaus stretched out between the towers; residential districts, private offices and empty domiciles. A steel monorail line snaked between them. The multiple, conjoined cars flashed like silver as it raced through the blackness, azure neon blurring. Gradually, the higher they rose, the lights of Hive City gave way, smothered by industrial gases, diffused into a luminous haze.

Bane crouched just beyond the range of the probing search lamps in the shadow of a disused fuel stack long since dormant and decayed. He was thinking.

'What are we waiting for?' Mavro hissed, his impatience growing as he cast frequent anxious looks behind him into the threatening dark.

'We can't just walk right up to the gate and knock,' Bane returned without averting his gaze.

'Why not?'

'Because they'd be just as likely to shoot us as to ignore us completely,' MacDaur returned. He was crouching next to Bane. He had perked up a little, but still looked rough. No one wanted to get within the safety of those walls more than he did.

After a few moments, waiting as the search lamp made another pass, casting them all in monochrome white. Bane spoke.

'I'm going in alone,' he decided. Archimedes rested a hand on his arm. He too was at the head of the group with Meiser poised behind him.

'What if you can't gain us passage?' he asked quietly. 'You'll only get one chance at this. Let me come with you.'

Bane turned to him. The experience in the chapel had obviously changed him. He did not know of anyone in his trade that was so willing to put themselves in danger for others.

‘If you come,’ said Bane, you come alone.’ He didn’t need to look at Meiser to know the bodyguard’s expression had darkened.

Archimedes looked into Bane’s eyes, searching them. After a few seconds, he found what he was looking for and nodded.

‘Alright then.’ Bane turned around to face the group. Nark’s face stood out, waiting at the back of the group. His eyes held suspicion and a readiness to act. Bane did not want to leave him alone, unwatched, but he had no choice. He had to take the gang Lord at his word. There was distance between Nark and the rest, who huddled together.

MacDaur and Meiser carried Alicia between them on a makeshift gurney. Jarla stayed dutifully with her father behind them. Gilligan leaned heavily on his crutch. To their left, a little further back, were Mavro and Ratz.

As the Ratskin came closer, nudged along by the doctor, in sight of the massive Precinct House walls, his expression changed. Bane saw a creeping dread infect his face, all trace of blissful, ignorant catatonia extinguished.

Ratz screamed, a terrible wrenching noise that made Bane wince.

He shuffled back about to turn and run.

Nark grabbed him. Ratz struggled, flashing fevered glances at the forbidding structure before them. He pointed, looking at Nark, trying to get his attention, to get him to understand. His mouth open and closed constantly as if he were trying to utter something.

‘What the hell is wrong with him?’ Nark asked, strong enough to hold him still. ‘Snap out of it,’ he urged.

Bane gripped Flare by the shoulders, forcing him to look at his face. ‘What is it?’ he asked slowly and firmly. ‘What have you seen?’ Ratz tried to look past him but he blacked his view. The Ratskin’s mouth opened and closed. He was growing more hysterical, gasping for breath, clenching and unclenching his fists. He started wailing.

‘Mavro,’ Bane called, ‘we need to shut him up.’

The doctor shook his head reluctant to get involved. Fear and mistrust were etched on his face for all to see.

‘Get over here, right now,’ Bane said.

There was a flash of movement and the incoherent wailing ceased. Nark stood over Ratz, rubbing his knuckles. A thick purplish bruise was already

blossoming beneath the outlander's left eye. 'You wanted him to shut up,' Nark said nonchalantly. 'He's shut up. At least he isn't dead.'

Bane held the gang lord's gaze a moment longer and then turned to Mavro. 'You watch him. Drug him if you have to.' The doctor dared not disobey and nodded.

'And you,' Bane added, scowling at Nark.

The gang lord gripped Bane's arm and pulled him close. 'I helped you out of that damned chapel. I helped you get this far,' he snarled.

'I know that.' Bane went to move away, but Nark increased his grip and held him closer.

'I'm taking you in. Nark,' Bane said, shotgun raised to the gang lord's gut. Nark felt it but ignored it. It was not the first time he had had a gun pointed at him. 'You make sure *they* know that,' he said. He had no chance out there in the dark, at least not unarmed. Trapped here with an infected, whose identity he did not know, heading to the bastion of his enemy, it was a bad situation. Maybe if he had a gun...

Bane cocked the shotgun with a dull, metallic click and met Nark's intense, desperate stare. He looked down at his arm! Nark held him a moment longer and then let go.

'I'll do what I can,' Bane said solemnly. 'You have my word.'

Bane moved to where MacDaur, Archimedes and Meiser waited. He unslung the shotgun and gave it to his deputy.

'Best chance is if we go ahead unarmed,' he said, trying to push the Ratskin's psychotic episode to the back of his mind. Something did not sit right, but there was no time to investigate it. The zombies could be close and they needed to get inside the Precinct House quickly. 'Don't want to provide them with an easy accuse to shoot us.' He leant over and spoke so that only MacDaur heard.

'You got seven shots,' he whispered. 'If he runs,' he added, eyeing Nark surreptitiously,

'Incapacitate him, but don't kill him. Are we clear?'

MacDaur took a moment on that one. He would like nothing more than to shoot the dirty ganger, but he respected Bane's command. 'Clear,' he said.

Bane looked at Archimedes. 'Are you ready?'

'Ready.' The guilder took a breath and smoothed his worn robes.

Bane caught Narks gaze. ‘Everyone stays here,’ he ordered. ‘MacDaur is in charge.’ He got to his feet. ‘Raise your hands,’ he said as he and Archimedes started forward.

Archimedes nodded. Following Bane’s lead, he raised his arms, palms facing out. They walked slowly towards the lit tarcrete runway.

’AHEAD, TO THE left of the door. You see that?’ Bane gestured with a head movement towards what looked like little more than a jutting square of plascrete.

‘Yes’ Archimedes breathed.

‘It’s a sentry station. Four enforcers man it. There are two inside a concealed gun nest above. A narrow slit gives them a wide field of fire. It’s likely that they have a high-calibre riot-stubber. It’s loud and they might fire a warning shut.’

‘I understand,’ Archimedes replied.

‘Walk towards it.’

Archimedes swallowed hard.

‘Eyes front,’ said Bane. ‘We’re in range of the search lamps.’

Within three seconds of the two men walking into the effective range of the probing lights, a throaty crackle emitted from a vox-speaker concealed within two wall cavities.

‘Halt!’ The tinny voice was threatening, riddled with partial static.

‘Do as they say,’ Bane hissed urgently.

‘Identify,’ the vox voice continued.

‘Erik Bane. Watchman, Former Glory,’ Bane responded.

‘Archimedes Vaxillian, guilder: He saw the black, gun-metal glint of the riotstubber barrel nose. He felt as if a target was being burned into his chest even as he spoke.

‘No Underhiver may advance beyond this border without authorisation,’ the voice crackled.

‘Please,’ Bane began and then chastised himself inwardly.

‘The Enforcement does Mil respond to pleas of mercy. Remove your presence from the immediate district or face lethal action.’

This was a Sector Precinct House. They were different to local Precinct Houses. It guarded a major route into the Hive City, one of the few points

on this level with some measure of protection. Bane knew he had to tread very carefully.

‘We bring news from downhive. A neural plague outbreak has engulfed many of the lower domes and threatens the upper levels,’ Bane said. ‘I once served at this precinct,’ he continued. ‘Service number six-five-three-three-two-one-one.’ It was a risk. Hopefully at the very least it would give them pause, something to corroborate. They were still custodians of the law, after all.

A minute’s silence persisted. It felt like half-an-hour in the tense atmosphere. There was a loud crackle and a dull click as the vox link was terminated.

‘Eyes on the sentry station,’ Bane muttered to the guilder.

Another long minute of charged silence passed before two figures emerged from the sentry post. A door slid open in the flat, dull grey, revealing a black rectangle.

One of the enforcers held a portable vox caster. They were both armed with combat shotguns. The one without the vox had his weapon raised and trained on Bane and Archimedes.

‘Approach,’ the porto-vox crackled.

Slowly, Bane and Archimedes walked towards the two enforcers who had moved to within ten metres of the station.

At a safe distance away from the enforcers, the vox crackled again. ‘Halt.’

The enforcer with the vox let it hang by his side and pulled out a bolt pistol in preference to his primary weapon, which enabled him to vox and shoot if necessary. Together with his shotgun-toting partner, they advanced. At three metres they stopped.

The one with the pistol raised his free hand and twirled it around in the air, fore finger extended in a gesture for them to turn around in a circle. They complied willingly. The enforcer with the pistol brought out a scanner to check for hidden weapons.

‘Throw down your arms,’ he said. He was speaking through a respirator. It was standard procedure; gas attacks were common. His voice came rasping and distorted through the device. The effect made it cold and impersonal.

Bane wondered briefly if he had sounded like that when he had worn one. ‘We are unarmed,’ he said, aware of his thumping heart.

The shotgun armed enforcer raised his weapon and cranked a round into the chamber. The crunch of the loading mechanism made Bane feel sick. He remembered the service pistol. They must have read it on the scanner.

‘Wait,’ he said, turning around slowly pulling up the jacket at his back revealing the weapon. ‘It’s dysfunctional,’ he added, easing the pistol out so they could see. ‘No threat.’ He tossed it behind him and it landed a short distance from the enforcer with the scanner. Keeping his hands raised, Bane turned back around, catching the ident-plate on both men’s carapaces: Mackavay and Holpen. He did not recognise them, but it had been a long time. In three years faces changed, people died, and there were many enforcers in his precinct.

Mackavay, who held the scanner, picked up the pistol. He examined it briefly, before pocketing it in a side pouch. He scanned them again.

‘Clean,’ he said in a monotone. The shotgun armed enforcer, Holpen, lowered his weapon from a kill to a ready position, waist height, cradled easily in two hands. Mackavay holstered the bolt pistol.

‘State your business,’ he barked.

‘I and a group of survivors have fled the Underhive,’ Bane began. ‘A neurone plague is sweeping through it and I believe thousands could already be infected. It is imperative we be allowed inside this facility and a message be sent to Hive City Precincts to stem it before it boils over into the general populous.’

Mackavay regarded Bane impassively.

‘Please, there isn’t much time,’ Bane urged. There are more survivors beyond those stacks, most need urgent medical attention.’

Mackavay clicked a comm-bead attached to the side of his helmet, a personal voxponder. His shadowed eyes, white slashes through his helmet slits, stared ahead. ‘Be advised, additional targets located in vicinity, sub-sector three-three-two-point-one horizontal, six-six-nine-point-three vertical. Threat level unknown.’

‘Threat? There is no threat,’ Bane implored. ‘They’re unarmed civilians.’ That was a lie but he could explain the details later. Right now, they needed access.

Beyond the two enforcers, Bane heard the whirr of an automated pintle-mount. The riot-stubber, training behind them on the co-ordinates Mackavay had provided. He watched as two of the search lamps flashed over to the stacks and rested there: two overlapping ellipses of intense, stark white.

'This is the Enforcement.' the main vox-emitter chirped again. 'Be advised, step into the lamp halo or you will be fired upon. I repeat: you will be fired upon.'

Bane looked back and felt paralysed. He prayed MacDaur would remember his training or the heavy stubber would shred him, Alicia and all of them without mercy.

There was another brief spell of silence in the wake of the vox command until MacDaur emerged, shotgun held above his head, palms out in a gesture of compliance. He waited there alone.

'Lay down your arms.'

MacDaur obeyed and stepped forward. The others came out after him, Alicia borne on a stretcher by Meiser and Mavro, fear of imminent death compelling the doctor into action. Gilligan stumbled out, Jarla supporting him as best she could. Then there was Nark, the unconscious form of Ratz slung over his shoulder.

'Advance.' The vox commanded.

The group moved to within fifteen metres of the enforcers, before the vox instructed them to stop. Mackavay had his pistol out again. Holpen had the shotgun at kill position.

'We are in need of your help. I can vouch for them, I was an enforcer-' Bane's plea was cut off by Mackavay.

'We know who you are citizen. Erik Bane is a drunk and an addict. A disgrace to the Enforcement. You will take these civilians and return to the hole you came from. The Enforcement will waste no further time on drunken delusions,' he said. 'You have three minutes.'

Bane was dumbstruck. His fears were realised. He might not know the two men before him, but clearly they knew of him and his disgrace.

Mackavay tapped the comm-bead again. 'Trespassers have been advised. A standard protocol three minute extrication order has been issued. Prepare to fire in,' he paused to check something in his helmet pict, 'one-seven-three seconds and counting.'

‘No, wait. You have to believe me,’ Bane urged.

‘Back away to thirty metres, or I will shoot.’ It was Holpen.

Bane found himself backing away. He could not believe what was happening. He had not expected a happy home coming, but this...

‘Wait,’ Archimedes said. ‘I am a Guilder. Here is my badge of office.’ He showed Mackavay the guilder ring.

The enforcer looked at it and thought for a moment as the counter in his helmet pict-display ticked ominously downward. Mackavay tapped the comm-bead. ‘Belay last command, pending my authorisation,’ he said. He produced the scanner and held it over Archimedes’s hand, logging the signature of the guild ring. ‘Authenticated,’ he said after a few seconds, reading off the scanners low-res display. He sounded almost disappointed.

Archimedes gave an inward sigh of relief, but outwardly maintained his false aura of calm. ‘By order of Necromundan Guild Law I demand safe passage granted to my person and those in my charge,’ he said.

Mackavay did not hesitate. He nodded to Holpen, who lowered his shotgun back to ready position. He tapped the comm-bead.

‘Nine to transport through the gate,’ he uttered. ‘Scratch extrication. I repeat, scratch extrication.’ Behind him, the riot-stubber’s pintle-mount powered down. Bane sighed with relief and clapped Archimedes on the back.

‘Let’s just get inside,’ muttered the guilder, looking back to eye the forbidding dark behind them.

THE GREAT DOOR to the Precinct House ground open slowly and inexorably. Churning servos protested in dull metallic baritones. Released pneumatic pressure hissed as interlocking pistons extended. It took two minutes for the massive gate to open fully across the tarcrete approach runway. It did so in a dense Munk of heavy metal, and kicked up dust and grit.

In the gloom inside, there came a throaty engine rumble, low and powerful. Bright flare lamps banished the semi-dark, a rigid silhouette framed in the backwash from the lights. A transport, not entirely unlike the *Bull*, grumbled into view. It was slightly bigger, with a thick dozer plate on the front. It ground towards them noisily.

The survivors gathered together. Despite their suspicions, the prospect of survival and safety was enough to compel them. The transport took two minutes to reach them, from its emergence in the gateway, to the access door sliding open. Two enforcers waited within. As Bane entered, helping to carry Alicia with MacDaur, he saw an indent-plate. It was Vincent, one of his team at Toomis Pre-fab, three years ago.

‘Vincent,’ Bane said after he got Alicia comfortable. He sat next to him. The enforcer gave no response. ‘Vince, it’s me, Erik,’ Bane tried again as the last of the survivors got inside. The door shut. There was a brief spell of darkness, before crimson internal lighting and activation runes on the driver chamber pict-display illuminated the transport space.

‘Vin-’

Please refrain from all communication,’ Vincent responded tersely, eyes front, monitoring the display.

Bane sat back as the transport’s engine rumbled to life. He looked at Alicia, pale and thin on the Enforcement stretcher. Webbing held her in place. Vincent’s words echoing in his mind, Bane had never felt the burden of his guilt more than at that moment.

CHAPTER TEN

THE HOLDING AREA was a grey rockcrete rectangle. Broad pillars bore down from the ceiling into steam-riveted steel support. Walls, cracked and split in places, sported the occasional errant bullet hole Overhead, strip lights exuded a dirty yellow glare. Shadows crept into the recesses of the room against the weak light. A battered looking couch of deep green synth-leather sat in one corner. Small holes pockmarked the surface that was ingrained with years of sweat and grime.

Ratz and Mavro sat on it. The Ratskin was still out cold from Nark's punch. A large bruise had blackened in the time between the survivors arriving inside the Precinct House and being ushered quickly and silently into the holding area.

Next to the couch was an ancient looking caffeine-vending unit. It dispensed one choice of beverage – foul tasting, extra-strength caffeine in reconstituted paper cones. The entire room reeked out, that and the stale stink of narco-stick emissions. The smell clung to the atmosphere like a second skin.

MacDaur and Bane sat in the middle of the room on low stools, around a metal table of similar stature. The table had head-shaped dents in places. Bane also thought he could make out the impression of three knuckles from a fist. A dark patch in one corner and a trail of fainter spatter marks could have been blood. Clearly the room was used for 'informal' interrogations too.

Meiser stood a short distance away from the table. The taciturn bodyguard waited patiently beside his master, who sat in a high-backed chair, covered in a similar shoddy synth-leather to the couch. Like everyone, the guilder was quiet, contemplating what lay ahead for them all.

The silent unease was broken only by the intermittent *thwump* of three ceiling rotator fans operating languidly above them. Strange but they did not seem to perpetuate anything approximating a breeze. They were just a noise, and one that exacerbated the anxiety they were all feeling.

Bane eyed them speculatively, as if in the drone of their slovenly spinning blades, he would find the answers to the questions dogging him and the unexplainable unease gnawing at him. The sense of elation they should have been feeling and the relief at their apparent escape to a place of safety, had been crushed by doubt and a growing tension at the enforcers' wall of silence.

Bane had requested to be taken to the head of the facility. It was imperative that Hive City be warned of the impending plague horde. His request was met with characteristic stonewalling He should have expected it. That was the Enforcer way minimal communication. The survivors were an unknown factor. Their reports of a mass, potentially epidemic, bio-hazardous incident were unsubstantiated. In their position, he would have exercised caution, possibly suspicion. Yet still he was uneasy.

'This place is a frikking dump,' Nark said. He sat on a chair bolted to the floor and situated at the edge of the room, swathed in shadow. 'Is that what you're thinking lawman?'

Bane looked over at him. It was the first time anyone had spoken since they had arrived.

'Not exactly,' he answered.

'Yeah, didn't think so. Shall I tell you what I was thinking?'

'Does it matter what I say?'

Nark ignored him. 'I'm thinking where the hell are our medical checks? I'm thinking, why haven't your girl and the big guy in there,' he thumbed over to a thick black curtain across the room opposite the battered couch, 'been treated yet? We've been here almost an hour and so far we've been told precisely zilch. Personally I'm worried about what the scav these bastards are gonna do to me,' he concluded, staring intently at Bane, eyes hooded by the shadows. Bane returned a stony glare. He was aware that everyone except Ratz was watching them.

'I'm betting *that* was what you were thinking - with the exception of the latter, of course,' the gang lord added, sitting up to emphasise his point.

‘I don’t know Nark. I don’t have the answers,’ Bane replied, ‘but don’t pretend you care about these people. One act of selflessness doesn’t eradicate a lifetime of past sins.’

‘Past sins, eh?’ Nark said, a sarcastic smile creasing his clean features. ‘Well you’d know all about that wouldn’t you?’

‘You know nothing about me, ganger.’ Bane’s tone was hostile but he checked it quickly. ‘I told you back at the gate. I’d do what I could for you and I will, so shut the frik up. You’re not helping.’

Nark stared for a moment longer, sniffed derisively and slumped back into the shadows.

Bane got to his feet and eyed MacDaur, ‘Watch them,’ he mouthed with quick glances at Mavro and Nark in turn. The doc had grown skittish again, tapping his foot incessantly and flicking the razor over his fingers.

MacDaur followed his gaze and nodded. The deputy was almost grey. The second wind he had got earlier, possibly fuelled by the prospect of safety at lash had evaporated. He was breathing hard.

‘You all right, MacDaur?’ Bane whispered, keen not to draw too much attention. ‘Yeah,’ MacDaur rasped unconvincingly.

Bane regarded him for a moment, searching his face.

‘Don’t do that to me,’ MacDaur said, mustering a stronger tone, ‘I’m ok, just tired.’

‘I need you to stay with me, MacDaur,’ Bane said.

The deputy nodded. ‘I will, Bane.’

Bane put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed a little. ‘Soon as I speak to the Sector Judge, I’ll get a medicae in here, ok?’ Bane’s attempt at reassurance fell a little short. ‘It’s nearly over.’ That was not convincing either.

Bane walked over to Archimedes. The bodyguard observed him as if he was little more than an inanimate object, but did not block him. It seemed he had his trust – for now. The guilder looked drained and was deep in thought. When he saw Bane approach, he kept his voice low.

‘Is this normal procedure?’ he asked. To be kept here like this. I don’t trust the ganger either, but selfish or not, he has a point.’

‘Just stay calm,’ Bane said. ‘I will get a medicae to treat the injured and find out what’s going to happen to us. You think that guild ring of yours can swing us any more slack?’

‘It’s done all it can. Friends in high places have little marketable value on the frontier.

Perhaps if I could get into Hive City...’

‘I thought so. Hopefully it won’t come to that.’

‘He doesn’t look so good,’ Archimedes said, looking at MacDaur.

‘He’s fine,’ he said. ‘Adrenaline’s been keeping him going for a while, has all of us to one degree or another. He’s just coming down from it that’s all.’

With that, Bane walked away, over to the black flexi-plas curtain. He drew it aside slowly, revealing an antechamber. There were three bunks where patrolmen could catch some shut-eye. Aside from that it was bare, with strip lamps on the wall next to each bunk. A fan, much like those in the main room, hummed noisily above. When Bane entered it was dark.

Errant light washed in from the adjoining room. Jarla sat hunched between two bunks. She looked up at Bane. Her eyes were sad and tired, faintly red as if she had been crying. On either side of her, Gilligan and Alicia were slumbering silhouettes.

‘You ok?’ Bane asked quietly, sinking down to one knee. The room was so small that he was almost next to her without approaching further.

‘I’m fine.’ said Jarla, her voice betraying her emotions. ‘Just tired, that’s all.’

Bane paused for a moment. ‘How are Alicia and your father,’ he asked.

‘Not sure.’ She rubbed her eyes and brushed her hair away where it was stuck to her face

‘They’re still out.’

Bane thought about taking a look at them but stopped himself. No point. Nothing he could do right now.

‘Just make sure they’re comfortable. I’ll get some help soon, ok?

‘Ok,’ Jarla answered meekly. ‘Can you close the curtain?’ she added, shielding her eyes. ‘I’m very tired.’

Bane got to his feet, ‘Sure.’ He drew the curtain shut again and turned to find Mavro in his face. The doctor had a wild look in his eye.

‘What’s taking so long, Bane?’ he hissed. ‘Nark said it already. Don’t you think it’s odd that we’re still holed up in here?’

Bane shrugged dismissively. ‘Enforcement protocols take time Mavro. This isn’t a medical facility. Right now, I’m more concerned about

warning Hive City garrisons. Now,' he said, leaning in close, 'Sit... back… down.'

The doc backed away and was about to protest when the entrance door, a grey metal plate, slid open. An enforcer stepped in, wearing half armour – a black carapace shoulder guard and vambraces. His hair was cropped close and dark brown in colour, the same as his eyes. Like most enforcers he had perfected the steely gaze. The rank on his arm denoted him as proctor, a low rank in the Enforcement. A side-arm was strapped to his torso.

'You two,' he said, voice low and aggressive. He indicated Bane and Nark and then stepped aside to reveal the open door. The intimation was obvious. Bane gave Nark a look and the two men walked towards the door. Half way, Nark caught up with Bane and hissed in his ear.

'Remember what you said.'

Bane nodded. The two men reached the opening and went through, followed by the proctor, the door swishing shut in their wake.

'Finally,' said Mavro, sitting back on the couch, 'some action.'

'Yes,' breathed Archimedes. Suddenly the room felt less like a holding area and more like a tomb. 'Let's hope it's of the benevolent variety.'

ON THE OTHER side of the doorway there was a narrow corridor. They had walked along it on their way to the holding room, two armed enforcers flanking them either end of the column. An access panel had led them in through a subterranean vehicle yard where the transport had parked. Other than that they had seen precious little of the facility. Clearly, they were not to be trusted.

The corridor was lit by a long crimson strip light that stretched its entire length. Nark was out first. As soon as the door was shut and he set foot in the corridor again, a combat shotgun was thrust into his face. Two enforcers were waiting for him, armed and in full armour. The one who did not have Nark at gunpoint punched him hard in the gut.

Nark budded and coughed but did not go down.

'Hey!' Bane began, but he shut up when he felt cold steel in his back.

'Not your concern,' said the proctor, voice thick with meaning and menace. He gripped Bane's shoulder and pulled him back out of the way.

Bane could only watch.

‘You bastards,’ Nark growled as he straightened, spitting at the guard who had struck him. The second guard pulled a bolt pistol and smacked the stock of his weapon across Nark’s back, putting him down on his knees.

Bane shrugged off the proctor and tried to intervene. The enforcer turned the bolt pistol on Bane. The proctor then stepped between them, blocking Bane with his arm. ‘Grakken Nark,’ he intoned with a voice like a prophecy, ‘you are under arrest and will be taken to the cells until a full account of your crimes can be scribed. There you will await trial.’

‘Wait,’ Bane said sternly. Despite his feelings towards Nark, he had given him his word. Were it not for the gang lord’s actions, Alicia would be dead. He owed him that much. There is mitigating evidence in his favour.’ His tone demanded the proctor’s attention.

‘This is an Enforcement matter. We are fully aware of this Underhiver’s transgressions. Your testimony has no bearing,’ he said.

‘He was brought here in my custody. I am still a Watchman damn it,’ Bane snarled, trying to keep his temper in check. The proctor had all of what five maybe six years service and here he was, quoting the law at Bane as if he was a common citizen. Then it struck him. That was all he was to them, a common citizen, no different from Mavro or Gilligan, or even Nark except he had not committed any offences they knew of.

The proctor turned ignoring the dawning realisation on Bane’s face. ‘Take him away,’ he ordered, the two enforcers who shoved Nark in the gut urging him to rise.

‘Wait,’ Bane spluttered a desperate edge to his voice. ‘You don’t understand.’

‘I don’t think they’re listening Bane,’ said the gang lord, getting warily to his feet and wiping blood away from his mouth. Once he was up, the two enforcers ushered Nark down the corridor.

‘Erik Bane, follow me,’ the proctor said, walking in the opposite direction. Bane did as ordered, following silently.

At the end of the corridor, bypassing the entrance port which the survivors had entered by from outside, was a small hexagonal antechamber. Shimmering blue energy crackled at the doorway – a force shield. The proctor hammered an access code on a panel next to it. The

shimmering energy diminished into nothing. He pressed a second panel beneath. Servos whined dulcetly and the lifter platform came slowly into view, as if the ceiling of the chamber was gradually descending. After a few minutes it docked at their floor with a hiss of released pneumatic pressure. The proctor gestured Bane inside with a sweep of his arm. Bane stepped onto the platform, a halo of white lights winking around the edges. There was the faintest clunk of metal on metal as the locking clamps disengaged and the platform began rising again.

'Command centre,' the proctor intoned and the lifter picked up speed. He turned to look at Bane, face impassive. 'You've been granted an audience with the Sector Judge of this facility.' he said.

As they rose, Bane noticed various chambers visible through clear plexi-glass. In numerous offices, enforcers filed reports, checked crime statistics and planned patrols. Training rooms were filled with cadets learning unarmed combat techniques tutored by veterans. On a gun range, bolt pistols and combat shotguns barked and roared and plastek targets daubed with simplistic black icons of menacing lawbreakers exploded in curious, violent harmony. One window provided a view out into the vehicle depot yard where transports waited, tech-adepts toiling beneath engines, stripping and reassembling weapon arrays.

Soon, the glimpses into the facility at large ceased and Bane was left to contemplate a gun metal void as he felt the levels swishing by. He felt time eking along with it. As the lifter gradually came to a halt, the force shield evaporated and a wide barren corridor of azure-stained steel was revealed. Bane only hoped it was not too late.

THE WIDE CORRIDOR leading to the Precinct House's command centre had a slight upward incline. On either wall were statues of ex-judges, either dead or retired, displayed in fill armoured regalia, often carrying a power maul aloft like a banner. All of it was propaganda, a perception of justice. Anyone who had served as long as Bane knew that. But it was important for morale, and for aspirations, however lofty and untenable.

Reminded of those ideals once more, Bane felt a renewed pang of guilt as he approached a large set of bronzed double doors, the Enforcer insignia engraved onto them. Two enforcers waited dutifully on either side, their

armour slightly more ornate than those officers in the field. Both were ten-year veterans, as indicated by the rank insignia wrought upon their brocaded shoulder guards.

On reaching the door, Bane's guards nodded to the others, about faced and left without a word, leaving Bane wondering what to do next. He did not have to wait long. The doors slowly edged open with a dull, metal shriek. Bane entered.

The command centre was dark. A vast square office space was lined with blinking charts on the walls, describing sectors of the Underhive and Hive City in detail, including trade routes and known hide-outs of criminal elements. Another statue was set into a cavity space, several metres tall. Beneath it was a bronze scroll. An epitaph with a roll of honour.

The names of fallen enforcers were painstakingly etched beneath. Bane traced the names with his finger, eyes narrowed to make them out. He felt his stomach lurch when he came across a certain cluster Nabedde, Heske, Lorimir, Rannon and Keller. All of them had died at Toomis Pre-fab, the night Bane had killed Alcana Ran-Lo. Keller was the last one to fall. It happened when they made their escape. A lucky shot struck a fuel cell, causing it to explode. Keller's insides were vaporised in the blast swell and he had died instantly. Five men dead in what was supposed to be a routine mission, a mission where they had the upper hand. Something had gone wrong. They had been betrayed and the price paid was dear.

'I still remember that night, as I'm sure you do,' said a familiar voice from the shadows. Bane turned and realised someone was sitting at a large ops-desk in the middle of the room. Until that point, he had thought the Sector Judge was in some anteroom, trying to make him sweat before he announced his presence. In fact he had been there the whole time, watching him.

'Do I know you?' Bane asked.

The figure was nothing more than a silhouette, backlit by a large hive schematic, while an emerald under glow threw wan light beneath his chin from a display pict on the elliptical ops-desk below. The silhouette's hand moved slightly, pressing an activation rune, and lighting set in alcoves about the room stuttered weakly into life.

'Better than anyone,' he said. Even in the wan glow of the half-powered globe-lamps, Bane recognised who it was.

‘Mathias,’ Bane gasped. Before him was his old proctor, Mathias Vaughn, wounded on the night of the ambush at Toomis Pre-fab. He was almost exactly as Bane remembered him, though he looked a little older and more haggard around the eyes and face.

‘How are you, Erik?’ Vaughn got up from his command chair. He wore a simple black suit, machine pressed, no buttons or lapels to speak of, save for a silver badge over his left breast. The shin collar had a small square cut into it at its curvature at the throat and there were slits in the cuffs. He carried no visible weapons. As he approached, Bane noticed he walked with a limp.

Vaughn extended his hand. Bane took it out of instinct and the two men shook hands. ‘It’s good to see you,’ he said, though his eyes told Bane different. The old training, however dulled by vice, never went away.

Bane sniffed his amusement at that. ‘You’re lying, but thanks anyway. Why the perpetual darkness?’

‘Nursing a headache. Ever the detective, eh?’ Vaughn remarked.

‘Three years to Sector Judge,’ said Bane. ‘That’s fast track advancement.’

‘Arrest records speak for themselves,’ Vaughn explained. ‘After you... left, I assumed command of the precinct and became captain. A year later I was Sector Judge, and I’ve busted a lot of heads, even disabled,’ he added, tapping the injured leg. ‘But I won’t be here much longer.’ Vaughn walked to the ops-desk again and pressed a silver panel on its surface. There was a hiss of pressure release and the panel arched up forty-five degrees, revealing a decanter and two glasses, ‘Fresh pure?’ he asked, ‘I’ve had it alcoholically treated, so it’s got a kick even you’ll appreciate.’

Bane smarted at that not sure if it was meant as a gibe.

‘What do you mean, you won’t be here much longer?’ he asked.

Vaughn poured himself and Bane a glass. ‘I’m being promoted, to Hive City Judge.’

Bane couldn’t disguise his shuck. He masked it quickly, refusing the glass.

‘I hope in this role, I’ll be able to do more for the citizens of Necromunda,’ Vaughn added.

‘Never pegged you as altruistic, Mathias. I always thought you just wanted to put away scum,’ Bane said.

‘This way, I can make a real difference.’

‘Rubbing shoulders with the elite of Hive Primus, you’ll be at Helmawr’s table before you know it,’ Bane returned.

Vaughn smirked at that and drained his glass. ‘You didn’t come here from the squalor of Former Glory – that’s where they dumped you, isn’t it? – to reminisce over old times and debate the merits of my career. What do you want Bane?’

That was more like it. Truth. It was a rare quality, but when Bane saw it he knew it for what it was. He was surprised Vaughn was being so cordial, but then he knew Vaughn’s captains would have submitted preliminary reports.

‘An epidemic of neurone plague has afflicted a significant section of the Underhive. I’ve not seen it for certain but from what I can gather, there must be hundreds of thousands of plague zombies heading this way,’ Bane said. ‘They pose a serious threat to Hive City, unless stopped.’

Vaughn’s demeanour changed. Whatever he had been told, it was not this. Despite Vaughn’s feelings towards him, Bane guessed he still trusted his judgement, at least when he was not drunk or high on stimms.

‘This had better not be some spook-induced fantasy, Erik’ Vaughn warned, tapping a sequence of activation runes on the ops-desk. The pict display behind him shimmered and changed to a schematic of the Underhive.

‘I’m clean,’ Bane said vehemently, ‘and if you don’t believe me, I’ve got a House Greim guilder at ground level willing to back me up.’

‘I know of the company you keep,’ Vaughn said darkly, looking up from the ops-desk. ‘that ganger, for instance?’

‘I brought Nark here to be submitted to Enforcement justice,’ Bane protested. ‘In the end he came willingly and he saved the life of an innocent.’

Vaughn’s eyes narrowed but he gave no indication of what conclusion he had reached about the gang lord. ‘What sectors are infected?’

Bane stepped up to the ops-desk, reviewed the schematic carefully and pointed. ‘Former Glory here, to Dreyzer’s Glut. The horde has passed through this broad area. All of it.’ It encompassed roughly half the Underhive.

‘The horde,’ Vaughn intoned.

‘I wasn’t kidding when I said there are hundreds of thousands, Mathias.’ Vaughn’s expression was hard like stone. ‘How did this start?’ he asked beneath his breath.

‘I’m not certain,’ Bane admitted, ‘but I think it began way downhive, with the Razorheads.’

‘What?’ Vaughn’s hand went involuntarily to his injured leg.

‘I was their prisoner, Mathias.’ Bane explained. When I got out, I found them all dead. Only they were infected with the neurone plague. I think their water still was tainted.’ ‘Deliberately?

‘That’s not all,’ Bane said. They were planning something, getting tips from an insider with the guild. They had a huge stockpile of guns. I found them all, racked and stacked in their lair. Enough to make an assault on a frikking city.’

‘You think the guilders, the legitimate guilders, orchestrated this to pay them back?’ Vaughn asked.

Bane shook his head. ‘No. They trusted whoever did this to them, at least as far as Razors trust anyone. They had to get close enough to infect the still. You didn’t see that place Vaughn. It was like a fortress. Besides, tainting water supplies? That’s not guilder style. No, there’s something very wrong about all of this, something that doesn’t add up. I just can’t put my finger on it.’

Vaughn licked his lips. ‘Very well,’ he decided after a moment, ‘regardless of the source, something has to be done to quell the epidemic right now. I’ll send a communique to Hive City and get them to send troops. Meanwhile, I’ll put the garrison on high alert.’

Bane nodded. He was tired. Only now after he had done what he needed to do, did he feel it fully. He sagged.

‘You need some rest,’ Vaughn observed. ‘Rudius, my aide, will escort you back to the holding area. I’ll get a medicae to see your people as soon as you’ve returned.’

‘Thank you,’ Bane said. He was about to leave when Vaughn stopped him.

‘Erik,’ he said. ‘I believe this is yours: He held Bane’s service pistol in his hand, produced from a hidden drawer in the ops-desk.

Bane took it without saying anything, He had had it this long, it seemed strange to refuse it now. He looked up at Vaughn and nodded his thanks.

‘One of my officers said they confiscated it. I’ve had it checked. It’s harmless, won’t fire,’ he said, regarding the antique weapon. ‘A shame to let such a nice piece fall into disrepair.’

Bane tucked the pistol away without a word, but he felt the accusation as he walked back over to the door. The lights were dimming again as Bane approached it. He turned. ‘Mathias.’

‘Yes, Erik?’ Vaughn looked up from the ops-desk in the middle of establishing comm-links to Hive City.

‘They’re coming. Make sure your men are ready.’

‘I will.’ Vaughn’s tone was earnest.

The doors behind Bane opened. As he stepped through them he looked back at Mathias, his frame blackened by the semi-darkness now drenching the room, and was struck by a sudden sense of déjà vu.

The doors ground shut with a clang arresting Bane’s thoughts – old memories, nothing more. Rudius was waiting, tight-lipped and stoic.

‘I know the way,’ Bane growled and thudded dawn the corridor to the lifter.

HE COULD SENSE them amongst the throng of thickening, putrefying bodies, sense their minds, arrayed about him like rotting twit. They were empty shells, their old memories and any semblance of humanity diminishing into a vast, oblivious void. Instinct now reigned in their subconscious, fuelling their animalistic desires: a boiling maelstrom of hate and hunger. It was intoxicating.

He was still weak and pain rushed into his body with every movement. Only a few were under his thrall, two dozen – no more. Just the closest. They formed a shallow, circular cordon around him, their shuffling gait conducted in mind-compelled unison. He shuffled with them, a dark, wizened figure, leaning heavily on a staff, tapping the life energy of the weakest to perpetuate his broken body. As he walked, he felt his long coat, encrusted with filth and dried matter, trailing in the dirt behind him. He wiped a tangled strand of lank, grey hair from his face and smoothed his glabrous scalp, reaching out with his mind. One of their number, one of the survivors he had been pursuing, had been tainted.

Nascent urges within them had acted like a guidestone, bringing him this far. He could feel the infection running through the victim's blood stream, dissolving living tissue, eradicating sense synapses in the brain. Micro electrical impulses and thought centres shut down, as instinct and the desire to feed became absolute. The wizened figure revelled in it. The infected was close, which meant that he was close.

His euphoria was short-lived as he felt a spike of pain in his gut. He tasted necrotic blood on his lips. His hold on the creatures wavered. There was an infinitesimal pause as indecision crept into their debased consciousnesses. Refocusing his mind he reaffirmed his mental grip. The creatures immediately around him shuffled on, dragging broken limbs, their agonised moans a constant, macabre chorus.

Too close, he thought. His ordeals in the Abyss were draining, and without the artefact to focus his powers... It was all he could do to keep them under control, but it was just enough. A few, driven by his will, were enough to compel the rest of the horde. He had studied them, experimented at length. They were like sump cattle, gathering together out of some primal instinct. Where one leads, others follow. It began humbly, at first. He had only a few dozen, as he toured the devastated settlements downhive. Slowly the numbers grew, and now he had many thousands. He cast his gaze over a sea of the living dead, corpse heads bobbing in a plague-ridden tide. They stretched far and wide. He was at the heart of them. He was their indomitable will.

A vast structure loomed ahead. An avenue of blaring lights illuminated a runway leading up to it. A massive wall barred the horde's advance. Even in the wizened figure's mind-sight, it looked formidable. It was close and preparations needed to be made. A smile cracked his lips. There was a gate that was worked from within. If *he* could be manipulated...

He was back amongst the horde, the Precinct House just coming into view as little more than a huge, unfocused shape. Absently, he stroked the hair on a decapitated head tied to a belt around his waist He stopped walking and the cohorts surrounding him stopped as well. The rest of the horde moved slowly onward; grey, decaying bodies carrying shovels, swords, rusted pipes and guns. His army.

The head on his belt was that of a Redemptor priest. Varian Smite, he had announced himself as. It wore a gilded mask that covered the top half

of the face, jaw slack mouth open wide.

Another figure came into view. Taller than most of the zombies and bedecked in Redemptor robes, it looked much like the now headless priest. He wore a conical mask that left his chin and mouth exposed, and carried a massive eviscerator in both hands. Its saw-toothed chain blades were stained black with chunks of ripped flesh between them. There was a gaping hole in his chest, flesh ragged and bloody at the edges where it had been torn. The wizened figure marvelled at the steadily putrefying organs exposed within and the matter-slick broken rib bones. He watched as the Redemptor kneeled, as he would before a king.

The wizened figure gripped the hair on Smite's head and raised it up to the kneeling Redemptor's face. The severed head made it easier. The Redemptors had been strongly indoctrinated to follow the priest's will - even in death his fanaticism clung to them like a persistent unmovable mind stench, This way, he would meet little or no resistance.

The eyes of the decapitated head flared a green, ugly light and a low, rasping voice exuded through the mouth as the wizened figure spoke through it like some horrifying vox-caster. All the while his lips remained shut.

'What is your name?' came the voice through the head's mouth, which neither opened nor closed throughout the exchange, just gaped hideously.

'Deacon Raine,' said the Redemptor dully, his lolling tongue mumbling.

'And whom do you serve?' It was like a mantra, enabling the wizened figure to establish deep control.

'I serve you.'

The wizened man pushed the head closer and the baleful fires in the eyes lit Raines face. His dead eyes stared at them, hypnotised.

'I have a special task for you, Deacon Raine.'

Through the head, the wizened figure gave his orders. At the end of it, Raine got to his feet, hefted the deadly eviscerator and made off into the horde, full of implanted purpose. Then the wizened figure was moving again.

All his endeavours had led him to this point. The artefact he sought was within. Months of hiding in the shadows, feeding off rats to build his wage strength, gradually exerting his influence over the one who had claimed it for his own. Soon it would all come to fruition. Soon, very soon.

THE RETURN JOURNEY to the holding area was conducted in silence. Rudius, the proctor-aide, was unreadable. Bane wished he had Varian Smites precognitive powers, perhaps then he could get an inkling of what was going on in Rudius's mind. Bane knew truth, he could read it as easily as any legal edict, and something nagged him. What he had seen was a mere simulacrum of the truth, not actual truth. What the enforcers were hiding bothered him. The audience with Vaughn had done little to allay Bane's fears. Maybe there was something...

Bane dismissed the idea. He was tired and overwrought. His imagination was running wild, perhaps a symptom of the stimm deprivation – he had never gone this long without before. Paranoia during withdrawal was not uncommon. He had seen it plenty of times in the dregs he had shovelled off the streets. No, he was still an officer of the law. He dealt in facts. Vaughn was sending the communicae to Hive City and that was all that mattered.

The lifter touched down, arresting Bane's thoughts. An armoured enforcer waited beyond the shimmering azure of the force shield. He stood unmoving, like one of the statues from the command centre. The shield dissipated and Bane stepped into the crimson-flushed corridor. Rudius remained in the lifter. He waited until the force shield had re-engaged before he spoke.

'A medicae will be sent shortly,' he intoned without emotion. 'Officer Hagenbak will escort you back to the holding area.'

'I feel safer already,' Bane muttered. 'Lead on.'

'You first,' Hagenbak growled.

THE DOOR TO the holding area slid open. As Bane entered, he was surprised to see that a medicae was already there. Another enforcer was present, standing next to the door. His ident-plate read Trakkner. Bane stepped through, aware of Hagenbak following behind him. It seemed like a lot of muscle. The door slid shut. Bane suddenly felt vulnerable. This was not the safe haven he had envisaged.

'We have two injured in that anteroom, over there,' Bane said, gesturing to the flexiplas curtain, It was drawn. He assumed Gil, Jarla and Alicia were still inside. The medicae was examining Ratz, who was still

unconscious, though Doc Mavro had shifted and was now trying to look inconspicuous in one corner of the room. Everyone else was as he had left them. Bane noticed that Trakkner kept his gaze on Meiser at all times.

'Rest assured, we'll get to them,' the medicae responded. He did not look up and was intent on his work.

He was younger than Bane and slight of build compared to the other enforcers, obviously not indoctrinated on the same exercise and diet regimen endured by the frontline peacekeepers. He wore a plain grey suit with a charcoal shirt. Mousy brown hair framed a youthful face, drawn and pale. One of his eyes was an augmetic – it whined and clicked, cycling through examination protocols. Insignia on his arm identified him as scientific staff: Kepke. There was no medical insignia on his clothes. He had a brown bag with him. It was open and Bane could see chemical solutions and syringes within. Kepke delved into it and produced a syringe containing a black liquid.

Kepke had a micro-bead attached via minute-pins into his ears, easily overlooked. He was muttering something. The micro-bead was duel feed - transmitting and receiving.

Bane watched intently as Kepke carefully manipulated the syringe. The liquid inside was filled with tiny bubbles. His attention back on Kepke's communication, Bane made out some words, 'He's the one.'

There was a pause. Receiving instruction. Bane felt his heart hammering again. He cast a sideways glance at Trakkner who was no longer looking at Meiser. He had his eyes on Ratz. The tension was palpable. He even felt it from Hagenbak behind him. Bane shifted slightly, showing his side to the officer behind him. Another sideways glance. I lagenbak was edgy as scav. They all were.

'What is that?' Bane asked.

Kepke looked up briefly. 'Just a mild sedative.' he said, smacking Ratz's arm to get a vein up. It was not hard as the Ratskin was skinny as hell.

'Sedative? He's unconscious.'

'It contains a pain-nullifying agent.' Kepke explained. 'Judging by the size of that bruise, he'll have quite a headache when he wakes.' He lined up the syringe. Put in the needle. His hands were shaking.

'Stop!' Bane cried, reaching out, grabbing the medicae's wrist and wrenching the syringe out of Ratz's arm. As soon as he did so, Hagenbak

put a combat shotgun in his face. A round was cranked into the chamber.

‘Don’t move,’ he warned.

Trakkner had pulled his gun and trained it on Meiser. ‘And don’t you even twitch,’ he told the bodyguard. Meiser remained immobile. His gaze was fixed on Trakkner’s gun, hands clenched into fists.

Kepke shook his wrist free of Bane’s grasp and wiped his sweating forehead with a quivering hand. When he put the needle in Ratz’s arm, the Ratskin woke up. His eyes were glazed at first and he seemed unaware of the syringe in his arm. It made the medicae hesitate. When Ratz saw the enforcers he went crazy.

He kicked Kepke in the stomach, who doubled over, falling back. The Ratskin smacked the syringe out of his arm, clambered, spider-like, onto the back of the couch and tried to scale the wall, scratching at it with fevered fingers.

‘They took it, they took it!’ he screamed, pointing at Hagenbak and then at Trakkner.

‘Shut him up!’ Hagenbak bellowed, switching his gun between Bane and the Ratskin.

‘Take your gun out of my face and I’ll try,’ Bane snarled.

Hagenbak held his gaze for a second and took the gun off Bane, ‘Do it.’

Bane went over to the Ratskin, putting himself between Ratz and the enforcers.

‘They took it!’ he raged, clambering up the walls, only to slide back down, only to try and claw his way up them again.

‘Ratz,’ Bane said urgently, holding the side of his head, forcing the Ratskin to focus on him. ‘Ratz,’ he repeated. ‘Calm down.’

‘You shut him up, right now,’ Hagenbak bawled.

Bane ignored the threat. ‘Ratz,’ he said again, quietly. The Ratskin was sobbing. ‘What is it? What was taken from you?’

‘What are you saying to him?’ It was Trakkner, getting closer and taking his eyes off Meiser. Meiser watched him all the way. He unclenched his fists.

Ratz sobbed, his breathing growing erratic. He clenched Bane’s arms so hard is fingers drew blood. Bane winced but ignored the pain. Ratz was the key to all of this.

‘What was taken?’ he repeated. ‘What did you find in the outlands, Ratz?’

For the briefest moment, Bane saw a flash of clarity in Ratz’s eyes. The catatonia vanished and Ratz spoke calmly in a normal voice.

‘A crown,’ he said. ‘The Black Crown of Karloth Valois.’

‘What?’ Bane said. He could not believe what he was hearing. Valois was a legend. He did not think he was real.

Ratz stared ahead, glassy-eyed again. He could not answer. He was dead.

Hagenbak knew it too. Bane was suddenly aware of the man behind him, or more specifically, Hagenbak’s combat shotgun aimed at his head. Funny, but live a life where people aim guns at you on a regular basis and you get a kind of sixth sence about it. The way Bane figured it, he had about three seconds: two for the enforcer to hesitate and make a decision, another for him to pull a trigger. It was obvious. They had come to find out what Ratz knew, that he was the one they needed to kill first. Make sure of the kill. Then they would kill the rest of them.

Everything Bane had done, the battles he had fought to get here, the distance had travelled. He had kept them alive, he had got Alicia out. To be executed his knees after all he had been through did not seem fair.

Time slowed. Bane closed his eyes. He reckoned he could hear Hagenbak squeezing the trigger. Any millisecond now, there would be an explosion of noise and it would be over, all of his struggles for nothing.

The shot did not come. Hagenbak cried out. Bane turned and saw Mavro on the enforcer’s back, hacking at his exposed neck with his razorblade. Trakkner went to intervene, taking his eyes off Meiser. Big mistake.

The bodyguard moved quickly and silently. He clamped one massive arm around Trakkner neck even as the enforcer turned to help his comrade. He should have killed Meiser first. It was a natural reaction – to go to the assistance of a brother-in-arms. It proved a fatal decision. With one arm, Meiser broke Trakkner’s neck, wrenching it so hard, the skin bruised and reddened instantly, the flesh around the neck slightly distended, overlapping in hideously misshapen furrows.

Meiser did not stop.

Hagenbak mashed Mavro into the wall. The doc squealed and let go, dropping the razorblade. Hagenbak turned his gun on the others, blood streaming down his neck where Mavro had cut him.

Bane had one of the metal stools in his hand, about to throw it. There was no way he could make it before Hagenbak fired, but what the hell.

Thunder roared, resonating off the walls and fire flared.

Bane threw the stool.

Hagenbak went down. The stool missed him by a fraction and clattered against the wall behind him, removing great chunks of loose rockcrete, showering Mavro with dust and grit.

The enforcer was dead. A hole in his chest had opened up his armour. Massive blast burns scorched away the black lacquer of the carapace, revealing the cold metal beneath.

Mavro was next to him, dumped on his ass. He sat, legs splayed, specs of Hagenbak's blood decorating his face. He had his hands raised up, palms facing forward.

'He was going to kill us,' the doctor said plaintively. 'I know that look.'

Bane turned his attention to Meiser. The bodyguard stood over Hagenbak's body, Trakkner's bolt pistol sidearm smoking in one hand.

'Thank you,' Bane said breathlessly.

Meiser nodded and turned the pistol on Kepke. 'The medicae was slowly crawling away on his hands and knees.

'You,' Meiser intoned. It was the first time Bane had heard him speak – even his voice was scary. Kepke stopped and looked at Meiser, his faced etched with terror.

Meiser gestured behind him. 'Open this door, right now.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE RUNWAY LAMPS flared brightly in the blackness, the search lamps illuminating farther patches of it in grainy white.

Nothing.

Silence deafened the outer reaches of the Precinct House. Ever since the civilians had arrived, an eerie void of sound had descended. It was unnatural, enough even to shake the iron resolve of an enforcer.

‘You hear what those civilians were saying? asked Holpen, peering through an observation slit. His eyes narrowed, becoming slivers through his helmet visor, as he regarded the silent darkness.

The two men were still on sentry duty, but their shift was coming to an end. It was not unknown for those on long duty details, particularly sentry, to develop mild paranoia. They called it ‘watch fever’. Holpen and Mackavay were as tough as they came and neither had ever suffered from it. Tonight though, felt different.

‘Some,’ said Mackavay. ‘Something about a plague, a horde of the living dead.’ Mackavay sat on a metal bench, checking the load of his combat shotgun. ‘Sounds like grade-A shit to me.’ His tone was dismissive and he did not even look up from what he was doing.

‘Yeah, that’s what I heard.’

Mackavay looked up, sensing the enforcers unease. ‘Why?’

‘You think there’s any truth to it?’ asked Holpen.

‘Not our concern,’ Mackavay said. ‘Don’t place too much faith in paranoid ramblings.’

‘Seem quiet to you?’ Holpen asked.

‘A little.’ Mackavay laid the shotgun against the bench. ‘Why, what’s the problem, Holpen?’

‘Not sure. I just got this strange feeling.’

‘What?’ Mackavay got to his feet and walked to the observation slit.

‘Shit,’ Holpen hissed.

‘What is it, damn it?’ Mackavay was getting agitated.

Holpen turned, grim-faced. ‘The runway lights are out.’

‘That’s impossible, the power cables are protected by sheet steel.’ Mackavay shouldered Holpen aside to look through the observation slit. ‘And buried under six metres of...’ Mackavay’s words died on his lips. Darkness greeted him. All the lamps were down. Mackavay got on the internal vox.

‘This is Mackavay. We have a power outage at the runway. Divert probe lamps to within twenty metres of the wall,’ he barked.

Holpen took up his position at the observation slit again. He watched as the lamps drew in, their long grainy beams becoming tighter and more focused. They ranged, quickly from side to side, illuminating the immediate area beyond the wall.

‘I don’t like this,’ Mackavay hissed, taking up his shotgun and cranking a round into the chamber.

‘I can see something,’ Holpen said urgently.

‘What is it?’

Holpen peered intently into the shadows beyond the range of the search lamps. ‘Can’t be certain, he said. ‘Get those lamps to fifty metres.’

Mackavay ordered it on the vox and the lamps ranged further out.

‘What the-’ Holpen breathed.

‘What?’ Mackavay was sweating in his armour.

‘People,’ Holpen said. ‘Lots of people.’

‘People? What, rioters? More civilians?’ Mackavay asked urgently. He moved to the back of the watch station by a hatch which led across a yard into the Facility itself. Mackavay dragged his stool over to a bio-scanner and flicked it on. It powered up with a dull hum. A few seconds and a circular screen lit up in washed-out green. It was delineated into three metre blocks, stretching out a hundred metres from the station. A darker green line pulsed out from a central point, surging out in a semi-circular wave. The scanner was devised to register any heat signatures.

‘I’m getting nothing on this thing,’ Mackavay said.

‘I’m frikking telling you Mackavay, I can see them with my own two... oh no.’

The crowd had got closer, steadily advancing towards the wall. The lamps still strafed over them. Holpen thought he could make out details. He reached for a pair of magnoculars. He aimed them at the crowd and waited for one of the lamps to strafe over the area he was looking at.

'The scanner must be malfunctioning,' Mackavay said, working at the machine's dials and activator runes.

'It's not malfunctioning.'

That's not possible. Those people would have to be...' Mackavay realised the truth and suppressed a queasy sensation in his gut.

'Vox the stubber nests,' Holpen said urgently, throwing down the magnoculars, unhitching the observation slit and pushing his shotgun through. 'Vox them now!' he cried, thunder booming inside the tiny room as he fired.

'IT WON'T OPEN from the inside,' Kepke protested.

Bane reached over to him and yanked him to his feet. 'Do as he says,' he growled.

Kepke stared for a moment and then hurried over to the door, casting fearful glances at Trakkner and Hagenbak.

Using the tips of his fingers, Kepke prised off a panel set into the door. The medicae took a small card from his pocket, metal and rectangular – micro wiring and circuit boards made it look like some kind of tech – and pressed it into the panel. An access key lit within the panelled compartment, next to the tech card. Kepke was about to touch it when Bane stopped him.

'Hold on,' he told him. He looked at MacDaur. The deputy still resembled something that had just crawled from the Abyss, but he was slightly more alert after the brief melee.

'You ok?' Bane asked.

MacDaur nodded.

Bane crouched down, took Hagenbak's bolt pistol and tucked it in his trousers. Then he took the shotgun from where it had fallen and tossed it to MacDaur. 'You're with me,' Bane said.

'What are you going to do?' Mavro asked, getting to his feet and wiping the blood from his face.

‘Going back to the command centre,’ Bane said.

‘And the rest of us?’ asked Archimedes. ‘What are we supposed to do?’

‘You and Meiser are getting out of the Precinct House. Something is badly wrong here and I need you to get a message to hive City.’ As if to emphasise Bane’s point, a warning siren sounded in the room.

‘A drill?’ Archimedes asked.

The overhead strip lights flickered and went out. The whirring fans ground to a slow stop. Green emergency lighting crackled around the edges of the room.

‘No. That’s for real,’ Bane said, moving quickly over to Trakkner’s body. He picked up the shotgun, walked up to Mavro and pressed the weapon firmly into his hands. Mavro opened his mouth, about to protest, but Bane’s wagging finger stopped him.

‘Just point and pull the trigger,’ Bane said. He did not want to leave Mavro with the gun, but more enforcers might come looking for them and those that were left needed protection.

‘Ok’ said Bane. ‘Open it.’

Kepke pressed the rune and the door opened. The warning sirens grew abruptly louder. Meiser looked outside, quickly scanning both sides of the corridor.

‘Clear,’ he said, voice low.

Bane still remembered the warning protocols. He paused at the threshold of the room.

‘The walls have been breached,’ he said. ‘The precinct is under attack.’

‘Attack?’ said Archimedes. ‘By what? This place is a fortress.’

‘What do you think, guilder?’

‘Oh,’ he muttered breathlessly. ‘Oh hell.’

‘That’s right. Now, let’s get moving,’ Bane told them, ‘You too,’ he added, giving Kepke a nudge. ‘You’re first out.’

Bane was the last to go. ‘Keep your head Mavro,’ he warned.

The doctor nodded. The shotgun looked awkward in his hands. ‘You’re coming back, right?’

‘I hope so.’ Bane gave the black flexi-plas curtain a last look. Alicia was still unconscious. He thought about going back and seeing her one last time. It might be his last chance... No, they were getting out of this, one

way or another. She'd be safe. Teeth gritted, Bane stepped out. The door slid shut behind him.

Out in the corridor, the sirens were deafening. MacDaur was about to head towards the lifter at the far end. Bane grabbed his arm.

'Not that way,' he said. 'It's voice activated and probably mag-locked. Without the access protocols to open the shielding, we're going nowhere.'

MacDaur nodded.

Bane headed in the opposite direction, the way they had come. He gestured over his shoulder for them to follow. Kepke the medicae went next, MacDaur's shotgun in his back. Archimedes followed and then Meiser.

About halfway down, they reached a junction. To the right was a hatch where a sloping ramp led to the subterranean vehicle yard.

Bane turned, pointed in the direction of the yard and shook his head. It was a dead end, blocked by another shielded lifter. Bane knew it led up to the cells. They must have taken Nark that way. Even in the crimson light, Bane thought he could detect a dark patch on the floor – Nark's blood. It did not sit well with him to leave him like that. In all the confusion, maybe there was another way. Another doorway on the left led further into the lower section of the Precinct House. A crimson access panel throbbed quietly next to it.

Bane waited until they had clustered around the door, the faint hum of the shield, even at such close proximity, obliterated by the keening sirens. Only Meiser remained at the junction, watching the corridor carefully, bolt pistol raised. Bane got hold of Kepke. He shouted right in his ear. 'Access code, right now.'

Kepke winced in pain, tapping frantically at a pad by the access panel. He typed a sequence and it turned emerald. Bane shoved the medicae out of the way and looked at MacDaur. The deputy nodded; eyes on the door, shotgun at the ready. Bane hit the rune.

Nothing. The room was empty, some kind of storage area, just a few plastek crates and some metal drums, harbouring fusion-dried meals and fuel. Racking lined the outer walls on two sides. There was another door at the far end and a hatch in the centre. Bane waved MacDaur inside and the rest followed. Bane closed the door and shot out the access panel. The

brass casing hit the ground amidst a shower of sparks and seared metal. With the door sealed, the wailing sirens dulled in volume.

‘Don’t want anybody following’ Bane said, cranking a fresh round into the bolt pistol’s breach. It never hurt to be prepared. ‘Ok,’ he said, addressing the group. ‘The way I see it, if there’s an assault on the gate then most of the enforcers will be mustering there to repel it. In theory they shouldn’t use these channels,’ he said and then turned to face Kepke who was shaking.

‘Am I right?’ Bane asked.

Kepke nodded.

‘Thought so. This is some kind of service wing. From what I remember, we can get to stores, vehicle yard, cells too. That hatch,’ Bane said, pointing to the one in the middle of the room, ‘leads to a freight access tunnel. There’ll be a rail line down there and a freight-loader. You’ll need to wire it, as there’s no other way down the tunnel.’

‘No problem,’ Meiser said.

‘Take the loader about two hundred metres down the tunnel. There should be a gantry. Find that and on the left side of the tunnel wall is another hatch. Two hundred metres down another length of tunnel and you’ll be in the vehicle yard, opposite side to where we came in,’ Bane explained. Take a transport and get the scav out. I assume you can drive,’ he added, switching his gaze to Meisel’.

‘One or two-handed?’ he said.

Bane had to check himself. That almost sounded like an attempt at humour.

‘All right, you ready?’ he asked Archimedes.

‘Yes,’ the guilder answered calmly. Together, they went over to the hatch and crouched down by it, Meiser too, while MacDaur watched the medicae.

The hatch was mag-locked, but done manually, not coded. It was designed to keep people out, not in. Bane cranked a hexagonal panel, fixed on top of the hatch. He rotated it through six revolutions and the mag-locks disengaged. Gripping the hexagonal plate, Bane lifted the hatch. It creaked open. Darkness beckoned from within. A ladder was illuminated by the dim light of the store room.

‘The ladder leads to a platform,’ Bane told the guilder. ‘The freight-loader should be right next to it.’

Archimedes looked at him, eyes narrowed. ‘How do you know all this?’

Bane grew solemn for a moment. ‘This used to be my precinct.’

‘So it wasn’t just the institution that rejected you that you were confronting by coming here,’ Archimedes said. ‘It was the very people that actually threw you into the cold and left you for dead.’

‘I deserved it,’ Bane said, holding Archimedes’s gaze. ‘Still do.’

‘Not in my eyes, enforcer.’

Bane nodded his thanks. ‘We haven’t much time,’ he said. ‘Once you get into the tunnel and I lock the hatch, there’s no going back. It only opens from this side. It’s manual, so tech won’t help.’

‘I understand,’ Archimedes replied.

‘One last thing,’ Bane added with a glance at Meiser, ‘if anyone tries to stop you, kill them.’

The bodyguard’s dark expression told Bane all he needed to know, although he felt MacDaur shift uncomfortably nearby.

Archimedes got to his feet and held out his hand. ‘Good luck. Bane,’ he said. ‘I hope to see you on the other side.’

‘It’s Erik,’ Bane said, ‘and you too.’

Meiser was first into the hatchway, tucking his bolt pistol in his shoulder holster. Slowly, he descended into the gloom. Archimedes followed after him, with one last glance at Bane and the others, eyes fearful but resolute. The hatch closed for the final time and Archimedes and Meiser were gone.

Bane re-engaged the locks with a dull metallic thank. He looked at MacDaur. ‘Let’s go.’

Through the back door to the store room was another, longer chamber. This one was filled with machine parts and a metal bench stretched half the length of the room, with a battered set of tank tracks laid on top of it. A huge metallic disc dominated the centre of the room. It looked as if it was mounted on some kind of rotating crank and raised up about a metre off the floor. Four access hatches were cut into it. More racking on the walls was piled with engines, fuel converters, capacitors and coolant units. A large ramp on the left led down to a massive concertina door, another route to the subterranean vehicle yard. There was another door that Bane was interested in.

As Bane walked over to it, he stopped just in front of the ramp. There were boot prints, faint but definitely fresh, overlaying the tread tracks. He crouched and scooped up some of the dirt from the print with his fingers.

‘What is it?’ MacDaur hissed.

‘Not sure,’ Bane muttered, getting back to his feet. ‘No time for that now. Let’s move.’ He rushed to the door.

They were right outside it when MacDaur spoke again.

‘Meiser just killed those men without even thinking,’ he said.

‘I know,’ Bane returned darkly. He stopped and turned to look at the deputy, ‘and we might have to do that too. Kill the enforcers.’

MacDaur licked his lips and looked uncertain. He believed in the law and what it stood for. He had not been a peace keeper long enough to get jaded. The idea of attacking the enforcers, even homicidal ones, must have been close to anathema for him.

‘They’re not all corrupt,’ Bane said. ‘In fact I’m not even sure those two back in the holding area knew whatever the hell is going on in here.’ Bane gave Kepke a glance, but the medicae was saying nothing. They had a mission, to make sure they had the right Ratskin – the one that found the crown and then to find out what he knew and kill him.’

‘What the hell was that in that syringe?’

Bane gave Kepke another glance. Still nothing. Silence was his best policy now. ‘Nerve toxin, internal haemorrhaging serum, who knows? Whatever it was, I don’t think it got into his system. He just... died.’

‘Inked saline solution, loaded with additional oxygen molecules,’ Kepke muttered, deciding to speak after all. Perhaps, in some warped part of his fear-addled mind, he thought this was helping. That it might grant him leniency.

‘What?’

‘Inked salt water. That’s what was in the syringe,’ he said meekly.

‘I didn’t ask,’ Bane snarled, turning back to his deputy. The Enforcers are our enemy here, MacDaur. That’s all you need to know.’ Bane put his hand over the door’s access panel. He looked back at the medicae. ‘You first.’

Bane pushed Kepke out into a broad stairway where rough rockcrete walls and bare metal greeted them. The air stank of dust and sweat. There was only one direction: up. They took it. Kepke leading, until they reached

a platform about ten metres up. Another stairway led higher. MacDaur was about to mount the stairs when Bane's voice stopped him.

'No,' he said, 'I want to check something first.' He advanced towards a door that led off the platform. It was split on a diagonal and heavily reinforced, but with shorted-out servos. There was a metre wide split in it, enough room to creep through.

Bane edged through first, bolt pistol leading the way. Kepke came next, urged by the muzzle of MacDaur's shotgun. They entered a small guard room. A pict screen displayed a view of another room beyond. No sign of any guards, just a table, two chairs and a battered caffeine vendor in one corner of the room. A weapons cabinet stood alongside. Bane had seen enough to know it would be locked. A door to the other room in the viewer was open, servos shorted. Behind a second door opposite, Bane detected a faint hum – active shielding. It must lead to the lifter.

MacDaur saw the room in the pict, a long bare metal corridor, six doors along each side facing one another. 'Cells?' he asked, his tone was confused at first, then, as realisation dawned, he scowled.

'I owe him, MacDaur,' Bane replied. 'Watch Kepke.'

As soon as he stepped through the doorway, he felt the echoing resonance as his boots struck bare metal and he knew something was wrong. The access panel to the door had been prised off and wiring hung out of it like intestines. He walked slowly, checking each cell in turn and holding his gun in front in a two-handed grip, one palm beneath the stock to steady it. The strip light was weak and made the corridor gloomy. Emerald light from activator rune panels washed over him, turning his skin green.

The fifth door on the left side was open, just a crack, but definitely in recent use. Bane readjusted his grip. He smelled something like copper. Bane got his foot inside the crack of the door. He edged it open, very slowly. The copper stink grew stronger. Then he saw why.

There were two bodies inside, both enforcers. One had a shiv embedded in his neck. He guessed that Nark must have made it en route and kept it hidden. A fountain of arterial blood decorated the wall. The other corpse had a hole in its chest and two sets of blood spatter on its face. It was a close-range shot. The wound was cauterised, skin burned black at the edges. He had been thrown back by the impact; there were drag marks

where his heels had caught on the floor. The enforcer with the shiv in his neck must have bled out. It would have hurt like hell and was probably the worst three and a half minutes of his life.

There was no sign of Nark. Both side-arms were gone. They must have stowed the shotguns in the weapons cabinet. Bane was surprised Nark had not taken them. Maybe he did not have time, or maybe he preferred pistols.

Bane left the cell and saw a wrecked terminal. He was not sure what Nark was looking for. A pict display showed the outside of the Precinct House. The gate was open, and the only way to do that was from the inside. Bane gaped in horror.

The zombie horde was pouring through. Sporadic flashes lit up the dark – most of the lamps were out – as the enforcers discharged their weapons. They were hopelessly outnumbered. Stubber nests raged, bullet casings falling like metal rain. Bane watched as an enforcer was torn from his position. He had got close to toss a grenade. Bane watched as he was dragged into the horde. His mouth opened in a silent scream.

Bane looked away. It had come to guerrilla fighting, back into the facility when the wall garrison fell. Had Nark somehow accessed the gate mechanism from this terminal? Was that even possible? Gangers were wily bastards, learned a lot of stuff from embittered ex-officials. He could have got the guard's access protocols. It was possible. The only certainty was that time was running out.

Bane went back into the guard room. 'We go up,' he said. 'No more stops.'

WIRING THE LOADER had been easy. The vehicle filled the freight corridor as it went, effectively blocked it off from the boarding platform. Meiser stood at the controls, set the drive-shifter to mid-power and with a lurch of metal and the whirr of servos activating, the loader started to move, quickly picking up speed.

The bodyguard had to yank on the brakes with a little urgency as they over shot the hatch, two hundred metres down. No apology. Instead he hammered the access console that opened the entry port and he and Archimedes got out onto another platform.

‘This must be it,’ Archimedes muttered, gazing down at the strip lit tunnel they had just traversed. Crackling energy spiking across the loader’s tram line, threw azure flashes onto the walls. The shadows it caused took on a grim aspect.

‘Get that hatch open,’ he said, turning back to Meiser.

The bodyguard stalked forward. He gripped the hexagonal plate of the hatch. It did not budge. He put the weight of his shoulder into it. Still nothing.

‘We may have a problem,’ he rumbled.

AFTER MORE FLIGHTS of stairs than Bane cared to count, he was sweating and his muscles burned. MacDaur looked worse. Bane eyed him for a moment. He got hold of Kepke by the collar again. ‘I’m your babysitter now,’ he snarled in his ear. He pointed to a door at the top of the stairway. The rune gleamed red. ‘You know what to do.’

Kepke opened the door to the corridor which led to the command centre. Bane shoved the medicae through it, half-expecting a challenge from the guards at the far end. He was fully prepared to use Kepke as a human shield if necessary.

The challenge did not come because the guards were not there. Bane tramped down the corridor, a hand on Kepke’s collar all the way. MacDaur followed slowly behind.

Bane eyed every alcove and every doorway and vent, expecting an ambush at any moment. It did not come. When he reached the bronzed double doors at the end, they started to open as if they had been waiting for his approach.

Now he was really freaked out.

A void of half-dark pervaded in the command chamber. It seemed to draw them inside, against their will.

THE SENTRY STATION was completely overrun. Mackavay watched the grisly scene on a pict-viewer in disbelief as the zombies swarmed inside. They had fled the sentry station as soon as the zombies had got close. The power relay that gave life to the runway outside was dead and the sentry station door protocols were out. The creatures had literally torn their way

inside. Together with Holpen, he had sealed the access port that led from the station annex to the wall and beyond with the help of a tech. He had welded it shut. No use taking chances.

Mackavay switched the viewer to another area of the wall and then another and another. The zombies were swelling up against its length and breadth, like a living tide of decay. They clawed ineffectually at the heavily armoured wall, moaning and hissing and crawling onto the bodies of those creatures that had reached the wall first. They were crushed against the massing horde.

Heavy stubber fire raged in his ears. Holpen and four other enforcers who stood in the yard with them winced against the deafening barrage. The gun nests must be getting hot. How many must they have slain? How many more were there?

'We need to assemble all the men,' Mackavay said to Holpen. 'Relay to all watch captains and sound the alarm.'

Mackavay looked back at the viewer, which abruptly died. Static roared across it violently. They heard a sound. It was the gate. Servos squealed as it ground slowly, inexorably open. He could hear the horrible cacophony of groans grow suddenly louder.

'Oh no,' he breathed.

Dead eyes, unblinking and cold, regarded him from the widening void beyond the gate. There must have been thousands of them.

'Get more troops,' Mackavay urged. 'Get them, right now.'

He watched, almost petrified as the horde surged through. Twenty enforcers armed with suppression shields rushed to meet the zombies. Tech's working feverishly at the gate controls had managed to stop them from opening it any further. It was possible they could cover the breach.

The enforcers locked shields, dug in hard and pressed into the emerging masses. The creatures snarled and raged as the enforcers impacted against them, clawing at the shields.

Mackavay came to his senses and led Holpen and the others towards the men blocking the breach, shooting any creatures that squeezed through. One of them leapt, or was maybe thrown, right over the shield wall. Bolt pistol cracking Mackavay shot it in mid-air. He was a few metres away from the suppression shields when a high-pitched metallic shriek tore out from the undead mass.

Sparks flew, bright and angry in the shadows of the outer yard and one of the enforcers in the wall fell, his suppression shield tom in two. More sparks, the flash of metal and blood, and another enforcer died. Mackavay saw the source of the power outage. A huge, hooded figure, dressed in the robes of the Redemption, wielded a massive eviscerator in two hands and was carving up the rest of the wall.

The zombies swarmed around him through the breach he had created. The other enforcers tried to close ranks but were too late and another suppression shield fell. Corpse hands dragged him down, his muffled screams crushed as the horde smothered him. Steel flashed again and blood rained as another shield went down. Mackavay took aim at the Redemptor, but the round hit a zombie instead. He fired another as he retreated, but other zombies were closing. His bolt pistol blazed in his hand as he tore them down. He heard the booming retort of combat shotguns. Holpen and the other enforcers were firing too.

Mackavay backed off. Only six of the original shield bearers remained. Their defiance was short-lived. The horde overran them and they sank beneath it. Mackavay heard a scream to his left. He tried to get another shot at the hulking Redemptor, but he was gone, lost amidst the horde that had swarmed around him as they filled the yard. Above, gun nests roared and flared but the horde was not thinning. There was another scream, closer this time.

‘Spread your shots,’ Mackavay barked, trying to assert his authority and fighting the blind panic that threatened to unman him. ‘Keep a tight cordon of fire.’ His men were not listening. He just wanted to get away, to wake from the nightmare.

In their flight, the retreating enforcers became separated. The zombies were everywhere and it was difficult to differentiate where the enforcers were. Mackavay thought he caught a glimpse of a helmet disappear beneath the mass. He heard the grunts and moans of the horde as they snapped and clawed at their prey.

Only Holpen stood next to him now. He saw him out of the corner of his eye, face etched with desperation, lit by the staccato blast flare of his bolt pistol. Sirens were wailing in the air. They screamed for him to flee. Mackavay felt cold rockcrete at his back: the Precinct House gate.

‘Keep them back!’ the enforcer bellowed above the din to Holpen, whirling to examine the access plate. He hammered in the access protocols. Too fast. He had made a mistake. There was another scream. It sounded a little like Holpen. He hammered the protocols again. Green light. The door was opening. He was about to step through when strong hands gripped his arms, head and neck. He managed to squirm round. A thousand pitiless corpse faces regarded him. The door opened fully. Mackavay realised his error even as they tore apart his armour.

‘What have I done?’ he breathed, before all light was blotted out and he sank like his comrades into darkness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MEISER WAS SWEATING by the time he wrenched the access port open. The thick metal pipe clanged as he threw it aside. He had used it to lever the portal wide enough for him and Archimedes to squeeze through. He was exhausted from the effort and it had taken valuable time.

The long tunnel that led down into the subterranean vehicle yard beckoned. From there they could make their way to the surface, appear on the opposite side of the Precinct House beyond the wall, and head to Hive City.

Archimedes eyed the gloom warily. A cable array of yellowish lamps lit the way poorly. It was very quiet, very still. 'I don't like it,' the guilder breathed. It was cold in the lower levels away from the heat ducts, and his breath misted the air.

'I'll go first,' Meiser grunted, keeping the bolt pistol close to his body. An outstretched grip was fine with another hand for support, helped accuracy and balance, but one-handed it was weak, easy to knock loose and the weight quickly made the arm ache. Meiser decided to conserve his strength.

The bodyguard moved slowly. Stout buttresses ran up the curved edges of the tunnel. They protruded a metre or so out; room enough for someone to hide in the half-light. Meisel took no chances and checked every alcove, waving Archimedes up after him. Two hundred metres of tunnel, same routine each time. It was slow going.

The lighting died. Meiser stopped and remained still. He gestured for Archimedes to do the same.

'What's going on?' the guilder hissed as loud as he dared.

'Don't know,' said Meiser. They stayed like that for several minutes. For Archimedes, it felt like hours, perception of time distorted by the sudden darkness. Meiser knew the duration exactly. He listened hard. Nothing. If

anyone was there, waiting to ambush them, he would have heard them. There is no way anyone can stay that still for that long, without giving themselves away.

'Keep moving,' he rasped. Only about thirty metres left. He could see the faint oval of light coming from the vehicle yard. It must run on a separate power feed, he thought.

Something moved ahead, a group of hunched shadows, undulating like a wave of blackness. In the dark, it was difficult to see anything. Meiser edged closer, gun outstretched. Twenty metres away and he could hear noises: sucking, tearing, licking. Ten metres away and in the half light, Meiser saw a bloody hand flop out of a huddled mass that looked like scraps of entwined cloth. The hand twitched as something gnawed at the arm. A face appeared in the huddle of apparently conjoined rags, alerted by the bodyguard's approach. It was withered, grey and decaying. It snarled when it saw him, strips of torn flesh spilling from rotten teeth.

Meiser backed off, pushing Archimedes behind one of the alcoves. 'Stay there,' he warned.

Two plague zombies surged towards him, leaving the remains of their half devoured prey – an enforcer, probably a sentry, his armour cracked and split, his flesh...

The bolt pistol roared, lighting up the tunnel. Meiser hit the first zombie in the gut. Another shot to the head and it fell. The second took one in the neck and another in the head – its cranium exploded with the impact. In a matter of seconds they were inert carcasses, lying on the tunnel floor. Meiser was about to advance when the bundle of rags moved again. It alone formed the bulk of the obstruction – another plague zombie, but much, much bigger, stooping to fit in the tunnel. It was some kind of mutated ganger. Goliath tats were prominent on its decaying arms and chest. Its size came from stimm-enhancement, which reacted with the neurone toxin from the zombie plague to create a whole different breed of monster. Its musculature was impossibly developed, with hands that could wrap around Meiser's torso and a tiny diseased head on top of slab-like shoulders.

Meiser fired once, twice. It took a hit to the right temple – a glancing blow that did not even slow it. The creature rushed forward with all the momentum of a freight transport. Meiser winced in pain as the freak flung

its arms around him and pounded the bodyguard into the hard rockcrete of the tunnel wall. The sudden impact jarred all the way down the bodyguard's spine and he cried out. Meiser's good arm was pinned at his side and he yelled in pain as the sling was torn off the injured one.

The creature pitched him off his feet and Meiser had to ram his elbow up into the zombie's thin to stop it from biting him. Spikes of agony shot into him and white slashes invaded his vision. Panting for breath, Meiser managed to wrap his finger around the trigger of the bolt pistol. It was buried somewhere in the creature's drug-fuelled bulk. He pulled the trigger, five, six times.

The muzzle flare, even buried as it was between them, lit up the tunnel – Meiser's snarling visage described in stark light and shadows. Archimedes watched, huddled next to the opposite buttress, as the zombie's back exploded outward in a mass of flying bone and gore.

Still it held on.

Meiser felt its grip loosen, and pulled his knees up between his torso and the zombie's chest. He got his palm up, under the creature's chin, and pushed. It leaned back a fraction, froth and gore-soaked spittle flying. Meiser got his feet against the thing's chest and kicked hard. It still gripped his body but he got the bolt pistol free. Roaring, it came back at him, only this time Meiser jammed the pistol into the zombie's snarling mouth. He fired three times.

Archimedes ducked down, closing his eyes and covering his ears. The shots came like gargantuan hammer blows, resounding in his head. When he opened his eyes, clearing smoke infected the part of the tunnel they had fought in. Meiser was slumped on the floor breathing hard, his injured arm limp at his side. The freak was down, most of its head missing – rotting graffiti on the tunnel wall.

Meiser wrenched himself to his feet and wiped a swathe of blood off his face and neck with the sleeve of his bodyglove. He looked over to the tunnel mouth.

About a metre away from the tunnel exit a figure stepped into the light. It was a silhouette, crouched, bent up and old looking. But there was something about it, something powerful. Meiser felt the hackles on the back of his neck rising.

No way back.

The figure was coming closer, its movements slow and awkward. Meiser held up the gun. He was weak from his exertions and it wavered slightly in his grasp. He pulled the trigger and heard an ominous click. Empty. He tossed it to the ground. His heart thundered.

'Get behind me.'

Archimedes obeyed.

Meiser had been his bodyguard for nearly six years. They had been through some tough situations. The Corpseyard at Dreyzer's Glut was one of the toughest, so tough he had lost Trevallian, another long-serving henchman. But Meiser, like always, had got him out alive. In all those years, through all those life or death moments Meiser had never, ever shown fear, not even in his voice, until now.

The world was dark and undefined, as if shrouded by a dense fog. Hunger gnawed at the infected's brain, driven by debased instinct. Only the scantest thread of humanity remained, a barely recognisable memory trace embedded deep in a withering psyche. The stink of flesh filled their nostrils, awakening a primal craving. It was unbearable.

Sweet soft flesh...

So sweet...

They longed to taste it.

Sanity ebbing away...

The plague... Impossible to resist...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BANE ALMOST TRIPPED on the first body. It was one of the guards, still wearing his armour, although there were no visible wounds. A shotgun lay nearby. Another body was further inside the room, little more than a bulky shadow in the gloom. Again, no wounds and a gun laying nearby.

Bane stooped over the first guard, thrusting Kepke just in front of him. MacDaur waited just behind. Bane could hear his deputy's laboured breathing. Tentatively, Bane pulled the guard's head back. There was a loud crack as his neck snapped. He had barely touched him. Bane winced when he heard it. Heart thumping, he held both sides of the guard's helmet and carefully pulled it free. It came off easily, as if his head had grown too small for it. Bane gave a sharp intake of breath.

The guard looked like he had been dead for years. His skin was thin, like parchment, and bluish veins showed through. His cheekbones poked upwards like miniature peninsulas. The eye sockets were black and sunken, pupils white and glassy. His lips were sloughed away to reveal blackened gums and teeth. The tongue was a black and withered strip of flesh.

Bane rolled him over. Air, his final breath, escaped in a long and tortured rasp. The foetid stench of it washed over Bane and he gagged. It was as if the life had been literally drained out of him. Bane got to his feet and looked over at the opsdesk. It was hidden completely by the darkness, unnaturally so. Even the light washing in from the outer corridor seemed to abate at this threshold, as if it was afraid to penetrate further.

'Get up,' Bane hissed. Kepke was on his knees, vomiting quietly in the corner. He wiped his mouth and obeyed. Bane turned to MacDaur. The deputy was keeping it together, just. Bane gestured to his left, indicating that MacDaur should circle. The deputy followed his gaze, moving slowly, wearily.

Together, taking Bane's lead, the three men edged towards the ops-desk, penetrating the rim of the darkness. As they did, the door began closing.

Kepke cried out, looking back urgently, about to flee. Bane gripped his wrist hard, arresting his flight.

'No time,' he whispered.

In seconds the doors slammed shut and darkness engulfed them. Just the strip lights overhead to guide them with their dull green luminescence.

Bane waited, allowing his eyes to adjust. Slowly, a figure began to materialise, a hazy silhouette.

'I know you're there,' Bane said, trying to keep his voice calm and level.

Another moment of silence.

'Ever the detective.' The voice was familiar, but corrupted somehow, as if two people were speaking at once.

The light on the ops-desk flared. Harsh and white, the sudden illumination made Bane squint but he resisted the temptation to look away.

Lit from beneath by such stark light Vaughn's face looked haunted. Deep shadows pooled in his eyes, cheeks, around his mouth and beneath his nose. He looked somehow older, even in the short time since their last meeting.

He wore a crown. Jet black, the crown shimmered like living metal. It was hooded at the back. It wended all the way round to the front, ending in two raised edges, like spikes. All manner of grotesque metal artifice was attached to it. A grinning, daemonic visage regarded Bane from between the raised spikes.

So this was what Ratz had ventured into the Abyss to retrieve. This was what the Enforcers had stolen.

Bane heard voices in the void as he stood facing off against his old proctor, sibilant, soothing yet urgent. Not Vaughn, his mouth was shut tight as if stitched. He was listening. Bane realised it was the voice of the crown's owner, Karloth Valois, infamous zombie master. A nightmare tale to scare hive children to sleep. Except the nightmare was real. The very evidence of it was before him. Bane knew that it was not Nark who had opened the gate but Valois, through his willing pawn, Mathias Vaughn.

Bane took a step forward, waving MacDaur behind him. Vaughn's raised hand stopped him. There was pain etched on the Judge's face as he

struggled for control. His eyes were fixed tight, teeth set in a grimace. The hand clenched into a fist.

Vaughn opened his eyes, awareness returning, the pain gone.

'You opened the gates,' Bane said, his tone accusatory. The bolt pistol was low, held in line with his waist, pointing down. He should kill Vaughn now, but he had questions and he did not know what Vaughn, or rather Valois, could do. The desiccated corpses of the guards stayed his hand for now.

'In a manner of speaking, I suppose I did,' Vaughn returned.

Bane licked his lips, not sure what to do. 'Vaughn.' he said, 'fight it. Give up the crown and we'll get you help. Valois has seduced you. You don't know your own mind.'

Vaughn threw his head back and laughed. The sound boomed around the chamber like maniacal thunder. Recovering his composure, he looked back at Bane. 'I was seduced by nothing,' he said, lip curling into a sneer. 'I wore the crown willingly.'

'You're a good man at heart, Vaughn,' Bane continued, edging the gun up. 'I know this isn't you.'

Vaughn's face grew suddenly solemn. 'For someone who was once regarded as a formidable detective, you are disappointing Erik,' said Vaughn. 'I thought you'd realised it when first we met not more than an hour ago, in this very room.'

Bane looked on, confusion and disbelief warring in his mind.

'You paused, as you left. I was... *aware* of it.'

Realisation dawned finally in Bane's mind and with the weight of it the bolt pistol sagged in his grasp.

'The hooded figure,' he said, eyes wide. 'It was you.' Vaughn sniffed his amusement and smiled broadly. 'But that would mean...' Bane continued.

'That I was the leak, the one providing... information to the Razorheads,' Vaughn said. He took great sadistic pleasure in it, pleasure in watching Bane crushed by the truth. 'That night in Toomis Prefab. You remember it, yes?' He was still smiling.

Bane felt his legs weaken. He dropped the pistol – didn't even hear it fall – and put out a hand to steady himself.

'No.' The word was barely a rasped breath.

‘Our intelligence led us to believe we were the ones who had the upper hand, and yet we were ambushed,’ Vaughn continued, delighting in every moment. He began walking from around the ops-desk, still framed by the harsh light. He waited until he was face-to-face with his old captain before he spoke again.

‘You were supposed to die in that ambush,’ Vaughn whispered darkly, ‘but something altogether more satisfying happened instead. You killed that girl. Alcana Ran-Lo was her name, wasn’t it? An enforcer slaying the child of a high-born in a botched mission he himself had orchestrated. What other penalty could there be but expulsion? And for someone like you, who lived and died by the very institution that spat you out like poison, that was worse than death. So followed your predictable slide. Wash-out. Drunk. Addict.’ He dwelt on each word, letting it sink in, making it hurt. ‘You were as good as dead, better even.’

‘I trusted you Vaughn. You defended me,’ Bane blathered, eyes on the floor as if shamed. Then he looked up, light into Vaughn’s eyes. ‘You were shot, I saw it.’

Vaughn smirked. ‘A small price to pay,’ he said, getting close. ‘Power, Bane, that is what I craved, like you crave stimms. You were a good detective, great in fact. I knew I couldn’t keep my... associations from you forever. You blocked my ascension and were getting close to ruining everything.’

‘And your comrades, the other enforcers who died and were injured, what of them?’ Bane fostered his anger and felt it building.

‘Come now Bane, you and I are familiar with collateral damage.’

Bane clenched his fist. All he had to do was reach up, grip Vaughn’s throat and crush the life out of him with his bare hands. Then he remembered the dead guards and his fist unclenched. Vaughn was a vessel, a vessel for Valois’s power. It was primal, beyond Bane’s comprehension. He could feel it, crackling beneath the surface, pricking at his skin. He was in trouble.

‘And the Razors? Bane hissed. He heard something moving behind him. ‘Were they collateral damage too?’

‘Inadvertently, I let them grow too powerful. They had to be destroyed,’ he explained. ‘It was easy to taint their water still. They trusted me.’ He

could not resist smirking at that. As I'm sure you realised, it fed the entire complex. Once they were infected, the plague would do its work,' he said.

Bane stared in disbelief.

'They were a loose end,' Vaughn said. 'Just like this Precinct House. There is evidence here that can link me to the Razorheads and certain personnel I was forced to take into my confidence. The plague will see to them,' he added, nodding. 'This,' he said, pointing to the crown, 'told me what to do.'

'You're deluded,' Bane said. This may have been your plan at the start, your corrupt will, but it is the whim of Valois you serve now.'

Vaughn ignored him. 'The zombie horde will overrun this entire facility. No one will escape, no one. I will be the only survivor. A desperate rearguard action to Hive City, my internment as Sector Judge bathed in courageous glory as I personally rally the defences.'

'You're crazy,' Bane snarled. 'The plague will ravage Hive City.'

'An unfortunate necessity,' Vaughn returned. 'It will abate eventually, and in the rejuvenation of those sectors doubtlessly afflicted, with me at the helm, I will shine and thus garner more favour with the ruling elite of the Spire. This,' he said, spreading his arms wide, 'is all that stands in my way. All of you, everyone in this Precinct House, must die.'

Bane heard Kepke yelp and get to his feet from where he had been cowering. He felt the power inside Vaughn before he saw it. He dropped to his knees out of instinct, the same instinct that had kept him alive this long.

'All must die,' Vaughn raged, outstretching his arm.

Now Bane saw it. The dark power seemed to manifest in slow motion. Black energy, like miniature forks of malevolent lightning, crackled over and between Vaughn's fingers. They shuddered, the movement minute and urgent. Steadily the forks arced and merged, forming a dark nimbus of reckless energy. The nimbus swelled, consuming Vaughn's entire hand until it exploded outward in a coruscating bolt of black lightning.

Bane felt the backwash of power sear the skin on his face, streaking across the room until it struck Kepke as he fled towards the door. The medicae's death screams wrenched time back to normal. The blast wave lifted him off his feet, a flare of dark energy lighting up the air around

him, casting him in stark silhouette. Tendrils of evil power raced over his body, probing, coursing, eking the very life out of his puny body.

Kepke's scream died. His steaming corpse lay on its back and smoke funnelled from the mouth like some extinguished fuel stack. His skin was withered, aged impossibly in seconds. Bane suddenly wished he had the same faith Smite had been so fond of. Maybe he would have prayed. Instead, he reached for the bolt pistol lying on the floor.

He raised the gun, half-expecting Vaughn to turn his borrowed power onto him but the blast of dark energy did not come. Vaughn staggered back. Bane fired and the first shot missed as the ex-proctor fell against the ops-desk. His psychic exertions had taken something out of him. Bane swung his pistol around as Vaughn clambered around the edge of the ops-desk, face wracked with pain as he tried to focus.

'This madness ends now,' Bane cried. He was about to fire when someone crushed him into the floor from behind. The bolt pistol boomed, the shell impacting into the ceiling. Bane caught a glance of Vaughn disappearing further into the room beyond the ops-desk, before he was crushed down completely. His wrist smashed against the hard floor and the bolt pistol spiralled from his grasp. Bane struggled and threw an elbow into his assailant's gut. It got his arm free. He backhanded and felt connection with bone. The weight lifted for a moment. Bane used the time to roll onto his back, blocking a grasping hand reaching for his throat. Bane stared into the eyes of his attacker.

MacDaur's face was drained of colour, his eyes a glassy void. He snarled as he fought, spittle flecking Bane's face. MacDaur was the infected and he had at last succumbed to the plague. Not MacDaur, Bane thought.

MacDaur got a hand around Bane's throat and squeezed, the deputy's nails digging into flesh. Bane head-butted him and felt MacDaur's neck jerk back. The deputy's grip weakened. Bane drove his knee up into MacDaur's stomach, using his free hand to throw him off his body. The deputy skidded across the floor. The bolt pistol was right next to him. Dazedly, he saw it and picked it up. Bane sat up and crawled backward on his elbows, kicking with his feet for more purchase. He saw the gun. MacDaur's slackjawed expression showed no emotion.

'MacDaur, don't do this!' Bane pleaded. He felt the wall at his back. Nowhere to run. He felt something else too, digging into him: his service

pistol. Bane wrenched the pistol out from behind him, took aim and pulled the trigger. The pistol's report resonated around the room. The bullet hit MacDaur in the chest and he fell, his weapon clattering down with him.

Bane sagged against the wall. Vaughn was gone. There was a concealed lifter at the back of the room that Vaughn must have used to escape. Bane got to his feet and went over to MacDaur. The deputy was breathing heavily. Breathing?

Bane dropped to his knees and held MacDaur's head up into the light. The glassy expression had vanished. He must have been controlled by Vaughn's – or rather Valois's – will. It was not MacDaur who was infected. Maybe none of them were. Maybe the infected was already dead. Bane looked down at his deputy, his friend, and was horrified. He could not speak. MacDaur was dying, blood staining his clothes in a growing crimson blossom.

'Bane,' MacDaur breathed, blood flecking his lips as he spoke.

Bane leant down. 'Easy MacDaur, easy,' he said, his voice choking.

He had driven him to this. MacDaur was an idealist. He had believed in the law and what it stood for. He had believed in him. Those ideals were shattered. Bane had seen to that. He had been adamant that they should head for the Precinct house. His damned redemption, so precious to him, had led only to death, maybe for them all, and many more besides.

'Bane,' MacDaur said again, voice growing weaker.

Bane put his ear to MacDaur's lips. 'Yes.' His voice was barely a whisper.

MacDaur's final words were spoken defiantly. He arched his neck up as he said them. They used up the last of his fading strength. 'Get him.' MacDaur's head sagged back down. He was dead.

Bane closed his eyes tight. He cradled MacDaur's head for a moment as he crushed his feelings of remorse deep down within him. He let the deputy go and got up. No way forward. The lifter would be keyed into his old proctor's voice signature. He had to go back. One way or another, Vaughn would pay.

BANE SHOT THE lock on the door mechanism using the bolt pistol. The service pistol firing once was a miracle. He doubted it would fire again.

He heaved the doors free by hand. Rage fuelling him, he got them open. He hurled himself down the corridor. He noticed that the lifter at the end was plate sealed. He made for the stairwell entrance instead. As he reached it, there was another thought dogging his mind. He had believed MacDaur was the infected. It was one of the reasons he had taken him, to get him away from Alicia. He had thought he could handle it, hoped MacDaur could stave it off long enough for him to take Vaughn down. But it was not MacDaur, so who was it?

Bane's mind was racing when he opened the hatch that led to the stairway. He bolted through heedlessly. It was unlike him. His emotions were making him careless. When he saw the bolt pistol in his face, he realised his mistake.

The enforcer smashed Bane into the wall, smacking the bolt pistol from his grasp. Another smashed the hatch shut. Bane had surprised them, but they had been ready enough to act quickly.

The second enforcer pressed his forearm across Bane's neck and pinned him against the wall. With his free hand, he held Bane's chin. 'He's not one of them,' the enforcer growled, letting Bane go. The bolt pistol was still in his face.

'Who the hell are you?' the first enforcer snarled.

'His name is Erik Bane,' said a familiar voice. Bane looked over to its origin. He recognised Vincent. 'He's an escaped prisoner.'

'

You don't understand.' Bane began as the second enforcer grabbed his arm to restrain him. The other enforcer holstered his weapon, grabbing Bane's other arm. Bane did not resist. There were too many of them. 'Judge Vaughn,' he said, grimacing as the enforcer twisting his arm around his back turned him around and pressed his face against the wall. At least the gun was out of his face. 'He's the one behind this attack,' Bane snarled.

'Judge Vaughn is the head of this facility.' Vincent countered. 'The zombie horde came after you arrived,' he added accusingly.

Vincent got close and took out his pistol. 'You're under arrest Bane.'

'Release him.' ordered another voice.

The enforcers hesitated.

'I said let him go.' They relented. Even Vincent backed off.

Bane turned to face his apparent ally. In the half-light of the stairwell, he cast a large shadow. He towered over Bane – a wall of carapace and muscle. A sergeant's rank pin was fixed to his armour. The patchwork of scars on the lower part of his face was unmistakable. 'Dugan,' said Bane, more than a little relieved as he recognised his old heavy weapon specialist.

'Bane,' the massive enforcer returned.

'Judge Vaughn opened the gates,' Bane said quickly. 'He admitted it to me himself.'

Dugan could not hide his shock. 'What do you mean?'

'I don't have time to explain. Vaughn is the one who started the plague. He'd been giving information to the Razorheads and he killed them with the neurone virus to cover his tracks. He's been playing all of us: you, me, this entire precinct.' It sounded crazy. Bane was not even sure he believed himself, now he had said it out loud.

'What?' Dugan wasn't buying it. He looked over to Vincent and the other enforcers.

'Wait,' Bane urged, holding up his hands and backing up as far as he could. 'You think this zombie attack is a coincidence? Vaughn came into possession of an artefact, something an outlander salvaged from the Abyss.'

'The Abyss? Bane, what the hell has this got to do with Vaughn?' Dugan's face crumpled in confusion. He shook his head. When I heard you'd been brought in, that you saved some civilians, I thought you'd changed but you're still a frikking stimm-head, full of paranoid scenarios.' He looked at Vincent. 'Take him.'

They went to grab him again, but this time Bane resisted. He managed to pull Vincent's gun, punch him in the stomach and spin him around to make a human shield. He put the bolt pistol to Vincent's forehead.

'Listen to me,' Bane urged.

Dugan showed Bane his palms, a glance at the other two telling them to back off. Bane was desperate, he looked like a lunatic.

'Take it easy,' said Dugan.

'Vaughn is dirty. The corruption goes way back,' Bane tried to sound adamant. 'He even staged the ambush of Toomis Pre-fab.'

Dugan shook his head again. ‘Bane, that night was tragic, but there was nothing we could’ve done. It just went bad.’ He took a step forward.

‘Keep back’ Bane warned, pressing the pistol harder, his arm around Vincent’s neck. He took the opportunity to look around. Four enforcers on this level: Dugan, Vincent and the two who had restrained him. There was a heavy stubber rig stowed in the corner, next to the hatchway. One level down, there were five more. Two had suppression shields, another carried a flamer. One enforcer was working on a vox unit. It looked like he was trying to get a signal and he kept sending out an acknowledgement message. The fifth was at the door where presumably the enforcer’s had entered. He was a tech-adept, just finished welding the lock. He heard a scratching sound – low and insistent – coming from outside.

‘What the hell are you doing in here anyway?’ Bane asked.

Dugan licked his lips, trying to stay calm. ‘We got trapped,’ he admitted. The zombie horde flooded the outer yard and penetrated the central structure of the facility. We were forced to retreat into the stairwell. The creatures migrated upwards for some reason.’

Bane looked back at Dugan.

‘They’re heading towards Vaughn. He has the crown of Karloth Valois.’

‘That’s insane.’

‘They are coming for it, Dugan,’ Bane urged. ‘How else do you explain this? You’ve got good instincts, always did. Tell me you don’t think there’s something unusual happening here.’

Dugan regarded his old mentor, trying to decide. There was doubt, Bane saw it in his face. ‘Behind me, down a corridor, is the command centre,’ Bane said. ‘Inside you’ll find four bodies. One of them belongs to MacDaur, my deputy. I shot him because he was under Vaughn’s control when he used the crown. As for the other three, Vaughn turned Valois’s powers on them too. I’ll let you judge for yourself on that one.’ Bane was breathing hard. He needed Dugan to believe him, it was his only chance of getting to Alicia and the others. Dugan was agitated, old feelings warring with current duty. ‘Even if what you say is true.’ he said, ‘and I’m not saying I believe you,’ he warned. ‘How could he do it? How is it even possible?’

‘I don’t know how, but he did. I saw it with my own eyes,’ Bane said. ‘Do I look jacked up on stimms to you? If you don’t believe me, go and

check. But do it quickly.'

Dugan regarded Bane a little longer and then turned to the second enforcer. 'Gant,' he said. 'Go check it out.'

'Are you crazy?' Vincent hissed, through gritted teeth.

Bane yanked his arm hard, making Vincent choke. 'Shut up,' he hissed, dragging him aside, so Gant could get through the hatch.

It took ten minutes for Gant to return. In the charged silence, broken by the steady clawing from beyond the door, it felt like ten hours.

'He's right,' said Gant breathlessly. 'I checked the ops-desk too. The gate protocols were activated from that station. I saw the command edict on the pict display.'

'What about Judge Vaughn?' Dugan asked.

'No sign of him, sergeant.'

Dugan looked into space, the revelations of the last few seconds wracking his mind. He made his decision. He turned to Bane.

'Let him go,' he said. 'I believe you.'

Bane hesitated.

'You have my word, there'll be no reprisals.'

Bane waited a moment more, searching Dugan's face. He let Vincent go. The enforcer coughed and spluttered as he hurried away.

Bane turned the pistol over and handed it out to Dugan, stock first. The sergeant holstered it. 'What now?' he asked.

'I need your help,' said Bane.

Dugan maintained his gaze and waited for more.

'The civilians I came in with,' Bane said, 'I need to reach them. They are in the lower levels of the facility. I need a way down.'

Dugan's face was a mix of annoyance and disbelief. 'And I'm to provide that help, am I? You've probably noticed Bane, we have a slight situation here ourselves. I'm trying to guarantee egress for as many of my men as possible.'

'She's a girl, Dugan, barely sixteen, just like Alcana,' Bane said, his voice betraying his emotions for a moment. It was selfish, Bane knew that, but it might be the only thing salvageable from this whole mess. 'In all the years you knew me as your captain, did I ever let you down?'

Dugan licked his lips. 'Just once,' he said.

‘Then let me make amends,’ Bane said earnestly. ‘Trust me Dugan, as you once did, as I trusted you all those years-’

‘Don’t listen to him, sergeant,’ raged Vincent. ‘He’s full of crap. No respect for the force, no respect for himself-’

‘Shut up, Vincent,’ Dugan bellowed. He searched Bane’s eyes, like his old captain had always taught him to. Then he nodded.

‘What do you need?’

‘Get me to the ground level holding room. I’ll do the rest,’ Bane said.

‘We’ve been trying to open up communications with other units,’ Dugan explained. ‘When the horde attacked we were split up. We believe that small pockets of enforcers still exist around the facility. If we can reconnoitre with enough of them, we might be able to breach a way through the horde, mount a significant assault...’ Dugan’s voice trailed off.

‘What...’ Bane began. Dugan raised his hand.

‘You hear that?’ Dugan said.

‘Hear what?’ Bane asked.

‘The scratching... It’s stopped.’

Dugan was right. There was only silence coming from beyond the sealed door. The tech-adept pressed his ear against it. A sudden high-pitched shrieking made him fall back. Sparks lit up the area around the door as a churning blade was pushed through the welded lock. Another second and the door came down, right on top of the tech-adept.

‘Shields!’ Dugan cried as he saw the zombies pouring inside.

Two enforcers raced forward, leaping over the tech-adept and smashing their suppression shields into the zombies. The vox operator followed closely behind, yanked the door off the fallen tech-adept and dragged him to safety.

Something flashed in the dark and there was the sound of churning metal and the guttural noise of a fuel-powered weapon. One of the enforcers with a suppression shield cried out. He spun ninety degrees. His arm was severed at the elbow and it flew off and down into the stairwell void below. He dropped his shield and was pitched over the side. He hit the lowest floor with a wet crunching sound.

A huge figure stepped through the doorway, dressed in brown robes, a conical mask covering his face and head. In his hands he held an eviscerator. The teeth of the deadly weapon whirred as he came forward,

spitting out chunks of chewed flesh and splattering blood. Bane recognised him. It was Deacon Raine, it seemed that Smites crusade had faired badly.

Raine was about to lay waste to the other suppression shield when the flamer came forward and ignited the entire area in front of his comrade. Raine and a dozen other zombies fighting to get through, burned. The Redemptor thrashed and turned and several zombies lost body parts as they came under his whirring chain blade. Several more were pushed over the side, burning like parchment as they fell. But Raine did not fall. He came forward, forcing the shield and flamer to back off.

Dugan and the other enforcers unhitched their weapons with unerring synchronicity and fired. Raine took six hits and went down. The flame-seared void created in his wake soon filled as the zombies continued to pour in. Vincent leapt down the first set of stairs and took up the fallen shield. Together with the other shield-bearing enforcer, and with gouts of fire from the flamer, they forced the horde back.

'Can we go up?' Dugan asked, turning to Gant.

The enforcer shook his head. 'I'm not sure. I didn't see any exits.'

'There's nothing,' said Bane. 'Apart from this hatch, the whole place is sealed, including the lifter to the lower levels.'

Dugan swore under his breath. Then here's where we make our stand.'

'Dugan,' Bane said urgently, 'I've got to get to those people.'

Dugan thought for a moment. He heard something and looked down.

'You won't make it that way,' he said. In the darkness below, in the bowels of the stairwell, empty eyes regarded them balefully. A terrible groan carried up towards them, uttered by many voices. Dugan tracked higher up, aware of the zombies pounding on the suppression shields as they tried to force their way in. His gaze rested a few levels below.

'There's a lifter in the cells,' Bane said.

Dugan looked back at him. The protocol is halcyon four four three two three six.'

Bane started off, aware that he did not have much time.

'Wait,' said Dugan. 'Zan, Renkner, go with him.'

Bane met Dugan's gaze. 'You'll never make it alone,' the massive enforcer said and handed Bane his bolt pistol. Bane nodded his thanks.

Zan and Renkner were already heading down. The shields were keeping the zombies back. The vox operator had abandoned his position and was

firing shotgun bursts past them into the throng. Gant was strapping on the heavy stubber rig.

‘Once you’re through, we’ll back up, seal the command corridor and try to wait it out,’ Dugan said.

Bane regarded his old friend one last time.

‘I won’t forget you, Dugan.’

The heavy stubber raged as Gant washed the lower floors with it. The noise was deafening.

Dugan’s face was grim. There was no way they could fight off the zombies. They did not have time to seal the hatch to the upper corridor, either. ‘Go,’ Dugan said.

Bane ran down the stairway, shotgun retorts and barking stubber fire in his ears as he went. Zan waited for him. Renkner discharged his shotgun into the gathering horde below until Bane was through. They followed quickly, sealing the door shut behind them.

On the other side. Bane breathed hard, his back to the wall as he regarded the cells and the plate door that led to the lifter. He heard the muffled fire, urgently barked orders and said a prayer for Dugan and his men.

The lifter hummed as it tracked down the facility.

‘It’s good to see you again, Zan,’ Bane said, breaking the silence.

The weapon’s specialist stood with Renkner at the front of the lifter, ready to be first out.

‘You too, captain,’ he replied.

‘I don’t know what we’ll face down there,’ Bane said.

‘Neither do I,’ Zan returned, ‘but we’ll get you to that holding area.’

The lifter slowed its ascent. A few more seconds and they touched down. The transit noise ebbed and died. Beyond the crackling azure of the force shield, it looked quiet. Renkner deactivated it. The crimson lighting in the corridor persisted.

‘Ready?’ Bane hissed, taking out the bolt pistol.

Zan and Renkner nodded. They moved out.

They were a few feet from the first corner when they heard the familiar shuffling gait of the zombies. Just one, it loped around the corner. It looked sluggish, it probably had not fed recently. Its clothes were ragged but it wore an apron and had a cleaver in one hand – a flesh vendor. The

zombie snarled when it saw them, revealing rotten, jagged teeth. Renkner went down on one knee and blasted it with his combat shotgun. The creature's head exploded.

A low groaning sound – several voices – emanated from where the creature had emerged.

'Go!' Bane ordered and the three of them raced to the corner. Eight more zombies were shambling towards them, alerted by the gunfire. Zan stepped forward and a burst from his flamer torched four of them. Renkner took another and Bane shot down two more. A final flamer burst finished them off. Long shadows stretched into the corridor. Another four zombies came around the corner.

Bane heard a noise behind him. Five more zombies were coming through from the workshop and the store room. The bolt pistol blazed in his grasp. Three went down. Renkner shot the other two. Zan doused the corridor ahead, torching the group in front.

'We've got to move,' he said urgently. They pressed forward. Already more zombies were appearing in the corridor ahead and behind in greater numbers. They reached the holding room door. Bane hammered on it as Zan lit up the corridor ahead and then turned to hose the way behind. Renkner picked off the stragglers that Zan missed.

'Mavro,' Bane cried, 'Mavro, it's Bane, open the damn door.'

Zan's flamer ran out of fuel and died. He slung it down and pulled out his bolt pistol.

There were at least twenty zombies at either end of the corridor and they were closing. Renkner was out too. He wielded the shotgun like a hammer as the first zombie reached out for him, smashing its skull. He waded in against another and battered it down. Three more came at him. He took down the first but the other two grabbed him. Then another came, and another. Renkner was dragged down, screaming.

Bane hammered at the door with renewed vigour. Zan had his back to him, picking off zombies on either side, with controlled bursts. The door opened. Zan was grabbed. As a zombie bit down into his shoulder he cried out in pain and pushed Bane inside. Then he hammered the rune that sealed the door. Bane watched as the door slid shut, desperate to try and help him, desperate to do something, but he knew that Zan was gone.

‘What... What happened?’ blathered Mavro, shotgun quaking in his hands.

Bane was already heading over to the synth-leather couch as he spoke. ‘Vaughn, the judge who is head of this Precinct House, started the zombie plague. The entire facility is overrun.’

‘What do we do?’ Mavro asked.

Bane ignored him and took one end of the couch and started dragging. There was a sudden, heavy thud against the door and then another. ‘Help me lift this,’ Bane told Mavro. He put the shotgun down and raced over to the couch. When he realised they were dragging it across the door, he said, ‘That’s our only way out. Why are we barricading it?’

‘There’s no way out that way.’

Mavro didn’t seem to register what Bane was saying. ‘But we need to keep it clear,’ he said. ‘What if you’ve been bitten?’

‘I haven’t,’ Bane snarled, then felt his face drain of colour and his legs waver. It was not MacDaur. It could not be Mavro, so that only left... His gaze wandered over to the black plexi-curtain where he’d left Alicia, Gilligan and Jarla.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LIFTER CONCEALED in the Command Centre's anteroom bore Vaughn quickly and silently to the very bowels of the complex. There was only room for one, Vaughn had it designed that way. It was his emergency exit. Once the lifter stopped. Vaughn deactivated the azure force shield and shot the controls with his sidearm. There would be no going back.

Egression from the lifter platform led Vaughn to a short tunnel. It was low and unlit. He had stashed a tube flare within it and it blazed as he stooped to make his way through. A mag-locked hatchway was at the end of the tunnel. Pneumatic pressure hissed as Vaughn punched in the runic sequence. Vaughn entered and then pushed the door closed. It was metre thick plas-steel on seldom used bolt hinges. He was sweating by the time it clanged shut.

He was in the freight tunnel. The hatchway he had exited from was concealed, impossible to see with the naked eye. Looking around in the gloomy light, he noticed that the freight loader had moved from its docking position. It blocked off the entire corridor and prevented him seeing further. It did not matter. Vaughn used the flare to locate another partially hidden panel in the tunnel wall. He struck it with his fist and the panel opened, revealing another keypad. He hammered a code and with the whirring of concealed servos a small metal bridge, just wide enough for one, extended across the freight loader's tracks. It fed into a port on the opposite side.

Vaughn walked across the bridge to the other side and was surprised to see that the exit to the vehicle yard had been forced open. He pulled out his sidearm. For a moment, he thought about using the crown. Even in the short time it had been in his possession it had granted him a certain awareness. He could sense things, usually people, and read their intentions. But he dismissed the idea. The crown was slung in a small pack

over his shoulder, strapped to a concealed harness on his suit. He would not need it. He doubted anyone would have got this far in order to escape. Even so, Vaughn walked into the tunnel cautiously.

When he reached the end, he saw the corpses of three of the plague victims. They had been shot in the head. One of them, a big one, was a real mess. A few metres further down, he saw another two bodies. One of them was dressed in what had once been fine apparel. On his finger he wore a guild ring. Vaughn's heart thumped when he realised he must be one of the prisoners. Had they escaped? Surely that was impossible. Another corpse lay next to him in a body-glove – probably a bodyguard. Vaughn's anxiety heightened when he got closer. Something had sucked the life from them.

With no time to investigate further, Vaughn hurried on, less self-assured than before. He got into the vehicle yard, glancing at every shadow and every imagined movement from the corner of his eye. Not far, not far. He saw his transport up ahead. There was no sign of anyone. It was eerily quiet. He reached the access hatch and punched in the entry codes on a rune panel. The door slid open and Vaughn stepped inside.

Dim, emerald lighting flickered on immediately as his presence was detected by the transport's onboard entry protocols. It took only a second for them to kick in, a crackling hum accompanying their activation. It took only two more seconds, as the door slid shut behind him, for Vaughn to realise he was not alone.

A silhouette at the back of the transport regarded him in the greenish light. It sat facing him on one of the metal bunks, normally occupied by Enforcer riot specialists. All the others were empty, save that one.

Vaughn was reaching for his sidearm when a voice stopped him.

'Stop,' it said. It had to be the silhouette talking, yet the voice was inside Vaughn's head. He was compelled to obey.

The figure stood up. He stepped forward and approached him. In the semidarkness, Vaughn thought he saw his eyes flash red. He was old, his skin a pale, translucent pink that looked as if it might tear apart. Purple lips held a sneer of contempt and ragged strands of grey, wasted hair dangled from his balding pate. When he spoke, his mouth was a pit of eternal black, an unending void into which Vaughn felt himself falling.

'That,' uttered Karloth Valois, pointing a bony finger at the pack on Vaughn's back, 'is mine.'

‘PICK UP THE shotgun,’ Bane ordered as he raced across the room, bolt pistol out and raised ready to fire. He reached the curtain in seconds, but it was not nearly fast enough. Wrenching the black plexi-plas aside, he saw Alicia lying on her cot. Ripping his gaze across, he saw Jarla stooped over her father. She was little more than a semi-detailed shadow. It looked like she was kissing Gilligan’s forehead. Bane exhaled his relief and lowered the gun. Maybe he had been wrong, maybe it was not any of them who had contracted the virus. It could have been Nark. He prayed it was not Archimedes or Meiser.

‘Jarla,’ he said quietly, aware of a jittery Mavro just behind him. ‘Jarla,’ he said again, when she did not respond. It sounded like she was chewing something. Bane’s heart quickened. He held out his hand. ‘Jarla,’ he said for a third time, bringing the bolt pistol back up. He touched her shoulder.

Jarla whirled around, her blood-smeared visage contorted with anger as she snarled at him. Haunting green light illuminated her face, shadows pooling like slime in the sunken recesses. Bane hesitated. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gilligan’s mined visage in the gloom. Jarla sprang at him, claws flailing. Bane fired, pulling the trigger as he backed away instinctively into the holding room. He hit the thing that used to be Jarla in the chest. The impact smashed her against the wall. It barely slowed her and she was on her feet quickly, possessed of a fevered zeal, and came at them again. This time Bane was ready. One shot bored a hole in her forehead and she fell to the ground.

Bane moved into the room. He knew Gilligan was already dead so he went over to him, put the gun to the old barman’s temple and closed his eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ he breathed. ‘Can’t risk the infection spreading.’ Bane pulled the trigger.

Bane went to Alicia, flashing a glance to see what Mavro was doing. The doc gripped the shotgun tight in both hands. His face was contorted with fear. He might snap at any moment.

‘Ease up, Mavro,’ Bane said soothingly. Jarla’s dead.’

‘What about her?’ he breathed, nodding towards Alicia.

Bane could not see any wounds. Jarla must have started with her father when she turned. Tentatively, Bane moved his hand towards Alicia, about to check for concealed injuries. His hand was shaking. He looked back

down at her and realised she was stirring. Bane sank to his knees and set down the bolt pistol.

‘Alicia,’ he said softly.

Slowly she opened her eyes.

‘Bane?’ her voice was croaky and weak and she squinted as she looked at him.

Bane felt tears welling in his eyes. She was alive and awake, at last. He had begun to doubt she ever would be. When he replied, he found he could barely Speak. ‘You’re awake,’ he said.

‘You came back for me.’

‘I told you I would,’ Bane said, caressing her forehead.

‘What’s happening? Where are we? I couldn’t find the Salvation. Some bastard jumped me.’ She sounded agitated and still very groggy.

‘Don’t worry, you’re safe,’ Bane lied. ‘I’m taking you out of here.’ He picked her up in his arms and took her out of the room. ‘Close it,’ he said quietly to Mavro.

The pounding from beyond the door had grown insistent. Bane set Alicia down in the synth-leather chair, where Nark had been sitting. He wondered briefly whether or not the gang lord had escaped. Deep down, he hoped he had made it.

Alicia had little idea of what was happening. Bane was glad of it. At the thunder that raged beyond the room – the pounding fists of the horde – Bane gritted his teeth. The hammering continued and he was out of ideas.

Bane noticed a blanket, worn with holes, slung on the chair. He draped it over Alicia. ‘Keep warm, you’re still weak from whatever those bastards drugged you with,’ he said. After making sure Alicia was comfortable, Bane rose wearily. Mavro was at the caffeine vendor, trying to rip it up off the floor.

‘Leave it,’ Bane said.

Dents were appearing in the plate metal door. Bane looked over at Alicia again and felt his despair redouble. It had all been for nothing.

‘So what now?’ asked the doctor. ‘Can we fight our way out? Do you have enough bullets for that?’

Bane discharged the clip form the bolt pistol and counted the rounds.

‘There’s just enough,’ he said, his voice low and tinged with a grim finality. He met Mavro’s gaze. ‘But not to fight our way free.’

‘How many are left?’ Mavro’s voice was choking – he knew what Bane was saying, just did not want to admit it.

‘Three.’

KARLOTH VALOIS EMERGED from the subterranean vehicle yard. All around him, the zombies stumbled in loose groups. Most of the enforcers were dead. Certainly, there were none out here in the open. Without prey and his direction, the creatures were purposeless. Some had already started wandering back into the Underhive. Of the rest, he doubted there were many left. A sea of diseased and decaying zombie corpses clogged part of the gate, festering.

Valois headed to the gate, the black crown on his forehead. He had always intended for the enforcers to find it. There in the Precinct House it was safe, it could be found. The zombie horde was nothing but a device; one he had implanted into Vaughn’s subconscious, making him believe it served his own ends. It had, up to a point. The zombie horde had concealed his advance – within their rotting ranks he was virtually invisible and they had protected him. Only the heathen wyrd, Smite, had been able to detect him. The priest’s derangement, a side-effect of his raw powers, had eliminated him as a threat.

The army of the dead was nothing more than a distraction, a way in. Retrieval of the crown was all that mattered. It had called to him on the fringes of the Abyss, where he lay broken, believed to be dead. When Vaughn’s henchmen took it and he assumed ownership, his lust for power – already a nascent contagion eating him from within – had made it easy to manipulate him. Once the wheels were set in motion, they could not be stopped.

There would be no assault on Hive City. He was still weak and had exhausted much of his power to get this far, to destroy those two in the tunnel as well as loan Vaughn some of his abilities through the crown to ensure he rendezvoused with him in the vehicle yard – albeit, without the judge’s knowledge. No, he would not press his advantage. Most of the zombies were dead. He had little energy left to control those that remained. Valois had no desire to alert the rest of Necromunda to his presence, nor the numerous bounty hunters and zealots that still bayed for

his blood. Varian Smite was a fool and a mindless fanatic, but the other servants of the Redemption and the many independent wrydhunters were not so stupid.

Valois approached the gate. Raising his hand, a group of zombies milling around in front of the gate, parted. Valois stepped through. As he did, the zombies clustered back together. The crown atop his head, Valois released them from his influence and, sinking into the scattered hordes, became lost in darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE HAMMERING ON the holding area door grew louder, more insistent. Part of it bent inwards, at last yielding to the furious attention of the zombies.

The three survivors huddled together at the back of the room. Bane held Alicia in his arms. Mavro cowered nearby, holding the shotgun like a security blanket. He rocked back and forth, eyes never leaving the door, wincing at every blow.

'That door is plasteel. How can they get in?' he whimpered.

'It's not that tough,' Bane replied, 'With enough repeated force, it'll give. Remember, there are hive gangers amongst the horde, some of whom have augmetics, others are stimmed up to hell and back. Enough fists that feel no pain hit that door and it will give.'

'I still have this,' Mavro offered, voice brightening but not enough to be convincing as he offered the shotgun.

Bane looked at the doctor. He had hated him. Bane was in no doubt, he'd fuelled his own stimm addiction but Mavro had made it so easy. He had lost count of the number of times that he had tried to kick his habit and Mavro had always been there to 'rescue' him from the even worse hell that was existence without them. Yet now Bane regarded him with pity. He was scum, but he had come through for him. Despite his cowardice and his self-serving attitude, he had come through. So what Bane said next, he said with compassion.

'I'm sorry Mavro, it's not enough. When the time comes I promise I'll make it quick.'

Mavro licked his lips and was about to say something but shrank back into himself again, instead.

Bane looked up. The hammering stopped. Silence descended. He heard something else – further away – dulled by rockcrete and metal. It could

have been gunfire. They stayed like that for another five minutes. The only sound was their desperate breathing. None of them dared to speak, unsure what was going to happen next.

Something was moving outside. The hammering started up again. Bane's heart sank, hopes crushed. The dents became larger, and a clanking noise accompanied the dull hammering sound, as if made by tools. The left corner pulled away from the door frame with the shriek of tearing metal. The door's hinges came shortly afterward. In the gloom beyond the doorway, Bane saw shadows – the zombies, it had to be.

He looked down at Alicia as the door fell onto the floor with a resonating clang. He pulled her close – out of the corner of his eye he saw Mavro had put the barrel of the shotgun into his mouth – and moved the bolt pistol so she did not see it, resting the muzzle against the side of her head, cushioned by her ragged, pink hair so she did not feel the coldness of the metal. He whispered into her ear, 'Close your eyes.'

'Thought I'd forgotten you eh, lawman?' said a familiar voice.

Bane looked up and saw Nark.

The gang lord stood before him, twin autopistols holstered at his hips. Behind him, a big ganger – even bigger than Skudd – hefted a huge pneumatic vice which he had used to rip the door open. There were others, at least four more Bane could see, all heavily armed. Some bore the tattoo of the Sabres, others a hammer, a third a chain clenched in a fist. Bane suddenly remembered what Nark had told him in the cab of the *Bull*, about some of the gangs he controlled, the Ironhammers, the Jack-ratchets and the Sabres.

'I knew you'd be pleased to see me,' Nark said, 'but I didn't expect tears.' He smiled, but it was a dark smile, one without humour.

'I thought you...' Bane began.

'I did,' Nark told him. 'Shivved those two frikkers in the cells and got the hell out through the vehicle yard. My men were waiting, just like I knew they would be. I couldn't get close, thanks to the horde, or the enforcers when we arrived here,' Nark explained. 'But once I was out and the enforcers and the horde were knocking the crap out of each other a window of opportunity presented itself.'

Bane dimly recalled the boot prints in the workshop. Nark's. He had not made the connection, until now.

‘What about the zombies?’

‘Most of ‘em are dead, but there’s still a few of the more persistent frikkers roaming around the complex,’ Nark explained. ‘And I have no desire to go toe-to-toe with what’s left. They were pretty light in the outer yard and who knows how many are infesting the entire building? So, let’s get you the hell out of here.’

Nark held out his hand. Bane took it and got up. Two other gangers came forward, helping Mavro to his feet. Another moved towards Alicia.

‘No,’ Bane said, whirling to face him. The ganger glanced at Nark. The gang lord nodded and the ganger backed off. Bane picked Alicia up, taking her in his arms as a father cradles a child. He looked back at Nark.

‘I’ve got her,’ Bane said.

‘I’ve cleared a route through to the vehicle yard,’ Nark told him as they moved out of the holding room. ‘There’s a transport. Use it. Get to Hive City and tell them what’s happened.’

They walked down the crimson-lit corridor, now the site of much carnage. A group of gangers stood ready, weapons primed at one end. Others lined the walls en route. When they reached the exit to the subterranean vehicle yard, Bane stopped and turned to Nark. He was about to speak when the gang lord stopped him.

‘You saved my life, Bane,’ he said. ‘Even stood up to those bastard enforcers to vouch for me. As far as I’m concerned, we’re even. Our paths meet again and things’ll be different,’ he warned.

Bane nodded and was about to walk through into the vehicle yard when he stopped again. ‘You’ve probably saved a lot of lives,’ he said.

Nark smiled, slipped a kalma-root between his lips and fired it up. ‘They won’t thank me.’

EPILOGUE

THE AMBER LAMPS of the docking ports flicked by, illuminating Bane's face in sporadic ephemeral flashes as he sped past in the limousine speeder. He was dressed in a crisp suit of dark azure, with a small Enforcer motif stitched at the breast. Black boots ran up to his knees and shone dully in the ambient light. He wore his service pistol, gleaming with a renewed lustre. The black transport navigated the many jutting platforms and coasted through the access tunnels.

Bane looked out of the plexi-glass window from the opulent crimson leather seats within the transport and saw the cloud of pollution that delineated Hive Primus's lower levels fade away. He even saw the giant banks of precipitators as they vented false rain onto the hundreds of levels below. He watched the moisture saturated air spill over the shiny hull of his transport, flicking across the Hive City Judge emblem emblazoned in silver on the side. His own reflection looked back at him: shaved, clean and alert.

A vox was playing inside the transport. It was a news edict, pumped into the many hive City factorums and in domiciles throughout the higher echelons of Necromundan society. 'Enforcement teams from beta and delta sectors have finally put down the zombie horde threatening the borders of Hive City. There are still no reports as to how this outbreak of zombie plague occurred in such close proximity to Hive City, but it has been confirmed that the remnants of the plague not already destroyed have been driven into the Underhive. Suspicion still remains as to the Enforcement's involvement in the outbreak though at this time there is no investigation pending.'

Bane turned off the vox. In the end, only a small section of the Underhive had been affected, some few hundred thousand. Had the affliction reached Hive City and the teeming millions living there, things

would have been very different. It was thanks to his intervention that the zombie horde had been crushed. Nark was right, there were still many remaining and they were dangerous. Bane had grieved when he had heard of the deaths of Archimedes and Meiser, but he had achieved what they could not. It had meant his re-instatement into the Enforcement albeit in a non-active capacity as Hive City Judge, where Bane knew there was an opening. He used the knowledge he had gained of Vaughn's plan and the corruption evident in the system, to act as leverage. That and his heroic actions, immortalised and embellished by the Necromundan Chronicle, had guaranteed his tenure as well as a few other concessions Bane had insisted upon.

As far as anyone else was concerned, other than those privy to secrets behind closed doors, Vaughn's body was never found, assumed lost amidst the burning pyres that littered the Precinct Houses wounds. Of course, Bane knew differently. Vaughn's desiccated remains had been found in his personal transport and burned along with everyone else. The black crown, it seemed, was missing too. Nor was there any mention of Nark's involvement. Life was different in the Underhive, but some things, the exchange of information, the adage that 'knowledge is power' and those with it wield the power, still held true.

Something had happened at the Precinct House, something other than the zombie invasion and Vaughn's corrupt undertakings, something that no one knew about or could cover up. Bane had felt a presence there, overlying everything. It was unnatural. He had even heard it, talking to Vaughn through the crown. He remembered the words of Varian Smite, that he was looking for someone, an individual he had seen in his visions. Bane had no doubt that this individual was the very person who had infiltrated the Precinct House and had killed Vaughn – Archimedes and Meiser too. The life draining effects were unmistakeable. Bane had his suspicions, but as yet no fresh evidence had come to light. In any case, he dared not voice them.

The transport slowed, arresting Bane from his reverie as it reached its destination. Levelling out, the transport moved horizontally, merging with the docking platform upon which amber warning lights flashed silently.

The vox cackled and Bane's driver said, 'We have arrived, sir.'

‘Thank you,’ Bane returned and pressed the exit rune on the cab’s interior. A hiss of pneumatic pressure and the cab door opened. As Bane got out, his driver held out a grey storm coat. Bane took it, said his thanks and walked across the platform, clutching the storm coat about him as he was buffeted by turbine winds. At the end of the platform there was an ornate doorway. Bane passed through it and found himself at the site of Alcana Ran-Lo’s memoriam. He had been granted special permission to visit it, here in the Spire. It was one of his concessions.

Bane delved inside the jacket of his suit and produced a wax candle. The memoriam was simple, considering Alcana’s heritage. A holo-pict image of her face revolved in mid-air inside the small chamber. In the recesses of the chamber there were two guards, enveloped by the shadows. Another figure was at the back of the room and would have been invisible were it not for the winking lights from a visual and cranial implant. Bane ignored the guards and the cyborg, took his candle to an igniter set into the wall and lit it.

He approached one of the platforms slowly, eyes on the image of Alcana revolving in the holo-pict. He set the candle down carefully and closed his eyes, whispering a prayer.

‘Rest in peace,’ he muttered, opening his eyes and stepping away. When he turned around, a figure was waiting for him at the doorway. Bane smiled and went over to meet her.

Outside the memoriam. Alicia hugged him long and hard.

‘Easy.’ said Bane. ‘I’m an old man remember.’

She withdrew from the embrace and smiled. She looked different. The pink hair remained, but it was straight and cut short. The gang tatts were erased and the piercings were gone. She wore a simple jade suit with a long grey storm coat, flapping in the breeze. She still bore the scars of her injuries but they would fade. She no longer ran with a gang, no longer had to survive in the Underhive. She had a job at a merchant shipping firm in the lowest part of the Spire. That was the last of Bane’s concessions. He kept an eye on her and made sure she was safe and well looked after. He had some influence and power. It went a long way.

‘I think you’ve earned some peace, at last,’ she said.

Bane smiled, ‘We’ll see.’ He produced a slim card from his pocket. ‘Here,’ he said, giving it to her. ‘You can contact me with this whenever

you need to.'

Alicia took it. Thank you,' she said. 'You saved my life.'

Bane smiled, it was tinged with regret. One out of two. Alcana Ran-Lo's death still hurt, but it hurt less. 'Come on,' he said and ushered Alicia back out to the waiting speeder.

The speeder would take her back to her domicile in the Spire. They hugged again and Alicia kissed Bane on the cheek. He watched her as she got inside; one final glance at him as the door slid shut. Bane stepped back as the docking clamps disengaged and waved Alicia off as the limousine speeder arced away.

He looked into the dark for several minutes. It was cold out in the open but Bane did not feel it. He felt alive, for the first time in a long time. The nightmares had stopped, and he resolved this would be the last time he would visit this tomb. He had been given a second chance and he intended not to waste it. He had come back, against all the odds, back from the dead.

A NECROMUNDA NOVEL

OUTLANDER

MATT KEEFE

PROLOGUE

NOT ALL UNDERHIVERS are native-born children of the warm dark domain beneath Hive City. The teeming Underhive takes all to its bosom: the dispossessed, the hopeful and the desperate, all are equally welcome in the great dark depths.

Nor are all these souls simply condemned to it - there are those who choose the life of the Underhiver. It seems unimaginable that those who are rich and powerful might want to share the miserable equality of the downtrodden, yet there are such people: men with strange accents and unfamiliar names, or no names at all, men without a past, with an agenda of their own: hiding, searching, questioning, tasting the sweet fruits of danger denied to those who live in quiet splendour above the Wall.

Who can really say what drives the outlander who quietly sips his Wildsnake in a dark corner, away from the traffic and the cares of the world? None could say, because none would ask, or at least that's how it should be.

But this was Ash Season, when the raging storms out in the wastes beyond the hive build to such intensity that they sweep through the hive's lower reaches, turning the already filthy air into nothing more than an impenetrable grey haze in which no man should be 'abroad. Yet this stranger was, oblivious to it all, and that alone was reason enough to ask.

CHAPTER ONE

‘WHAT BUSINESS?’ SAID Erket, slamming his tankard on to the bar as a sign of his growing impatience Secretly, Erket had little stomach for the filthy slop it contained, least of all at the height of Ash Season, and hoped that a little might spill out over the sides and spare him the hurt of drinking it, or the indignity of leaving it unfinished. And slop out it did, though no one would have noticed amongst the puddles of filth that already covn-ed the slime-encrusted, budded old stanchion that served as a bar.

The stranger showed no such impatience or lack of stomach, calmly knocking back his Wildsnake, taking one last puff on his toxstick and raising his hat just emough to scratch the scalp beneath before turning to the impertinent juve.

‘*My* business,’ the stranger answered at last. He was as calm as Erket was impetuous.

Erket’s rage flared instantly. His blood boiled and his face turned a furious red. If Erket had yet proven himself worthy to wear the full mask of a Cawdor, he might have hidden his face, and with it his growing rage. As it was, his skin painted an angry red halo around the black leather mask that covered his face around the eyes, and it was clear to all, not least this implacable stranger, that Erket was losing his temper.

It had been barely an hour since the stranger had arrived in Fall Sands, strolling out of the ash storms as though it was a clear day in the Spire. Already the entire town was abuzz with talk of the stranger, as mad or as brave as he must have been to risk the storms, alone and unaided.

Whilst others gossiped in doorways, Erket resolved to take a rather more direct route. So it was that he had found the stranger holed up in the Pipe Under Mile, Fall Sand’s only watering hole and, as Erket saw it, a place this stranger had no right to be.

‘And what business is that, outlander?’ said Erket, calmer than before. It cut at his pride to stay cool in the face of this arrogant outlander but he was slowly beginning to realise that his failing temper just might be exactly what the stranger wanted. Still, he was livid inside. Here was Erket, and here was this nameless nobody who thought he could defy him. *Him*. Erket. Erket of the Union. The Union ruled this town, and in Erket’s mind, that meant *he* ruled the town, and he wasn’t about to let some wandering fool challenge that.

The stranger said nothing. His toxstick had gone out since he last drew on it, and he concentrated on relighting it. As he raised the small, sparking slate towards its tip, Erket snapped and smacked the stranger’s hand down, knocking the thumb-sized slate to the floor where it burned up in a phosphor green flash.

That was enough. The stranger was on his feet and in Erket’s face in the blink of an eye. His right hand clutched the collar of Erket’s robe, pulling it so tight around his throat that Erket could utter only an undignified gag where he had aimed for a furious curse. The stranger’s left hand flashed up to Erket’s face and wrenched the little mask off in an instant, meeting the frightened juve’s gaze with his own.

‘Now see here, little man,’ said the stranger. ‘My business is my business, and till I go asking you about yours, I reckon things are gonna stay that way. You got me?’ Everything the stranger said was measured, calm, and impossibly menacing. Erket writhed, but the stranger’s gnarled hand just tightened its grip, choking Erket and leaving him with no choice but to nod weakly and raise his hands in submission.

The stranger released him at once, sending the cowardly Erket plunging down on to one knee before he regained his balance, narrowly avoiding an embarrassing fall onto his backside. The leather mask fell from the stranger’s hand and landed at Erket’s feet, forcing yet another undignified stoop, then another as the nervous little juve first fumbled his mask before finally snatching it up in his terrified white fingertips.

The stranger just settled back down onto his stool, drawing deeply on the toxstick pressed between his lips. It was lit again somehow, though Erket could swear the slate had never touched it.

Erket staggered backwards, pulling the mask back on to restore his anonymity if not his dignity. Behind him, the others were already on their

feet, closing in on the scuffle, and Erket stopped with a jolt as he backed into the tall, muscular Lakatos.

‘What’s going on?’ said Lakatos.

Erket cowered and wriggled out of the way, perching himself behind Lakatos’s shoulder, without the nerve to answer the question. His leader could deal with the stranger.

The crowd that gathered around the outlander was vast. The watering hole was full, and it seemed almost everyone knew Erket while no one knew the stranger. The Pipe Under Mile was quite literally that, a section of collapsed pipe with a raft of fallen debris as a roof, so that it had no walls but rather a single circular exterior formed by the pipe itself. With the huge crowd surrounding the stranger, the little circular building took on the appearance of an arena more than a simple watering hole.

The Union was here to a man – a dozen of Erket’s Cawdor brothers and all the pistols, shivs and garrottes they could hide about their persons. Erket sneered viciously from his hiding place behind Lakatos. Now that damned outlander was going to get it.

‘What’s going on?’ Lakatos said again as he cast his glance directly at Erket. Erket had yet to master his cowardice and eventually it was the stranger who answered.

‘Seems your friend has a problem with a man enjoying a little Wildsnake in a storm,’ said the stranger, not even bothering to rise from his stool or turn and face Lakatos.

Silence reigned for a few moments before Lakatos sat himself down on the stool recently vacated by Erket and gestured for two more Wildsnakes. By rights, even for the Cawdor to be there was a sin, but with the claustrophobic terror of the ash storms playing on their minds, well, sin was virtually medicinal. The bartender clutched both bottles in one hand as he skimmed the lids from them with the edge of his knife before planting them down firmly in front of the burly Cawdor leader. Lakatos passed one of the Wildsnakes to the stranger and Erket’s heart sank, torn by a mixture of disappointment and anger while his face betrayed his utter bemusement. Why wasn’t the stranger getting what he deserved?

‘I just asked him his business,’ protested the confused Erket. Lakatos ignored him entirely.

‘Well, never mind my friend,’ said Lakatos, keeping his gaze fixed on the stranger. ‘We don’t have a problem with you getting your Wildsnake, Emperor judge us all,’ he said, covering his own sins with the hasty admonition.

‘What we got a problem with, is your face. We ain’t seen it round here before,’ he continued, raising the glass bottle to his lips while awaiting a reply.

There was still no sign of emotion on the outlander’s face as he turned to face Lakatos.

‘Well there’s a thing, ‘cos I ain’t seen your face at all,’ he said, drawing attention to the black leather mask that covered every inch of Lakatos’s face. Combined with his dark robes, heavy breeches and worn leather gloves, Lakatos was a creature upon whom not an inch of flesh was visible. He was perfect, thought Erket.

In another bar, such quick wit would have brought raucous applause, but here it brought the most expectant of silences. The Union’s gangers pressed nearer while the bar’s other patrons flitted nervous glances towards the stranger and then towards the door, hurriedly averting their gaze if they caught his eye, or those of the assembled Cawdor.

The silence prevailed just long enough for Lakatos to finish his Wildsnake and return the bottle to the bar with a delicate clinking noise that ushered in the briefest of commotions.

The circular crowd broke into chaos as two of the Cawdor gangers, Durn and Rubik, dashed forwards and grabbed the stranger by the shoulders. He rose instantly from his stool to meet them, his fists in their stomachs as if about to fling off their grasps. Before he could do any such thing, a dagger was pressed to his throat brandished by a third onrushing ganger, Antal, while two more pointed their rather decrepit looking autopistols at his head from where they stood at the edge of the crowd.

Erket grinned. Now this was what he wanted to see.

But this outlander was no fool. Against such overwhelming odds he simply slumped back down onto his stool, his shoulders still in the vicelike grip of the two Cawdor heavies, the dagger still held firmly against his throat and the pistols still trained right on him. He put up no fight as the two gangers wrenched the long, tattered coat from his shoulders and clamped his arms behind his back.

Erket was delirious with glee. That stranger had cost him in front of his betters in the Union, and now he was going to get payback. Cocky as only a juve could be, Erket stepped out from behind Lakatos and strolled right up to the stranger, knocking his hat from his head with a single swipe of his hand. Erket laughed and pressed his face close to the stranger's, sneering viciously.

It was only now that he got a good look at him. With his broad-brimmed hat and long, dark coat, the stranger was almost as well covered as a Cawdor. Erket had mistaken him for thin, lanky. He was indeed tall, but the long sweep of his coat had hidden broad shoulders and a powerful frame. Three identical tubes emerged from his flesh just below the jawbone before disappearing into ugly, scabrous bionic ports in his chest, and his left eye was bionic too. The enhancements were certainly the worse for wear, but they were clearly well made, not some makeshift, Underhive bodge jobs.

The dark ochre of the stranger's skin coupled with his gnarled, stubbly features did much to hide the grime that covered his flesh, giving him a ruddy rather than dirty appearance, something with which all these mysterious outlanders seemed blessed – the ability to wear the inescapable dirt and grime of the Underhive like a carefully crafted badge of office. His lips and nostrils were covered in a fine layer of the toxic grey ash from the storms raging outside, though Erket presumed from the tubes emanating from the stranger's throat that a mouthful of the stuff would do him little harm.

Most obvious of all was the stranger's lack of any visible weapon, a sure sign of a hidden device on him somewhere. Erket stepped forwards and, while Durn and Rubik held him firmly, began to search the stranger. Sure enough, the small of his back hid a pistol, held in place by one of the half dozen fibrous chords that bound what appeared to be a once-resplendent breastplate on to his torso.

The armour was badly worn, and the right side was missing entirely while in many other places individual patches hung at odd angles, evidence of hasty, makeshift repairs. Nonetheless, the armour was clearly of a calibre higher than Erket had ever seen before. Behind him Lakatos squinted, viewing the stranger with the same curiosity as Erket.

Erket pulled the pistol from its hiding place. A bolt pistol: a heavy shell-firing device, again a rarity though nothing Erket hadn't seen before. He glanced back at his leader to see Lakatos's own bolt pistols displayed proudly in the holsters at his hips.

Erket dropped the dip and inspected the weapon. It seemed in perfect condition. It took much of the Union's wealth and resources for Lakatos to maintain his brace of pistols, so for the outlander to keep just a single bolt pistol in working order was no mean feat. Erket thought for a second about taking this example for himself, though Lakatos's stern glare made him think better of it. He passed the bolt pistol to Lakatos before rifling through the assortment of pockets that covered the stranger's trousers.

Erket could find little of interest in the pockets (not even the spare sparkslate he was sure would explain that damned burning toxstick) but as he patted his hands against the stranger's boot, he narrowly avoided a concealed dagger sheathed in the leather. Erket pulled his hand away on instinct, just as the handle and three inches of exposed blade popped from their sheath with a telltale *hiss*. Pleased with himself and his find, Erket took the blade by the handle and whipped it out of its hiding place, waving it menacingly in the stranger's face before breaking into a deep belly laugh. Lakatos could keep the fancy pistol, thought Erket. This dagger would do just fine as a memento of the soon to be dead outlander who had dared cross him. Erket pushed the knife down inside the top of his own boot, stood, and returned to his vantage point behind Lakatos.

'This isn't all he's carrying,' said Lakatos. 'A bionic eye like that is trained to a sight, and this pistol doesn't have one. He's hiding something.' Lakatos gestured at the stranger's bionic eye with the butt of the gun Erket had earlier taken from the outlander. Lakatos weighed the pistol in his hand for a moment longer before stuffing it under his own belt and stepping forward to where the stranger sat. Reaching him, Lakatos ripped the stranger's coat sleeves clean off his arms with a single mighty yank.

Sure enough, an elaborate harness on the inside of the man's forearm housed a second pistol, a mere stub gun, yet this one did indeed sport a laser sight, no doubt the one Lakatos was sure must be relayed directly to the bionic eye. Erket could feel the triumph of his find slipping away from him, and cursed himself for not searching the stranger more thoroughly,

though he was too much of a fool to be angry at his own negligence and cursed the stranger instead.

Another ganger, Berzel, stepped forward from the crowd and plucked the pistol from its harness before inexpertly attempting to remove the harness from the stranger's arm, a task he quickly abandoned, leaving the harness hanging by a tangled mess of cord, half-disassembled with latches, bolts and springs falling from it as evidence of Berzel's ineptitude. The patter of their fall was the only noise in the otherwise deathly silent Pipe.

Lakatos, meanwhile, was meticulous. He had the stranger's coat spread out on the bar and searched it with a thoroughness that only made Erket even angrier with the damned outlander who had made such a spectacle of him, and in front of his gang no less.

Lakatos's search yielded a handful of parchments, though none of them seemed to grab his attention and he tossed them casually into a pile beside him on the bar.

'Just kill him,' yelled Erket. He was the only one stupid enough to shout such a thing but it was clear that most of the assembled Cawdor were thinking pretty much the same thing.

'No,' said Lakatos, coolly stopping and turning to face Erket 'A man needs a pretty good reason, or a real big problem, to venture out in Ash Season, and I want to know what it is.' Lakatos glared at the stranger who dipped his head and aimed his gaze at the floor, remaining staunchly silent.

That much was true, thought Erket. It was a good three days walk through the storms from the nearest settlement a week's walk from the nearest settlement that wasn't under Cawdor control. How the outlander had survived so long out there alone was something Erket couldn't fathom, though in truth he didn't much care.

Lakatos carried on searching the coat drawing a dagger and ripping the garment's seams open just in case its lining hid anything of interest.

Then he stopped.

Lakatos stared at the pile of discarded parchments for a moment chopped the jacket and reached over and brushed the top three or four parchments out of the way. He snatched up the particular sheet that had caught his eye. In flinging it to the bar, Lakatos had accidentally dropped the parchment into a foul smelling puddle of liquid, probably the same

filth Erket had cunningly spilled from his tankard earlier The right-hand side of the parchment was soaking, and where the liquid ran it revealed something most surprising.

The surface of the parchment looked like nothing more than a plain old grant of passage, a simple docket the stranger had used some time in the past to cross, in this case, Orlock territory without difficulty. But the slop revealed another layer, hidden beneath the writing on the surface, and this was what caught Lakatos's eye. He dragged the parchment through the puddle of spilled liquor, dousing the rest of the parchment to reveal the entire inscription.

It was a chart of some sort, a ledger with what appeared to be designation codes scribbled in the left-hand column, with a series of ticks, crosses and numerals filling the columns that ran out across the rest of the page.

Lakatos snatched up Erket's half-full tankard from where it stood on the bar, and the juve breathed a sigh of relief as Lakatos poured its contents unceremoniously over the entire pile of parchment. His leader had disposed of the filthy stuff and spared Erket from drinking it without him having to suffer the indignity of refusing it.

Lakatos flicked through the pile, tearing many of the sodden parchments in his imprecise, leathery grip. He tossed many of them aside, but two more parchments revealed the same hidden layer as the first. One of these was another ledger while the second took the form of an intricate diagram Erket couldn't make out from his poor vantage point. Lakatos snatched up the magic parchments in his fist and turned to face the stranger.

The stranger looked up, his good eye blinking a little faster than normal, but his bionic eye remained still and he showed no other signs of nervousness, even now that Lakatos had apparently chanced upon his hidden cargo.

'What are these?' asked Lakatos, striding up close to the stranger.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I'm just the courier'.

Lakatos allowed himself a faint chudde. Erket marched forward and parked himself right behind his leader, peering over his shoulder. This time, his voice was just a whisper.

'Let's kill him. We don't need him. I bet we can sell these things for a fortune. Come on, let me finish him, boss.'

‘I don’t think so,’ said Lakatos. ‘He’s got a fancy bolt pistol, but a busted up little stubber with a laser sight on it. That’s quite a thing to do, to put a sight on a battered weapon’ said Lakatos, beginning to pace in circles round and round the still restrained stranger.

‘Even if you were just the courier, someone like you doesn’t come cheap. These must be real important don’t you think?’ Lakatos waved the parchments beside the stranger’s face, trying to frighten him with the sudden noise from behind.

‘Maybe they are.’ The stranger still held his nerve. He didn’t let his eyes wander, and even as Lakatos paced behind him, he kept his gaze fixed dead ahead. ‘I wouldn’t know. I just carry ‘em.’

‘But real important to who? Where were you going?’ asked Lakatos. That’s what bothers me. This place isn’t on the way to anywhere, and you don’t seem like somebody who got lost in the storm. There’s more to you, outlander, isn’t there?’ Lakatos’s intimidating black mask came within an inch of the stranger’s cold, hard stare. ‘Much more, I think.’

Lakatos raised himself to his full height and with a casual flick of his gloved fingers he gestured to Durn and Rubik, their hands still clamped down on the stranger’s shoulders like ripper jacks to a kill. For a second, Erket was sure his leader had just given the signal to kill the stranger, and he snarled in delight, though he was disappointed that he couldn’t do it himself. Then, once more, the juve’s tumultuous temper raced skyward as he realised Lakatos’s real intention.

Durn and Rubik released their grip on the stranger and stepped back. The stranger took a moment to roll his shoulders in their sockets, working off the stiffness of the past few minutes’ detention. Then he rose from his stool and stood to face Lakatos.

‘You know what amazes me the most?’ said Lakatos rhetorically. ‘Just because a man has reason enough, is desperate enough, to try his luck out in the ash storms, doesn’t mean he’s going to make it.’ The stranger seemed to be paying little attention to Lakatos. Instead his foot slid across to where his hat lay on the floor. He slid his toe under the rim and kicked it hard upwards. Several of the Cawdor gave a start. Pistols were raised back to aim on the stranger’s head and daggers came forth from their sheaths while many of the bar’s other patrons dived for cover.

Not so Lakatos and the stranger. Both remained implacable. The stranger's hand flashed out to his side, catching his hat by the brim and flicking it back onto his head with a single motion. Lakatos raised his hand and signalled to his gangers to lower their weapons. The stranger's gamble had done little to shake Lakatos but as Erket gazed around the room, it was clear that fear was the only thing holding back many of the other gangers' trigger fingers.

'What amazes me,' said Lakatos confidently, 'is that you came here at all, that you made it here, especially when, well... when...' Lakatos's voice trailed off. He was playing with his audience, confident he had solved this stranger's riddle. At last he continued.

'These stormy days are unpleasant,' said Lakatos, a wry smile forming on his face The other members of the Union gazed at each other half in shock half in fear.

'Yes,' said the stranger, emotionless, but with a hint of a question in his voice 'For strangers to travel...'

Erket cursed and without realising it stamped his foot to the ground in rage He could hardly remember the password at the best of times – something Lakatos reminded him of frequently – and here was this damned outlander. How could he know the password? He wasn't one of them, he couldn't be Erket was sure he couldn't be.

Lakatos obviously thought otherwise. Erket grimaced as Lakatos broke into a broad grin and slapped the stranger firmly on the back clutching his arm warmly with his other hand and leading him out of the watering hole like a friend who had not passed this way in years. Berzel, Morden and the others rushed up to the stranger, thrusting his pistol and the tattered pile of parchments back into his hands, eager to appease him. Many patted him on the back just like Lakatos had done, welcoming him warmly where minutes ago they would have thought nothing of slitting his throat.

Erket turned and spat on the floor as he watched the boisterous crowd leave the watering hole, the stranger in their midst. Damn that stranger, he thought Damn that outlander.

CHAPTER TWO

‘YES, FOR STRANGERS to travel,’ said the stranger, repeating the same ancient code that had just hours ago proved his allegiance and earned him entry to this hallowed place.

The other members of the Union clapped and hollered at the sound of this confirmation, delighted that a brother had arrived in their midst. Except, that is, for Erket, who just scowled in the corner. Lakatos caught sight of him and made a mental note to give the thankless urchin something truly unpleasant to do later.

‘Brothers,’ said Lakatos, rising from his seat at the end of the long plascrete slab that served as a meeting table in the poorly lit, poorly ventilated, claustrophobic little room that the Union called home.

‘Brothers, I give you Brother Jurgen,’ he said, reaching his hand out to the man to his left who had already risen from his seat.

Every one of the Cawdor gangers from the Pipe Under Mile was there, each seated around the table, barring Erket and the two other juves who were forced to lurk in the hall’s dimly lit alcoves. Besides these men there were half a dozen others; long-standing members of the Union whose age and physical condition excluded them from the life of a ganger, though their place in the Union remained as assured as ever.

For all the relief he must have felt at finding a place amongst friends, Jurgen allowed none of his mystery to slip. He was not Cawdor – Lakatos knew that for certain, having questioned the stranger at length before bringing him to the Union’s hideout-cum-shrine. No, this Jurgen was what one might call a convert to the cause. Lakatos could decipher little more of his past than that. He was determined to find out what he could, in time, though for the time being he had little wish to push the subject so far as to alienate the newcomer. That could wait, thought Lakatos. This Jurgen was clearly a very useful man, and Lakatos had no wish to waste any time in

bringing him before the Union and putting his considerable talents to work.

‘Brothers,’ said Lakatos, returning to his seat, ‘I give you a marvel of Jurgen’s making.’ He flung the parchments down the long table, their hidden ledgers and diagrams still visible on the damp paper. The other members of the Union leant forwards across the table, clustering round the parchments in small groups and scrutinising them zealously.

‘Go on, Jurgen,’ said Lakatos. ‘We are all of one mind here. Tell our brothers exactly what you told me.’

Jurgen leaned forwards over the table, his hands held wide as he began his explanation in his customary cool manner.

‘The charts, they’re dockets... invoices. The guilders use them to make sure their employees aren’t stealing anything. You can send out a caravan and an invoice with it, but whoever you send with it might just steal some of the merchandise and then alter the invoice to make it look like the stuff was never there. The guilders give these to their employees instead,’ said Jurgen, pointing at the ledgers Lakatos had found hidden in the parchment. ‘The employees think they’re just plain grants of passage, so they hand them over, no question, when they get to their destination. The buyer at the other end, see, he knows about the hidden invoice. He checks it against the invoice in the shipment, and if they don’t match, well, then they know someone’s trying to rip the guilders off. Those invoices mean you can’t cover your tracks.’

‘And this?’ asked one of the older Cawdor, Hengar, waving the third parchment imbued with an indecipherable diagram, quite unlike the ledgers Jurgen had just described. ‘What is this?’

‘That’s for the real valuable stuff,’ replied Jurgen, ‘goods so precious that the guilders send them in locked boxes. You need a code to open the lock, so they send it hidden like that,’ said Jurgen. ‘That way, even if someone steals the shipment, they can’t get into the boxes. I mean you can’t even krak these things open. They need the code and they wouldn’t know where to look for it. The diagram is a picture of the lock and the ciphers show you how to set the dial so it opens.’

Hengar leaned back in his chair and nodded, clearly impressed. Many of the other Cawdor continued to study the parchments, but it was clear all were similarly taken with the newcomer’s peculiar knowhow.

Jurgen turned to Lakatos and nodded, a gesture that he was finished. Lakatos stared at him for a moment and then erupted into laughter.

‘Oh, that is not quite all, is it, friend Jurgen?’ said Lakatos. ‘I think you missed out the most exciting part of the tale.’

Jurgen gave an uneasy sigh. He was clamming up again. They’d left him no choice but to explain the parchments, but he still didn’t seem any more willing to explain himself.

‘Come on,’ said Lakatos, ‘tell us all how you came to be throwing yourself upon our mercy.’

Jurgen wriggled uneasily in his seat. He hunched his shoulders and leaned forwards, his voice dropping to little more than a whisper as he continued reluctantly.

‘Every man has a past,’ he said. ‘It’s the Emperor’s mercy that he can leave it behind when he... finds a cause, you could say, so I don’t see as it helps any of you to know my past, just my situation. Fair?’ Jurgen looked up, casting his gaze around the table, looking in turn for each man’s response.

Most nodded, others shrugged, though none argued with his request. Whatever the stranger wanted to tell them would suffice for now.

‘Have you ever heard the tale of Alderman Greim?’ asked Jurgen, not waiting for an answer. ‘Greim worked metal and stone like a courtesan works the flesh. He was a genius, he could fashion anything. He fashioned this entire place.’

Several of the Cawdor gazed around the room, confused by the reference.

‘The hive, I mean. Alderman Greim built Hive Primus, or at least a hundred thousand proles built it just like he told them to. A lot of the hive was here before Alderman, of course, but in his life he rebuilt so much that what we have now is his work and no one else’s. Greim left his mark. He built the Spire, just as it is now, higher and more slender than they said was possible. No man has ever built anything more astonishing,’ concluded Jurgen. Several gasps of genuine astonishment rang out from around the room. Beneath his mask, Lakatos smiled, delighted that his new charge’s story so gripped the others.

‘And when it was finished,’ continued Jurgen, ‘Helmawr – Sadacah Helmawr as it was then – agreed that this was indeed the most astonishing

work of man and that nothing would ever surpass it. Or, at least, Helmawr decided that nothing ever should surpass it,' said Jurgen.

'Nothing ever would, surely?' came the baffled interjection from another of the gangers, Lirbus.

'No, it's not likely that it could,' said Jurgen. 'Unless, of course, Alderman Greim was somehow to surpass it himself. Suppose Greim had in mind to build something even finer, not for Helmawr, but for his own noble family. Suppose the House of Greim should surpass that of Helmawr in its splendour. Suppose there should be a second spire, even taller and more magnificent than the first. And suppose, Alderman Greim should be the one to sit atop it.'

Another astonished gasp followed. Jurgen continued, as relaxed in his delivery as Lakatos was smug in his discovery.

'This was what Helmawr feared more than anything and so, with Alderman Greim's greatest work finished, Sadacah imprisoned him within it; within the Spire he himself had built,' said Jurgen. 'Within its very walls. Not so much imprisoned, as *entombed*.'

'You see, Alderman Greim had fashioned something that Helmawr could never allow to be surpassed, or even repeated, and so Alderman Greim had to be disposed of.'

'So you see, in these cunning devices,' said Jurgen, pointing at the parchments on the table, 'I have achieved much the same: fashioned something that the guilders never wish to see understood by any but themselves, and so, they have decided that I must be disposed of.'

Lakatos leaned back in his seat, beaming with pride. The astonishment amongst the other members of the Union was palpable. They had accepted Jurgen as a brother, a fellow in the cause, and they had taken him for a man with knowledge or one who trafficked in such things. They had taken him for a very cunning thief, perhaps, but not for a moment had they thought he might be the architect of such astonishing things as the guild ledgers he brought with him.

'*You* made these?' asked Hengar, not quite believing it.

'Yes,' said Jurgen confidently, 'and I can again.'

Lakatos erupted into laughter from beneath his mask. A few moments later, the room was a riotous cacophony of laughter and applause. Cawdor men hammered their palms against the table and those that had them in

reach snatched up the ledgers and waved them triumphantly in the air. All assembled realised the worth of this stranger – this Jurgen – and the secrets he brought with him, and all assembled well understood the power that his arrival promised them.

The din died down at last as Lakatos once more took to his feet. Two solid claps of his gloved hands silenced the crowd and Lakatos turned once more to Jurgen.

'So then, Brother Jurgen, you say you *can* produce such marvels again. Will you?' he asked. The room stood still for an agonising pause, smothered in silent expectation. After what seemed an eternity Jurgen spoke.

'Yes, of course,' he said. 'On one condition.'

'Anything,' said Lakatos.

LAKATOS'S MEASURED STRIDE raised a terrible noise on the rusted metal beam beneath him, the haphazard collection of metal studs and shards of glass, which Lakatos customarily hammered into the soles of his boots, grating against the surface as he went. Lakatos thought it fitting a chorus to announce his arrival, and sure enough two cloaked figures emerged from the shadows up ahead. Each brandished a torch in one hand and was bedecked alike in flowing, blood-red robes. Their faces were covered, hidden beneath tall conical hoods, which added much to their apparent height, and their menace. They were deacons, Redemptionists.

One clutched a chainsword in his free hand, its teeth grumbling and jolting a little as the weapon came to life, quickly forming a terrible, snarling blur as its bladed links raced away clockwise down the handle. The other clutched a pistol in his hand, its shape mostly obscured by the long folds of sleeve that hung down from his outstretched arm. Only the flickering blue pilot light at its tip gave the weapon away as a flamer. Even as he halted midway across the beam, Lakatos knew he was well within the flamer's reach.

'These stormy days are unpleasant,' he called out, nonchalantly pulling the glove from his left hand as he did so. No reply came.

Lakatos hurled his glove down onto the beam, the heavy leather gauntlet kicking up a puff of ash and grime as it landed at his feet. Lakatos held out

his bare hand, palm up, and gazed expectantly at the two cloaked figures ahead of him. Still no reply came.

When at last it did, it came first with a low grumble as the chainsword's whirring teeth drew to a halt. Much flapping of blood-red robes followed, kicking up yet more of the fine ash that covered everything at this time of year, as the deacon on the right returned the weapon to a hanging clip on his belt. With his chainsword holstered, his hand plunged once more into the ungainly robes. A few more seconds' fumbling and the hand emerged clutching a long, blackened iron rod, the outline of a three-pointed crown forming a brand at its tip.

The deacon reached out, holding the brand across the beam where his brethren bathed it in flame with the most delicate of touches on his flamer's trigger. Even so, the burst raced towards Lakatos's face and he felt his eyes become painfully dry in the searing air. Just when Lakatos feared he might have to blink, the flame died away. The deacon reached forward, holding out the brand, and Lakatos duly took it by its handle. Upending the thing, he plunged it straight into the palm of his bare left hand.

Once he might have winced, but now Lakatos just repeated the words as the brand seared the same old pattern into his already scorched flesh.

'These stormy days are unpleasant...' he said. Handing the rapidly cooling brand back to one of the hooded figures, Lakatos at last got the reply he had been waiting for.

'Yes, for strangers to travel,' said the deacon on the left, at the same time stepping aside and beckoning Lakatos to advance. The other deacon stooped quickly, half-bowing as he scooped up Lakatos's glove from where it lay on the floor, handing it back to him in a gesture of deference before he, too, stepped aside and allowed Lakatos to pass.

Lakatos strode forwards confidently. His flesh was still searing hot, and he felt a little of the glove's lining melt to his skin as he pulled it back on, though he showed no pain. He stepped from the end of the beam onto the narrow 'crete platform on which the robed figures stood.

Lakatos brushed past them, marching along the platform. The walls quickly closed in around him, so that after half a dozen steps it was more like walking through a tunnel than across the high platform he had reached by such a precarious route. Another few feet and the platform broadened,

the ceiling above him shooting rapidly upwards to form the vertical wall of the next, higher dome into which Lakatos emerged.

Perhaps a dozen or so figures, robed like those at the entrance, crossed the steps at the centre of the dome, performing various rites and duties Lakatos had seen a hundred times. All were male. Nothing so unclean as a woman would be allowed within this hallowed place, for this shadowy arena was the latest territory taken by the Helm of the Emperor; a Redemptionist cult, and masters of Lakatos's every deed.

None of them questioned him – the deacons at the entrance were more than trusted to allow none to pass that shouldn't – and so Lakatos was unhindered as he ascended the steps. At the top, a row of torches ringed the steps, each mounted on a stake stabbed into the floor, forming skewers through piles of the malformed skulls of mutants, heretics and deviants.

Lakatos had never visited this place before. The cult's constant proselytising invariably drew the attention of what little authority existed this deep in the Underhive, and so the poor, honest men of the Helm of the Emperor were forced to continually move from territory to territory, taking each as a temporary hideout before scrutiny of their activities once again forced them to move on. Still, this unending exodus did nothing to shake the faith of the cult's members. It was just another hardship they must endure to prove their loyalty to the Emperor, while their constant persecution was another mortal sin for which the unbelievers would have to be punished.

Everywhere the cult went it formed this makeshift temple in precisely the same manner. Lakatos, like many of the cult's associates throughout the hive, recognised its layout immediately, even though he had last seen it a great distance from here, in a different dome entirely. He followed the outermost ring of torches and soon reached the top of the dome where a dozen or more slabs of rubble, sheets of scrap and collapsed sections of walkway had been dragged against the wall, piled together to form an unstable-looking shack.

Lakatos stooped as he stepped through the shack's low doorway. He felt the whole thing wobble as his broad shoulders brushed against the two plasteel sheets that acted as jambs, and reached out a gloved hand to steady them lest the whole thing come tumbling down. He took two more steps – never looking up, never looking ahead - carefully measuring his

advance by a series of marks scrawled on the floor before falling to the ground in genuflection.

‘Rise, Lakatos. You are welcome here.’ The words came the second Lakatos’s knee struck the cold stone floor; dearly his master had no desire to make Lakatos stand on ceremony. This was a good sign.

As he rose, Lakatos cast his gaze across the marks on the floor: a single line scratched in the ground directly in front of him, and at either end a scrawl of arcane symbols. ‘Leader, Leader of the Cawdor’, they read. Beyond him three more sets of arcane symbols, each representing the spot where men more worthy than he might approach and kneel before their master. Master, bodymaster, grand master; ranks to which, Lakatos told himself, he would one day surely rise.

Lakatos stood to his full height and, with his master’s welcome, stepped beyond these ritual stations.

‘Grand Master Catafengi,’ he said. ‘Praise the Emperor that I go on in his service. Praise the Emperor that I go on in *your* service.’ Lakatos bowed his head a little as he concluded his well-practiced greeting.

The old man sat atop a throne that rose a little off the ground. Lakatos stopped himself. He had always taken Catafengi for old, though in truth he had no way of knowing whether or not he was indeed an old man. It was a question that troubled Lakatos greatly. How old did one have to be to attain grand mastery? Lakatos himself was no longer a young man, certainly not by Underhive standards, and had long thought his time must have come. Perhaps Catafengi’s arrival hailed just such an event.

‘You serve him well,’ said Catafengi in equally ritualised reply. ‘Tell me, loyal Lakatos, how is our latest acquisition?’

‘Well. Very well,’ said Lakatos. ‘Fall Sands is ours entirely, grand master. They pay what we demand and they keep their silence. It has been a most profitable acquisition.’

‘Very good, Lakatos, very good indeed,’ said Catafengi. ‘Would that all our brothers were as accomplished as you in their endeavours.’

‘Then all is not well elsewhere, grand master?’ asked Lakatos, hesitantly.

‘No,’ said Catafengi, ‘all is not well.’

Lakatos offered a quizzical sigh in response.

‘Handomel is dead.’

Lakatos was momentarily stunned into silence. ‘Handomel?’ Lakatos finally asked, more words rushing from his lips quicker than he intended, such was his surprise. ‘Dead? Who?’ Catafengi sighed and sank in his seat a little as if defeated by the question.

‘An enemy with whom I had not reckoned,’ said Catafengi in reply, long though it was in coming. ‘A man I do not know. A man named Lago.’

‘Why has he killed Handomel?’ asked Lakatos. ‘What does he want with us?’

‘This,’ said Catafengi, ‘I wish I knew. Handomel was never less than discreet. I cannot imagine he would have been careless enough to come to the attention of the watch, or the guilders. Handomel has ruled his territory with an-iron hand for a decade; he has no natural enemy there. This Lago, I can only imagine, is either a new enemy, or a very old one.’

‘One of the other Houses?’ ventured Lakatos.

‘Perhaps, though I think rather it is a case of no House at all. Seems he came only to murder Handomel, and then disappeared without trace. He took nothing and made no claim to territory,’ said Catafengi. ‘His reasons for killing Handomel were clearly his own, and this troubles me greatly.’

Lakatos well understood the implication, and the reason for Catafengi’s concern. Catafengi and his cult wielded great influence. All the Cawdor gangs from a great distance in any direction served him, just as Lakatos and the Union did. While those who openly followed the cult might draw unwanted attention and find themselves perpetually hounded by the authorities, their agents across the Underhive acted on their behalf in dozens of settlements without drawing such unwelcome scrutiny. These gangs, like the Union, ruled over what territory they could, harvesting its profits not only to sustain their own hold on power, but also to fund the broader cult’s activities.

Subject to his master’s wishes, Lakatos ruled over Fall Sands, the settlement he and the Union had in recent months completely subdued, leaving its tremulous inhabitants entirely at their command. It paid well.

Handomel was Cawdor also, as was the neighbouring gangleader Addec, and each ruled over territory elsewhere within the cult’s domain. Addec’s territory – the greater part of the Ash Bluff and the Fulcrum Spike – bordered Fall Sands, with Handomel’s beyond that.

The Union and its counterparts were simple gangs, just like any other, but with virtually every Cawdor gang in the area similarly sworn to the cult's service, they invariably fared far better than the disparate and quarrelsome gangs of the other Houses. With their mutual borders well defended, the other Houses presented little threat to the well-organised Cawdor. Little by little this small corner of the Underhive was becoming nothing less than a single domain ruled over by the cult and its master, Catafengi. Any threat to one of these constituent parts threatened the cult in its entirety, and Lakatos well understood that Handomel's murder heralded trouble for them all, not least his own territory of Fall Sands.

'You wish for me to deal with this Lago, master?' asked Lakatos expectantly.

'Perhaps,' said Catafengi. 'First I would rather be certain of things in Fall Sands, Lakatos. You tell me things go well, but what have you to show me?'

Beneath his mask, Lakatos smiled. He reached down to his waist and drew forth a heavy, leather pouch. He passed it to Catafengi, watching the old man's wrist sink with the full weight of the fifteen hundred credits the pouch contained: a fortune. Catafengi weighed the bag in his hand, dearly impressed.

'Well,' he said, 'things have dearly progressed very well. Perhaps you are wasted in Fall Sands, good Lakatos.'

Lakatos's gaze rose at once. This, more than anything was what he had waited to hear all these long years.

'Master, you wish me to serve you elsewhere?' asked Lakatos, showing his eagerness, convinced that his time had come, that at last he would leave the shabby dealings of gang life behind and join the cult proper as a Master of the Redemption. His foot shuffled around nervously below him, running back and forth over the second of those scrawled worship lines, the line for which he now clamoured.

'I would,' said Catafengi, purposely cool, 'but I cannot leave Fall Sands without a leader. It is too valuable, and I would do nothing to weaken Addec further with Handomel already dead.'

'Grand Master Catafengi,' said Lakatos, his formality showing his desperate need. 'I will attend to both matters at once, and then join you wherever you require.'

‘*Both* matters?’ said Catafengi.

‘Yes, master, both. And I will not delay,’ said Lakatos. ‘I will find Handomel’s killer and find a worthy successor for the Union forthwith; someone who will ensure that Fall Sands is well guarded, and someone who will be well allied with Addec.’

‘Very well,’ said Catafengi. ‘Do so, and return to me here when they are done, Master Lakatos.’ He laboured the phrase in a manner that sent Lakatos into rapture.

Master. Master of the Redemption. One simple task lay between him and such a grand title. Just one, thought Lakatos, for in the matter .of his successor he was quite certain that fate had that very same day gifted him the perfect candidate.

LAKATOS’S STEP WAS uncharacteristically light as he drove on, head down, through the raging ash storm that confronted him as he completed his descent into the submerged dome of Fall Sands. The domes above were in little better repair but at least their height lifted them dear of these accursed storms.

Crossing the haphazard ruins and exposed foundations of walls long ago lost to decay, Lakatos drew nearer to the settlement, where the maze of crumbling architecture at least offered some shelter from the howling gale.

Turning against the wind, he brought himself at last to what passed for the main street of Fall Sands and headed swiftly for the Pipe Under Mile He did not reach it, instead stopping some distance short as he was confronted by a most curious sight in the street up ahead.

The Union was there and a crowd had gathered. Lakatos smiled to himself as he caught sight of the figure at its centre.

Jurgen, it seemed, was causing quite a stir.

CHAPTER THREE

‘THIS ONE?’ ASKED Berze1, completely disbelieving.

‘Yes, this one,’ Jurgen said for the third time. ‘Clear them all out.’

Berzel shook his head, still disbelieving, but did as he was told. He turned to the girl nearest to him, placing his large gloved hands on her delicate shoulders as if to drag her away. The situation seemed to leave Berzel clueless, and his inept attempt at moving the irate girl accomplished nothing more than earning him a slap in the face. The girl broke free of his grip and slunk back a few paces to where the other girls lurked against the wall.

Berzel stepped forward as if to grab her again, signalling for the other reluctant gangers to follow suit. As he did so the girl stooped, snatched up a chunk of rubble and hurled it squarely at Berzel. A moment later and all four of the ragged-looking women did likewise, pelting the confused gangers with a hail of rubble.

Into the midst of this chaos strode Lakatos, and Berzel winced at the sight of his leader’s return. Jurgen all the while stood calmly back, just in front of the crowd of bemused onlookers that had gathered on the other side of the street.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Lakatos.

‘Jurgen’s crazy. He wants us to clear out this place,’ said Berzel, jabbing a finger in the direction of the building behind him.

‘Need a place to work,’ said Jurgen, anticipating Lakatos’s next question, ‘and you did say anything,’ he said, reminding Lakatos of his earlier promise.

Lakatos paused for a moment before turning back to Berzel. ‘He’s right, give him what he wants,’ he said. ‘Give him anything he wants.’

Berzel threw back his head in astonishment. This was simply the most ridiculous thing he had ever been asked to do. ‘But... but... a *brothel*?’ he

stammered incredulously.

Lakatos shrugged and walked off down the street, leaving his baffled gangers to evict the building's irate tenants and give Jurgen his own peculiar choice of den.

Berzel grew tired of the ruckus and grabbed the girl again, more forcefully than before. This time she didn't even let go of the rock and instead smashed it hard into the side of Berzel's head with her fist. He flinched, angry more than hurt, since even the substantial weight of the rock added little to the girl's feeble blow. Yet the embarrassment was enough to finally make Berzel lose his temper. He dragged the girl to the floor, wrenching her arms behind her back and carted her bodily across the road where he flung her slight form into the midst of the crowd of onlookers.

Berzel's example finally convinced the other gangers that this wasn't just some odd hoax and the whole lot of them crossed the dusty street to where the remaining women stood in the building's doorway. These four were not quite as irate as the younger girl who raged at Berzel from the centre of the crowd, but they put up a fight nonetheless.

Having evicted the first girl single-handedly, Berzel thought that he was entitled to do little more than supervise the continuing scuffle. He could barely suppress a laugh as he watched Lirbus, Deveres and Morden all struggle to get sufficient leverage on the fattest of the whores and nearly split his sides as the ungainly scrum toppled over, trapping Lirbus in what might have been considered a position of mortal sin.

As the other gangers at last dragged the unwilling molls away from the building, Berzel drew Jurgen near, leading him past the scuffle and into the newly vacated building.

'PERFECT,' SAID JURGEN as the pair entered the three-storey building's highest useable chamber. There was another floor above, but it was roofless and uninhabitable. Several floors, perhaps dozens, also lay beneath them, but at those levels centuries of ash from the raging storms formed drifts so deep that the area was effectively lost, drowned in ash. Indeed the 'streets' of Fall Sands were nothing more than the uppermost level of this ashen silt, compacted by the comings and goings of those

unfortunate enough to dwell in such a place. With each passing year, those ‘streets’ rose as the storms hurled more of their sooty cargo over the settlement and in time, though perhaps not for some centuries, even the room in which Berzel and Jurgen stood would eventually be smothered and filled by this same choking ash. This was just how things were. The hive, the old saying went, rose upwards, ever upwards, while it’s people only ever fell down. The mounting rafts of ash around them were no exception, however gradual their ascent might be.

Berzel cast his eyes around the room. It was bare, the other members of the Union having already hurled what few furnishings there had been out onto the street in the hope that their owners might follow without resistance. They hadn’t, and at the thought of it, Berzel was sure he could still hear the pandemonium out on the street below.

‘You could have picked an easier place to hide out,’ said Berzel, still annoyed at the newcomer’s choice.

‘Had to be this one,’ said Jurgen. ‘It’s the right shape and it faces the right way. ‘See these?’ he said, pointing at a row of motionless, fan-bladed vents embedded in the wall. These are just what I need. Gotta have the right atmosphere, the right ventilation, if the parchments are gonna come out right, y’see.’

Berzel was far from convinced but saw little point in arguing now the deed was done. Lakatos seemed taken with Jurgen, and Berzel was certainly impressed with what he had seen of his carefully crafted parchments. He was willing to give the stranger a chance, for now, even if that meant embarking on what had been undoubtedly the most humiliating episode of his time in the Union.

‘Let’s bring the supplies in, and then I can get to it,’ said Jurgen, and Berzel’s mind was at once back on the matter at hand.

‘HE WANTED US out,’ said Berzel. ‘Said he was gonna work in the dark, and I didn’t see much point in sitting there like a blind fungus.’

In actual fact, it had been hours since Berzel had left Jurgen, at Jurgen’s request, to allow the outlander to begin work on his masterpieces. Still, Berzel decided it was best not to mention how long ago that was, especially since he had spent most of the intervening time in the Pipe

Under Mile with Deveres. Anyway, Lakatos had only asked him why he had left Jurgen, not how long ago.

‘Fair enough,’ said Lakatos, providing Berzel with an unexpectedly prosaic response.

‘There’s plenty more for you to be doing anyway, and for the rest of you.’

Berzel gazed around the room. The others seemed just as disappointed that there was yet more work to be done, just as reluctant as he was. Lirbus, in fact, still seemed to be suffering considerable back pain and Berzel wondered just how long he had ended up pinned to the street.

BERZEL FOLLOWED HIS route automatically. It was a task he had been assigned a hundred times before: visit Goddlesby and collect the taxes. But there was definitely something else going on.

Berzel put such thoughts out of his mind as he hauled himself up through the narrow access shaft that offered the quickest route to Mayor Goddlesby’s shack. He hauled himself onto the narrow ledge and pushed open the airtight, circular, steel door that shut Goddlesby off from the outside world. Berzel had long ago given up knocking when it came to Goddlesby, and the little creep knew better than to ever lock his door to the Union.

Upon entering Berzel was not surprised to find that one of the women from the brothel – the particularly ample one who had nearly crushed Lirbus, in fact – had apparently taken up residence in Goddlesby’s ‘chambers’, as he termed the dingy little hole. Berzel was convinced that it was an old septic tank.

‘I hope you’re not paying for that out of our money,’ said Berzel, making a rather noisy entrance. Berzel’s sudden entrance clearly surprised Goddlesby and he nearly toppled from his chair. Still, thought Berzel, he couldn’t have been well balanced on it to start with, not with him being so small and having something so peculiarly large on his knee.

Goddlesby leapt to his feet while the woman offered no more of a response than a highly professional frown.

‘N-no, sir. No, Mr Berzel... Not your money no.’ Goddlesby was instantly all a fluster. He was terrified of Berzel, terrified of the Union,

and he made no attempt whatsoever to hide it.

He instantly dashed across the room to the hole in the wall where he hid all the ‘taxes’ the Union obliged him to collect on their behalf. Goddlesby snatched up the sack of credits, and then was forced to stop, scrabbling on all fours as he gathered up all the credits that his nervous bumbling had scattered across the floor. Hardly composed, Goddlesby at least found sufficient equilibrium to drag himself to his feet and hurriedly presented the bulging pouch to Berzel.

Goddlesby’s eyes blinked at a furious pace as he waited for Berzel to relieve him of the sack and its contents. He was almost willing the Cawdor to take the credits and leave, but Berzel made him sweat. He took his own sweet time in taking the sack from Goddlesby’s outstretched hand and took even longer as he paced around the room, choosing a spot to count the loot. At length he chose Goddlesby’s desk, though two or three other flat surfaces were both nearer and more convenient to him. Berzel brushed past the ample woman, though he had no real need to do so other than to cause Goddlesby maximum anxiety, and sat himself down in the mayor’s rickety old chair.

With one great swipe of his gauntleted right hand he swept a whole clutter of documents from Goddlesby’s untidy desk, sending all the little man’s affairs crashing to the floor. Another brush of his gloved palm cleared the dust from the surface and Berzel at last dumped the sack’s contents out on to the desk.

Berzel took a well-timed eternity counting out the credits, first putting them into piles of five, then counting the piles, and then starting all over again when the tally he hastily scratched into the desk’s surface seemed to disagree with the currency before him. All the while Goddlesby sweated, and all the while his cheap consort frowned.

At last, Berzel looked up from the stacked credits.

‘It’s short,’ he said.

Goddlesby’s face flashed to white in an instant and a terrified gulp was the only noise he could muster. He dropped to his knees and scampered across the floor. Berzel thought at first he was fleeing, until the little man reached the hole in the wall where he stashed the credits and began frantically scrabbling through the rubble that surrounded it. Sure enough,

wedged in a crack in the floor, was a single credit. Goddlesby whisked it out of its hiding place and leapt to his feet, breathing a sigh of relief.

'Must have missed it,' he said, handing the filthy metal token to Berzel.

'I mean *really* short,' said Berzel.

Goddlesby gulped again.

Berzel calmly scooped all the credits back into the sack. Last of all he fatefully dropped in the lone escapee Goddlesby had just scavenged up from the floor, allowing the menacing clink of its fall to ring out before stepping out from behind the desk and pacing across the room to where Goddlesby trembled in fear. Berzel drew his knife and held it to the mayor's quivering cheek.

'It's short, but I reckon your eyes will just about cover it,' said Berzel.

Goddlesby let loose an agitated squeak and flinched away before Berzel's hand closed round his throat.

'It... it... wasn't me...' sputtered Goddlesby, at last mustering the courage to speak. Berzel said nothing but slowly released his grip on the man's neck and turned away chuckling.

'Who was it then? Huh? Who was it, her?' Berzel jabbed his dagger in the direction of the large lady in the corner who was still frowning for all she was worth. Goddlesby flinched terribly as Berzel moved the dagger, fearing his time had come, though he finally found the courage to reply.

'I... I...' Goddlesby just stammered. The woman gave him a moment, though it was obvious that Goddlesby clearly wasn't the kind of man to defend a woman's honour and so she erupted in a fit of rage.

'You little toad,' she bellowed, storming across the room. 'I haven't touched a damn credit and you know it.'

Goddlesby wriggled in Berzel's grip, unsure who was the most threatening: the stocky Cawdor ganger or the outraged dame rushing towards him.

'Oh lord, oh lord,' said Goddlesby, mumbling before breaking into a desperate wail. 'I don't know what happened! I just don't know. It can't be short, it just can't be!'

'I know little man, I know. Same time next month,' Berzel said, releasing the little man from his grasp. They both knew full well every credit was there, and yet the little urchin couldn't bring himself to swear it once Berzel got nasty. Berzel could not stop thudding to himself as he

clambered back out of the mayor's grubby little hole and headed back towards the Union's ganghouse. He lived for moments like this, making weaklings like Goddlesby fear for their lives, good reason or no. Besides, Berzel's treatment was nothing compared to what Goddlesby could expect from the woman he had just as good as accused of ripping him off. Berzel chuckled again as he thought of Goddlesby taking a beating, having the life thrashed out of him by that hussy of all people.

* * *

'EVERY CRED.' SAID Berzel. 'What did you expect? That little maggot Goddlesby was so terrified, he was virtually begging me to take it off him. It's all there, every single cred, just like every time, Lakatos. You know you can trust me.' Berzel smirked as he slammed the bulging bag of credits down onto the table.

Lakatos said nothing. He gave the bag one long look before knocking it over with a sweep of his gloved hand, sending credits shooting across the table to where the fidgety Erket sat playing with his weapon.

'Count it out,' Lakatos said to Erket. 'Half a share for each man and the rest divided two-thirds, one-third, okay?' Erket gave a resentful sneer as he snatched up a handful of the metal tokens and started to pile them in front of him. Berzel wasn't sure whether Lakatos meant to count the stash to check it was all there, or simply to apportion it. He knew every single credit was there – he had counted it himself – but he still grew more than a little nervous every time he returned to Lakatos with the haul.

As he followed Lakatos away from the table, Berzel made sure to push over the first half a dozen piles Erket had counted out in front of him. Erket sneered and looked ready to leap to his feet and strike Berzel. Lakatos's eyes were instantly pinned on him, though, and the juve clearly thought better of it and instead simply returned to counting the credits, cursing Berzel under his breath.

Lakatos dropped to his haunches beside a fire that burned in the corner of the room and Berzel followed suit. The blaze was held within the remnants of what must have once been a pipe that ran up the height of the

building. Now it was broken off just a metre or so above the floor and formed the ideal site for an ad hoc stove of sorts. Lined with whatever flammable scav the gangers could find, it provided the only fire in the building, though the effluvium that drifted down the south-west corner for the same three hours every day provided some additional heat and the mould lining the ceiling gave off additional light in the form of its eerie, green phosphor glow.

Berzel watched Lakatos snatch a giant rat out from the flames, skewered on a rusty metal spike and burned to a crisp. He ran his knife precisely down its belly. A second and third cut and he had severed the rat clean in two, throwing half to Berzel who picked fussily at it as they spoke.

'Your friend Jurgen has a very odd choice of hideout, Lakatos.' said Berzel, still put out by the morning's events. He had every intention, though, of fathoming his leader's intentions, and began with this circumspect broaching of the issue.

'Yes,' said Lakatos, 'he does, but he has some rather unusual talents, which I'm not willing to waste. Give him what he wants, Berzel, whatever he wants.'

'Very well.' said Berzel, increasingly unconvinced by the outlander, and of Lakatos's faith in him.

'Besides,' said Lakatos 'it certainly doesn't pain me any to see that little den of sin purged.' Berzel squirmed uncomfortably, trying to find a reply that would seem neither defensive nor too much of a protest. As it was, his awkwardness was easily avoided, thanks to the arrival of Morden.

'Morden,' said Lakatos, seeing him enter by the door closest to Erket, 'come.'

Morden predictably swiped at Erket's neatly counted piles as well, and Berzel breathed a sigh of relief. The chances of the stash actually being counted were diminishing rapidly as Erket's rage flared and his concentration vanished. It was the same every time. Berzel counted the stash when he collected it, but never quite trusted himself enough to be sure he hadn't made some mistake, and mistakes, he well knew, were something Lakatos simply did not tolerate. Still, no matter. Now it would be Erket's mistake.

Morden strode over to the two older gangers and similarly fell to his haunches in front of the fire. Berzel picked one last choice morsel from

the rat's carcass with the tip of his knife before tossing the rest – a good half of what he himself had been given – to Morden. He had been in the Union far too long to wait to be told to share with his brothers. Lakatos might be a strict master, but he was a fair one, and greed was not tolerated.

'You sent for me, Lakatos?' said Morden.

'Yes.' replied Lakatos. There is work to be done, and plenty of it.' Lakatos raised his head, gazing past the other two gangers. 'Erket,' he yelled, 'have you counted those shares out yet?'

Erket muttered something under his breath before replying. 'Yes, master. All here.'

Berzel chortled to himself. Erket was as predictable as he was cowardly. He was more scared of making Lakatos wait than he was of miscounting the stash and had simply lumped the credits into piles without counting them.

'And the rest?' asked Lakatos.

'Two-thirds, one-third, right here,' said Erket.

'Bring it to me.' said Lakatos, holding out his hand and gesturing as though he expected Erket to have already anticipated his demand. Erket would learn, thought Berzel, but probably the hard way.

Erket dashed across the room to Lakatos, both hands clenched out in front of him. Erket's left hand comfortably held the one-third while with his right he struggled to prevent any of the rather more cumbersome two-thirds share from slipping from his grasp. Sure enough, at least two – and quite probably four or five – credits fell from his grasp as he ran.

Beneath his mask, it was clear Lakatos was frowning. He held out his hand impatiently, snatching the one-third chunk of credits from Erket and dropping them deftly into a pouch taken from his pocket, and returning the pouch to his pocket just as quickly.

Erket looked around desperately for somewhere to offload the increasingly hard to grasp two-thirds. Lakatos frowned and jabbed a thumb at Morden, and Morden reached out both his own palms to take the credits from the struggling Erket. Morden pulled them close to his body, pressing them against his stomach before pouring them carefully into his lap. From there he transferred them safely to a purse drawn from the belt around his waist.

‘Take them to Addec, clear?’ said Lakatos. Berzel thought he saw a look of disappointment creep across Morden, his shoulders sagging and his head dipping.

‘In the storms, Lakatos?’ asked Morden, disbelieving.

‘Yes, in the storms.’ said Lakatos angrily. ‘It must be done.’

Morden sighed and Berzel felt a hint of pity for the man. No one ever ventured out in the storms; what Lakatos was asking was terrible. Still, better him than me, thought Berzel, and he considered this further proof of big things happening, though he needed little convincing. Of that much he was already convinced. Sending him out to collect what the townsfolk owed might be nothing new, thought Berzel, but for Lakatos to send Morden out of town – and in the middle of Ash Season no less – meant something was definitely going on: something big. Berzel puzzled his leader’s motives and listened intently in hope of them being revealed.

‘Take Addec the credits and ask him what he knows of a man named Lago, understand?’ Morden just nodded. ‘Good.’ said Lakatos. He stared at Morden for a moment before Morden realised that he was meant to leave that very moment. His shoulders seemed to sag further before he picked himself up and headed for the door, clearly not relishing the trip ahead of him.

‘Lago?’ asked Berzel.

‘No matter.’ said Lakatos. ‘At least it shouldn’t be.’

At that, Lakatos looked up. Berzel followed his gaze. Jurgen had joined them, though he hadn’t made enough noise to give himself away. Berzel was a little spooked but hushed the gasp that formed on his lips beneath the heavy leather of his mask.

‘Jurgen,’ said Lakatos. ‘Good. Do you have them?’

‘Yes,’ said Jurgen, reaching into his pocket and pulling out several vials of inky black fluid. Lakatos gestured towards Morden with his knife, who was about to head out the door, and Jurgen passed the vials to him. Morden seemed uncertain what to do with them.

‘Jurgen will explain all to you, Morden, don’t worry’ said Lakatos before turning to Berzel. ‘Go now, Berzel. Your work is done for the day.’

Berzel nodded and left the room, stopping only to snatch up his humble share of credits from the table as he passed. He was curious about the vials and no mistake, but he certainly wasn’t foolish enough to ask, certainly

not when Lakatos had told him to leave. He'd already pushed his luck by asking at mention of the name Lago, and Lakatos certainly didn't seem keen to answer that question. He figured he would find out the answers soon enough.

CHAPTER FOUR

MORDEN FLUNG BACK his head, dipping slightly as he stepped under the broad walkway and at last entered the cleaner air. To Morden, after three days of arduous trekking through the storms, the relief was ecstasy.

Addec's territory lay well below the level of Fall Sands but, by a fortunate quirk of fate, was not nearly so wracked by the seasonal ash storms. Its outer reaches were annually besieged much the same but the derelict industrial domes at its heart suffered little.

The area had once formed the lungs of the hive housing thousands of recycling and decontamination units. Their vast chimneys rose up the outside of the hive like arteries, returning the best of the air to the best of places above. These systems had long ceased to function, and even the zones they once purified were now derelict or else consumed by the hive city sprawl, but the architecture of the place still afforded its inhabitants some benefits.

Disused siphons, vents and convection chambers rose up for hundreds of metres above the dome, creating a more powerful current of air than could be found elsewhere in the Underhive. At the dome's base, ancient tunnels led deep into the rock below, creating a cyclical movement of gas and air throughout the dome which, for the most part, created sufficient atmosphere to repel the raging ash storms beyond.

The walkway under which Morden walked had once been a bridge of the type commonly found over liquid channels in the heavily industrial areas of Hive City. Indeed, the bridge's abandonment had clearly been swift and the walkway remained partly raised at one end, so that anyone traversing it would find themselves faced with a leap at the end. There was no need to go over it anymore, though, since its channel long ago dried up and Morden simply strolled down the plascrete trench and from there went into the narrow gas separation ducts that the channel had once fed.

Beyond these ducts there was no ash, and Morden breathed deeply a welcome luxury after three days spent crossing domes so riddled by the storms as to be virtually ash bound. Such a journey was unheard of, and Morden still had precious little idea why it was so urgent that he was sent. He could have died and his pride demanded there be a damned good reason for such a sacrifice.

Then again, thought Morden, the outlander had braved the storms just days earlier. Perhaps Lakatos knew that they weren't quite so ferocious as to be lethal at the moment. Or perhaps he didn't care.

The outlander Jurgen. Morden reached his hand into his pocket and fingered the vials Jurgen had given him. He had virtually forgotten that he still carried them and breathed a sigh of relief as he found they were undamaged. They hardly seemed a worthwhile reason for such a dangerous trek, but reason they were, and their value was deceptive.

Morden emerged from the ducts and found himself in a square – the exposed floor of a building no longer blessed with walls – where peddlers and street hawkers assailed the passing crowds. It was a good time to be selling. The ash storms cut the settlement off from the outside world; even the guilders wouldn't be passing through in this weather and those with something to sell, no matter how illicit or how scandalously overpriced, invariably found a buyer at this time of year.

No matter the wondrous commodities to be had, every pair of eyes fell instantly on Morden as he emerged into the crowded courtyard. He was Cawdor, and in a town like this that alone gifted him a certain air of dread, but he was mystifying also. The black leather of his gloves and mask, and the deep blue cloth of his robes were similar, but not quite like those worn by Addec and his men, and this most subtle of differences made Morden's appearance more disconcerting than a genuine stranger's would be.

Morden cast his gaze across the crowds as he passed, playing on their fears and letting them worry themselves stupid just a little more than was strictly necessary. At length he crossed the square and disappeared from view behind the ruined walls that surrounded it.

Morden had not been in the Fulcrum Spike for fully four years and he remembered little of it. He had been certain that he at least knew the way to Addec's residence, but as he meandered through the ruins beyond the square he became less certain.

A gang tattoo, scrawled on the wall up ahead of him, was instantly recognisable, though. The flaming skull logo was Addec's, with the crown atop its brow a nod to Catafengi and the broader cult. Yet when Morden had seen it last, this logo had marked Addec's own hideout. Now Morden saw it again, he found it marking nothing other than a crumbling stone wall, a chasmal pit beyond it, and two more crumbling walls to either side.

Nonetheless, Morden was convinced that this was the place. A rudimentary dig through the rubble at the crater's edge revealed little more than a handful of spent bullet casings, and Morden was satisfied that whatever had destroyed the building was an accident or the passing of time and nothing more sinister. Decay was the way of things in the Underhive.

Morden could only presume that Addec had left the place long ago, and hid elsewhere within his territory, yet where that might be he had little idea. Given that he had just swaggered past the town's inhabitants like a vengeful daemon from the pit, Morden decided against going back to ask directions and was determined to wait it out.

He leant against the wall and allowed himself a short rest after the arduous slog through the storms. If his entrance had accomplished one thing it had created enough of a stir to ensure that somebody would be looking for him, and he simply decided it best to wait until they found him.

'BROTHER,' CAME THE voice. 'Brother,' it came again, this time accompanied by a vigorous shaking of his shoulder.

Morden slowly opened his eyes, coughing a little as he did so, thanks to the ash that had clearly settled in his -lungs since he escaped the storms. He looked up groggily, straight into the face of a brother Cawdor.

'These stormy days are unpleasant,' said the other Cawdor.

'Yes,' said Morden, slowly rising to his feet with the aid of an outstretched hand, 'for strangers to travel.' He was greeted with a sturdy pat on the back as the other Cawdor pulled him upright.

'Fitting, don't you think?' said Morden, though his wry sense of humour seemed to pass the other man by entirely. He was dressed in long black robes, only the hood showing any colour, and that a brown so dark as to be

almost black. His gloves and mask were lighter, though, of a rich tan leather. He was one of Addec's men.

'What brings you here brother...?' asked the Cawdor.

'Morden,' replied Morden. He wasn't sure whether the man was questioning his motive or his identity and so voluntarily answered both. 'I must speak with Addec I bring news from Lakatos.'

'Very well,' said the other Cawdor. 'Come with me.'

EVEN SEATED, ADDEC was a tall man, though rather more slender than the bulky guards around him. He made much of his height with his choice of full robes, rather than wearing the cape and breeches for which most Cawdor opted. Instead, his hooded cowl lay atop long robes with three layers falling in tiers towards the ground. The uppermost garments were blue and open at the front, while beneath heavy black robes covered Addec entirely and hung so low as to drag on the floor when he moved. His sleeves, likewise, possessed a great deal more hang than was really needed and it all conspired to produce a rather sinister appearance. Had Morden not once served Addec, he might very well have been overwhelmed upon arriving in his dimly lit room.

As it was, Addec was pleased to see the old man again. Morden had served him loyally and had never truly wished to leave though he understood the need for it. The Helm of the Emperor had ambitions, and those ambitions had placed the fate of Fall Sands in the hands of an ambitious, but still inexperienced leader named Lakatos. Back then, it was decided that the young man would benefit from a seasoned lieutenant like Morden in a way the experienced Addec simply would not.

It all made perfect sense and Morden had gone willingly to assist the young Lakatos as was Catafengi's wish. In his heart, though, Morden had always been uneasy about changing gang allegiance in such a way. They might all serve the same master, but loyalty was loyalty, and deep down Morden still considered himself one of Addec's men. He only hoped that Addec thought of him likewise.

'Greetings, old friend,' he said, his hands upraised as he approached Addec where he sat in the corner.

Addec simply nodded in reply, but the cold sombreness of it did not unnerve Morden. Addec had always been a man of great reserve, and he had aged greatly since Morden last saw him. His calm detachment was to be expected.

‘What tidings do you bring, Brother Morden?’ asked Addec. Morden unstrung the pouch from where it had hung on his belt for the past three days and passed it to Addec.

‘By Lakatos’s request, Addec. He thinks you may well be in need of it,’ said Morden.

‘Perhaps,’ said Addec. ‘Perhaps.’

‘I also bring a question, Brother Addec,’ said Morden.

‘A question of Lago?’

‘The very one,’ said Morden. ‘Tell me what do you know?’

‘That he killed Handomel, that much I know, though I suspect Lakatos knows as much already and that is why he has asked.’

Morden said nothing. He had no idea Handomel was dead though thought better than to evince his ignorance to Addec. He hoped his silence would prompt Addec into further admissions, but none were forthcoming.

‘Where can I find this Lago?’ asked Morden.

Addec just shrugged. ‘I do not even know who he is, let alone where he could be found,’ said Addec, clearly sensing that Morden knew little of matters thus far.

‘Who does?’ asked Morden. ‘Who saw the killing? Handomel’s men? Some of your own, perhaps?’

‘None No one saw it,’ said Addec. ‘No one saw *him*.’

‘What?’ said Morden, his ignorance of the matter suddenly surfacing amidst his consternation.

‘Handomel was a fool. He did not take enough care and he paid the price for it. There were none there to help him, or even to see his end,’ said Addec.

Morden was sure that Addec wasn’t being deliberately cryptic, but he spoke in a manner typical of one of his age, and his meaning was often obscured to more youthful ears.

‘How do you know this Lago did it?’ asked Morden, an obvious next question but one Addec seemed unlikely to answer without prompting.

‘His name was written in Handomel’s ashes’ said Addec.

Ashes? The impulse to ask Addec what had happened to Handomel was almost irresistible, but Morden suppressed it. He was certain that he would regret asking if he did find out just how Handomel had met such a grizzly end in any case.

‘Lakatos will want more’ said Morden, trying to avoid direct questioning.

‘Then perhaps,’ said Addec, ‘he will have to find it out for himself. I do not know who this Lago is, nor do I know what he wanted with Handomel, but I know that Handomel was not the wisest among us. I’m sure his demise was his own doing. I am not so sure we need to trouble ourselves with this Lago now that he has taken his scalp.’

‘But perhaps...’ said Morden, uncertain. ‘I mean, another gang...?’

‘Yes,’ said Addec, ‘I think that might be the greater danger. With Handomel gone, our enemies may well fancy their chances, but we have always fought the other gangs, and we will continue to do so. We will do so all the more effectively if we do not distract ourselves with this Lago.’

‘I am sure you are right, wise Addec,’ said Morden.

‘These credits,’ he said, shaking the pouch Morden had given him, ‘will do much to make sure Handomel’s gang survives these difficult times. I will arm them myself and ensure they find a suitable successor. Be vigilant, Brother Morden, but do not be worried. This is Cawdor territory. Is this all, Morden?’ he asked.

‘Not quite,’ said Morden, reaching into his pocket. He drew nearer to Addec, only pulling the vials from his pocket once he was so close to the old man that he alone would see them. The stuff had an odd look to it. The light came through the vials in strange ways and the liquid’s colour seemed to shift and deepen closer to the edges where it should have been lightest. Addec peered at the vials from arm’s length though his eyes were clearly not all they had once been and so Morden passed him one for closer inspection.

Mordents voice fell to a whisper.

‘These are crucial times, Addec, and Lakatos wishes that we take no risks in our business,’ said Morden, doing little more than repeating what Lakatos had told him before sending him on his way. ‘We are to use a new system for messages, Addec, a secret one: one only Lakatos, myself and you are to know about’ Morden felt little need to mention Jurgen, though

the system was his and the vials Morden clutched were fruits of Jurgen's labours.

He passed the vials to Addec. 'Write in this ink and only this ink,' he said, 'and write on scrap, something any man might be found carrying. Once you've written a message, wait an hour and it will have vanished. Don't worry, just have your men bring us the message and we'll uncover it. If you receive such odd-looking sheets from us, here's what you must do.'

Morden reached into his pocket again and pulled out a folded parchment, one of Jurgen's earlier works, given to him by way of example. Addec massaged the paper between his thumb and fingers, as if expecting it to peel away or crack wide open and reveal its secrets. It didn't. It simply creased, tore and hung limply from his hands.

'It's just parchment,' said Addec.

Morden pulled a canteen from beneath his robes and sprinkled a few drops of water on the parchment, smearing it over the surface with his gloved hand until the whole thing had a sheen of water across it. He passed it to Addec who at once saw the message hidden cunningly within.

'Impressive,' said Addec. 'I understand. This will remain a closely guarded secret. Go now.'

Morden nodded, dipping a little as he did so, so that his knee brushed the floor for the briefest of moments before he turned and left the room. He had never said goodbye to Addec, not even when he left his ranks, and he had no intention of doing so now. The old man was wise, and Morden was sure he would see him again.

THERE WAS NO time to waste in returning his news to Lakatos, yet Morden thought it simple madness to venture into the ash storms again so soon. Night was as good as day in the Underhive and a few hours recuperation would do little to delay Morden. So he found himself seated in the Chapel, as the younger members of Addec's gang termed their hideout.

Morden knew almost none of them. Most were too young to remember him. Those few gangers who survived from Morden's day had mostly risen to the point where they attended Addec in his chambers across the dome.

The separate hideouts were a peculiar quirk of Addec's that Morden had almost forgotten. Still, he was glad to be able to rest in safety without burdening the old man further.

One of the juves drew near to Morden, holding out a bowl of fungus soup. Morden took it in both hands and placed it on his lap. He took the rusty spoon out of the bowl and discarded it. The trick with fungus soup was to drink it quickly before the foaming chemical reactions in the broth made it too hot to drink. To do this, Morden cupped the bowl in both hands and swiftly chugged it down. He placed the empty bowl on the ground in front of him and looked across the room to see two rather less savvy gangers wincing in pain as the poisons released by the fungi reacted with one another and burned their tongues.

A figure appeared in the doorway, though the heavy shadows there hid his features from Morden. At the sight of him, the juve raced over, offering a bowl of the same potent broth, but with a brush of his hand the figure declined. Perhaps it was another youngster, perturbed by the sight of his inept friends burning themselves.

Except, as the figure drew near, Morden could see he wore the fuller mask of a more experienced ganger and what he could see of his face was well-worn. A scar on his chin, already well healed, spoke of years living the life of a ganger.

A scar on his chin... Deeran, realised Morden with a start. It was Deeran, come to see him. Morden leapt to his feet and grabbed him by the hand.

'Hello, old friend,' said Deeran as Morden greeted him. 'I missed you at the old man's place.'

'I wasn't there long' said Morden. 'There seemed to be little he could tell me.'

Deeran frowned and gestured for Morden to return to his seat atop the worn stone steps at the rear of the Chapel. Deeran swept his cloak aside and perched himself beside Morden.

'Perhaps,' he said with a definite air of concern in his voice, 'but I fear there is a growing gap between what the old man knows and what he wants to admit to himself.'

'What?' said Morden.

'He dismisses talk of danger too lightly simply because he is too tired to deal with it,' said Deeran, needing little prompting. 'Lago's threat is real

enough, but Addec is blind to it.'

'Who is this Lago?' asked Morden.

'No one really knows, that much is accurate,' said Deeran. 'A bounty hunter, almost certainly. He seemed to act alone, and only sought Handomel's blood. I can't imagine another gang would be so discriminating.'

'Then Handomel made his own trouble and paid for it?' asked Morden.

'Perhaps, but if he had brought a bounty upon himself, how come this Lago never claimed it?'

'How do you know he didn't?'

'Claim the bounty? On a pile of ashes? The guilders normally ask for a little more proof than that,' said Deeran. He was right.

'I suppose he could have taken the head, or the hands,' he continued, 'but I really don't think it was a simple bounty.'

Morden swallowed hard as Deeran spoke. He didn't like what he was hearing and he liked less the fact that Addec hadn't told it to him. Reporting this to Lakatos would not be easy.

'Somebody wanted Handomel dead and they hired this Lago to do it,' said Deeran.

'Then it's still the same,' said Morden, slightly relieved. 'Handomel made trouble and paid for it. So it wasn't the guilders, it wasn't a bounty exactly, but somebody wanted him dead and now he is. Lago's gone, job done, surely?'

'If it was just a bounty, I could believe that but who wanted Handomel dead, and why?' said Deeran. 'Without that, who's to say what happens next? Who's to say Lago's gone?'

'You're spooking me, Deeran. Why do you think Handomel was killed? What are you saying?' asked Morden.

'I'm not sure, old friend, really I'm not,' Deeran replied, 'but I was with Handomel's men two days ago, and things are not well there. He has no clear successor and Vilhame and Coyne are already at one another's throats.'

'Catafengi won't stand for a leadership contest,' said Morden.

'I don't see how he can stop it,' said Deeran. 'To pick one of them would alienate those loyal to the other. What then? Kill them? And divide our number further? No, no, this is all very bad. We are faced with strife,

Morden, and I can't help but wonder if this wasn't exactly what this Lago wanted.'

'I don't understand,' said Morden.

'Well, suppose he's working for another gang.'

'

There's hardly another gang left within five domes of here,' said Morden. He was right. The allegiance of Cawdor gangs had all but eradicated the competition.

'That's true,' said Deeran, stroking the scar on his chin as he spoke 'but there are plenty who remember what we did to them, plenty who escaped and setup elsewhere. Who's to say one of those gangs hasn't come back and Lago with them?'

'They'd have attacked us as a gang. They would have raided Handomel's territory,' said Morden.

'Yes, yes, perhaps you're right,' said Deeran, rising from the steps, 'but I'm still worried that we are turning a blind eye to a grave threat.'

'If you're so worried, how come Addec isn't?' asked Morden.

'Addec is old,' said Deeran, his tone almost one of anger. 'Were he anywhere else, he would have left this life long ago. It is not for one of his years to be leading a gang in this stinking hole,' he said, clearly upset. Addec was, after all, his father.

'But we are more than simple gangs, are we not? And the pacts we have struck allow no return to the city,' he continued. 'He has spent his life in the service of Catafengi. The House will not take him back now. They cannot take him back now. Too many eyes up in Hive City look upon us. We must not allow them to see our grand old House consorting with the Redemption.'

Morden stared at Deeran in disbelief. His anger sounded dangerously close to something Morden didn't even want to contemplate.

'I'm as loyal as you, old friend, don't mistake me' said Deeran, 'but the places above fear the Redemption and they will not deal with it, or its agents. That we Cawdor serve the Redemption might be an open secret, but it is a secret nonetheless, and it must remain that way. It would destroy our House for it to be otherwise. As it is, my father must see out his days down here. We will all have to, in time. Perhaps it is a curse that he has

lived so long at all; it tires him now. He chooses to turn a blind eye to danger because he no longer has the strength to fight it and this I fear is why he talks so lightly of Lago and Handomel. Heed my father's words, Morden, as you wish, but do not assume that that is all there is to it. Promise me that much?'

Morden nodded meekly and Deeran departed. Suddenly the ash storms seemed like a more inviting prospect.

* * *

THE STORMS WERE not as fierce as Morden had feared. Here and there he could even see the remnants of his own tracks. In harsher weather, they would have vanished in mere hours. He had made good time and just two days travel had brought him close to Fall Sands, though he dreaded reaching it.

Deeran was his oldest friend, but time had clearly changed him and Morden was uncertain what to make of his prophecies of doom. Likewise, he trusted Addec's judgement completely, and was greatly reassured by his apparent calmness, but deciding exactly how much of this tale to relate to Lakatos gave Morden great cause for concern.

He shut such thoughts out of his mind arid concentrated instead on the matter at hand: navigating the ash storms without becoming lost entirely.

The gusting winds had moved many of the deepest drifts eastwards and where on the way out Morden had been forced to traipse endlessly over high dunes, he found his return journey a flatter one, along something of a temporary valley between the great walls of ash.

The one drawback of this easier lie to the land was that it badly obscured his vision in almost all directions. Elsewhere, this had proved less of a problem, since the low roof of the dome had been visible and Morden had followed its slowly rising curve out towards the centre. Now that he approached Fall Sands – itself in the middle of the dome – the roof was entirely obscured by the raging, ash-laden winds above and he could not be entirely certain of his direction.

Morden periodically scrambled up the dunes to either side, scanning for landmarks over the short distance he could actually see. Two or three such ascents had proven fruitless, and a fourth was looking similarly disappointing. Morden followed the crest of the dune along for a distance though it was terribly hard work since such bluffs were made of only the softest, least compacted ash, and Morden sank knee deep with each step.

Still no landmark presented itself, but there was something. At the base of the dune, down the opposite side to which Morden had ascended, there ran a second broad, flat valley, like the one he had been trudging down. Elsewhere, the ground to either side simply drifted off into a sea of dunes and Morden hoped that the occurrence of a second such valley might mean he was nearing home. He shimmied down the dune's side, deciding to take this second valley as his new course and he plodded on down it.

Perhaps an hour or two passed before Morden found tracks, leading away from him down this temporary channel. They were not his own, as he had first thought, for the print of the boots didn't match his. The only other person he could imagine that had been out in the storms was Jurgen. Perhaps this was the route by which Jurgen had first entered Fall Sands.

Morden's step quickened, heartened that even if he wasn't close to Fall Sands yet, he was at least on the right track. He followed the footprints closely and was glad to see they continued unbroken for some considerable distance. The wind, too, in this trench seemed far less biting, as if it were being held back by the abnormally high dunes, which formed to either side and Morden found the going a good deal easier.

Following them for several hundred metres more, the tracks shortened, the feet 'falling closer and closer together as if their maker were tiring rapidly. Soon, they were virtually overlapping prints made by a man doing little more than staggering forwards. Morden then realised in utter disappointment that the tracks vanished entirely.

He stopped dead on the spot, gazing around. Morden had continued to periodically ascend the dunes and look for landmarks. Perhaps Jurgen had done the same, breaking his tracks. Morden took a few careful steps forwards, but the trail did not restart. He turned and started clambering up the dune to his right. Any tracks here would have faded away rapidly, but at least if this was the spot where Jurgen left the track, Morden might be able to glimpse Fall Sands.

The dune was high and his feet sank with each step. He was barely halfway up when his lead foot failed him and Morden fell onto his side, slipping some metres back down the dune's side. He cursed but wasn't hurt, and quickly regained his feet. He gazed up the dune and as he did so, something terrible greeted his gaze.

Where Morden had fallen, the ash had slipped away, falling down the dune beneath him and leaving a great empty furrow in its side. Within that furrow, Morden saw a body: a dead, lifeless body. His boot must have struck it as he climbed, and that was what had caused him to slip.

He scrambled up to the body and hauled it out of the thin covering of ash that remained on top of it. The fine flakes of ash, blowing this way and that in the howling winds, had eaten away at the body, eroding its very flesh, and the skin in most places was nothing but a mass of tiny lacerations, leaving the body a horribly flayed, bloody mess. Some places were worse than others, presumably since those parts buried the deepest had been least affected, but the face was in tatters and only the body's substantial frame gave it away as male.

Pulling open the thick black jacket in which the body was clothed, Morden was quite surprised to find it armoured. Competently made – if unspectacular – flak armour covered the chest and the arms as far as the elbows. Patting the legs, Morden was certain the same armour extended over the thighs as well: a pretty useful suit.

Morden began to search the body for dues as to its identity. The man was well equipped, and his pockets were filled with ammo as well as several other pieces of equipment such as grapnels, binoculars and a toxdetector, none of which had done their owner any good, of course.

Fumbling around inside the jacket, Morden pulled out a wad of papers. The high winds rushing over the steep sided dune whipped the uppermost sheets from his hands before he could read them and Morden wisely turned his back to the wind, holding the papers in the shielded area between himself and the body. He could find nothing to identify the man, but as he unfolded the largest of the parchments he gawped in amazement.

It was a wanted poster, of the kind issued only by guilders, and staring back at Morden from its centre was the face of one Jurgen Ducott, the outlander Jurgen to whom he had been introduced just days before. Morden already knew Jurgen was a wanted man but he was stunned

nonetheless, firstly to find that bounty hunters were so close on Jurgen's trail and secondly to find that according to this poster, Jurgen was not wanted for fleeing the guilders, but rather for forgery. Something was not quite right.

THE ROPE BIT into Morden's flesh as his shirt again came loose and rose up over his stomach. He clumsily stuffed the cloth back inside his belt, trying to keep the taut, rough rope away from his skin. It was hardly a dignified end to his journey, but Morden was damned if he was going to carry a stinking body all the way in to town. As it was, the soft ash offered little resistance, and the body glided along behind Morden, sled-like on the end of the rope tied round his waist.

Two great crowned pillars – in fact a crumbling building with cornice intact – rose up ahead of Morden and, passing beneath it, he found himself once more in Fall Sands. He had clearly not been following Jurgen's route after all, but the dead man was at least on the right track, if too late, and Morden had found the settlement with little difficulty by continuing in the same direction.

He was greatly reassured to be back and concerns over how much to reveal to Lakatos had vanished from his mind. Having found the body of a man who died in the storms, Morden unsurprisingly found it easy to concentrate on his own well being. Only now did he start to concern himself again with what news to report. In any case, he had much more to discuss than just Handomel.

He had gone no great distance into the settlement before Erket and Lirbus emerged up ahead. Morden blocked sight of the body, but the unusually large puffs of ash kicked up in his wake and his own peculiar gait clearly caught their attention and they both hurried down the street towards him.

'You've brought us back a present,' said Lirbus mockingly.

'Yes,' said Morden, 'and you can carry it the rest of the fragging way.'

With that, he cut the rope loose from around his waist and marched off ahead. Lirbus and Erket gazed at the body, and then at Morden, and then at each other.

ERKET ROLLED THE body off his shoulder and slammed it down on the table, Lirbus having opted to ‘get the doors’ on the short trek back to the ganghouse. Lakatos, Morden and the others were already assembled around the table, though Jurgen was absent still consumed by his curious ciphers. A fact for which Morden was immensely thankful.

Lakatos looked down at the body, one gloved fist pressed to his face index finger across his mouth. He said nothing, prompting Morden to explain with a simple nod of his head instead.

‘He was out in the wastes, dead already, but I have no idea how long. He could have been there weeks, or the ash could have done this to him in hours. His tracks were still fresh, though, so I guess not long,’ said Morden.

‘Who is he?’ asked Lakatos.

‘Nothin’ on him to say,’ said Morden, ‘except...’

He flung the wanted poster down on top of the dead man’s chest. Lakatos and most of the others leaned closer. There was silence for the second it took them to make out the face before an astonished gasp rang out from the assembled Cawdor. Lakatos raised his head, staring at the ceiling in contemplation and stepped away from the table. He began to pace around but said nothing.

‘He’s a liar,’ yelped Erket. ‘Damned outlander’s a fraud.’ He seemed ready to go on with his vitriol, but a swift slap across the back of the head silenced the irksome little juve. Morden wasn’t sure who had slapped him but certainly thought it a wise decision. He manoeuvred himself closer to Erket, in case further chastisement was needed. Morden needed to keep a tight rein on this discussion and he wasn’t going to let the chip on Erket’s shoulder derail that.

Deveres stepped away from the table, shuffling over towards the door where Lakatos paced. The others followed, forming a loose crowd at the end of the table where the body’s feet lay.

‘What do you make of it, boss?’ asked Deveres.

Lakatos frowned as he looked up. ‘I’m not sure...’ he said. His voice trailed off as he began to pace again. This can wait. Morden, tell me about Lago.’

Morden coughed. ‘I asked Addec and...’

His voice trailed off as his and every pair of eyes in the room turned and focused on the figure that had just appeared in the doorway. It was Jurgen.

'Lago?' he asked, before noticing the unusually attentive crowd around him. 'Did you say "Lago"? What's going on?' Morden placed his hand firmly on Erket's shoulder, almost holding him by the neck just in case the juve had any rash ideas about making this his moment. The room remained utterly silent as Lakatos turned to Jurgen. 'Lago?' asked Lakatos. 'Who is Lago? What do you know about him?' 'He...' Jurgen seemed, for the first time a little nervous. 'He's the bounty hunter the guilders sent after me. They tried to kill me in Fortune Caves, but I escaped so they sent him after me. He nearly caught up with me in Dead Man's Hole a month ago. That's when I fled and ended up here.'

'They sent Lago after *you*?' asked Lakatos, his emphasis clear to Morden but meaning little to Jurgen or the others.

'Yes,' said Jurgen, more nervous than before, 'and he won't stop till he gets me. He's a psychopath. He doesn't do it for the bounty. He thinks he's some kinda saint, out to get all the sinners. He won't stop till he's killed me. What's going on? Why are you talking about Lago?'

Lakatos raised his gloved left hand and snapped his fingers. A moment of scuffling followed before Morden pushed his way through the crowd, wanted poster in hand, and passed it to Lakatos. Erket was the least of his worries and Morden strolled over to stand between Jurgen and the door, just in case.

Lakatos remained as calm as ever as he passed the poster to Jurgen. Jurgen paused for a moment staring at the poster. His lips didn't move as he read it, making him an accomplished reader by Underhive standards, thought Morden.

'Well I'll be damned,' he said at last. 'Where did you get this?'

'Is it true?' asked Lakatos.

'Is it true that I'm wanted?' said Jurgen. 'You know it is. That's why I came here, to get away from the guilders.'

'Is it true, said Lakatos, 'that you are a forger?'

'See here,' said Jurgen, still rattled, 'the guilders can't go saying "Wanted: Jurgen Ducott for writing us an unbreakable code" now can they? Soon as they do that, they give themselves away, and everyone knows about the code. They might not know where it's hidden or how it

works, but they'd know it exists. Now where did you get this? And what's this talk about Lago? Did he give you this?' he finished.

Lakatos stepped back. He held his arm to his side, pointing towards the table and instantly the crowd of Cawdor gangers parted, revealing the body. Jurgen squinted in amazement before strolling up to the table and running his hands over the body.

'We found the poster on him, Jurgen. That dead guy was carrying it,' said Morden.

'Oh no,' said Jurgen, peering into the dead man's eyes. This man works for Lago.'

CHAPTER FIVE

‘THIS IS ONE of them?’ asked Catafengi as he stooped over the body dumped unceremoniously on the stone floor. ‘You are quite sure?’

‘Quite sure,’ said Lakatos. ‘He had Handomel’s name and likeness in his pocket when we found him. He died out in the storms, between Handomel’s territory and mine.’

‘Hmm,’ said Catafengi. ‘It was my understanding that this Lago had acted alone in killing Handomel.’ Catafengi returned to his throne and sat himself down in it, all the more puzzled.

‘Lago alone killed Handomel, yes,’ said Lakatos, ‘but it seems he does not always work alone.’

Catafengi bowed his head a little ‘What does he want with us, Lakatos? What does he want with us?’

Lakatos shook his head. ‘I do not know, master, but I will find out soon enough and I will remove this thorn from our side. Do not worry.’

‘Very well, Lakatos,’ said Catafengi. ‘Do not fail me.’ Catafengi nodded, as if dismissing Lakatos, but he remained.

‘There is one more thing, the other matter, master,’ said Lakatos.

‘The *other* matter?’

‘Yes, master. The matter of my succession.’

‘Hmm,’ said Catafengi, surprised by Lakatos’s boldness. ‘I fear this is a little premature while we have an enemy upon us Lakatos.’ The pair remained silent eyeing one another for a moment before Catafengi relented.

‘Go on,’ he said. ‘Is it Morden?’

‘No, master,’ said Lakatos. ‘I thought that had you wanted him to succeed me, you would have named him.’

‘Very wise,’ said Catafengi. ‘You have read my intentions well, but then who have you chosen? I am not so sure there are any who are ready for it,

Lakatos.'

There is one,' said Lakatos. 'I am quite certain. He is a new recruit, master, and a most promising one at that. He has served me well this past time. I have brought him here to meet you. More than that, I think he may well hold the key to dealing with our other predicament.'

'Oh?' said Catafengi, raising his head, his curiosity piqued.

Lakatos bowed and turned back towards the door. He stood in the doorway motioning to someone outside. As he returned, a second man followed; a strangely garbed man that Catafengi had not seen before.

'Grand Master Catafengi,' said Lakatos, 'I give you Brother Jurgen.'

The second man halted some distance away and dropped to his knee bowing his head and remaining motionless on the cold stone floor. Catafengi shuffled over to where Jurgen knelt and scrutinised him closely. He had none of the garb of either a Cawdor or a Redemptionist and his appearance troubled Catafengi greatly.

'A convert?' he asked.

'Yes, mas-' began Lakatos, before Catafengi's upraised finger silenced him.

'I ask the newcomer,' he said.

'Yes, master,' said Jurgen, never lifting his gaze from the floor. 'I have journeyed far and I have often been made unwelcome. I have gone amongst others who didn't know my allegiance, master. Forgive me.'

Catafengi paused for a moment's thought. This Jurgen seemed honest enough and he was certainly not the first of the cult's members to go plainly into the wider Underhive.

'Very well, Brother Jurgen, you are welcome here,' Catafengi said at last. Jurgen gave one last nod of his head in appreciation and rose from his kneeling position, daring at last to look upon Catafengi.

'Tell me, Brother Lakatos,' said Catafengi in a tone of voice designed to test Lakatos's patience, 'what has our new recruit done to impress you so?'

'Jurgen...' said Lakatos.

Jurgen stepped forwards, drawing a wad of parchments from his pockets. He unfolded them and removed the top two sheets. He held them out in his hand, offering them to Lakatos who waved him off. Jurgen instead passed the sheets to Catafengi directly.

Catafengi inspected the sheets. One was a wanted poster of the sort typically posted by guilders. The other was a simple grant of passage and Catafengi remained unimpressed.

Jurgen drew near, taking the sheets back from Catafengi, though holding them at arm's length the whole time, like the reluctant grasp of a conjuror who presented his offerings from a distance so as to allow no hint of trickery. Jurgen even spun the sheets on their corners, showing them front and back to Catafengi as he backed away. Catafengi nodded and waved his hand for Jurgen to continue. The spectacle – was amusing if nothing else.

Jurgen pulled a canteen from his coat and, finding it difficult to both open the stiff canteen and hold the parchments, he passed the sheets to Lakatos who held them by their corners in the same ginger manner. Catafengi was intrigued as to why the pair of them seemed so suspiciously proud of these simple parchment.

Jurgen tugged at the canteen's stopper. It came away with a high-pitched *plop* and he raised the canteen over the parchments and emptied the contents over them, dousing them so that both sheets quicky became heavy. The sheets folded in on themselves and hung from Lakatos's grasp like heavy rags.

Jurgen took one sheet from Lakatos, pulling it taut by its sides, and walked back towards Catafengi. Lakatos did likewise, straightening out the sheet he held in his own hands as he went.

Jurgen passed his sheet to Catafengi, who was increasingly baffled by the display. He frowned as he took the sheet, less than thrilled to have the paper dripping all over his robes: He held the paper out in front of him and was instantly aghast.

A verse, copied word for word from the ancient ideologum that Catafengi had furnished Lakatos with long ago, was hidden beneath the wanted poster's surface, apparently embedded in its very fibres in an ink that had remained invisible until wetted.

'Astonishing,' said Catafengi as Lakatos passed him the second sheet. It similarly bore hidden text revealed by the dousing.

'They are quite undetectable and they will allow us to communicate freely with our friends all over the hive. Even our friends in the highest of places, master,' said Lakatos.

‘There is simply no danger of their contents being uncovered. They are of Jurgen’s making, master,’ he continued. ‘We have a ready supply of suitable documents, master. They merely need impregnating with Jurgen’s magic.’

‘Impressive,’ said Catafengi, his mind boggling at the possibilities offered by this new recruit’s peculiar talents.

‘There is more,’ said Lakatos. He nodded again to Jurgen and the newcomer drew another sheet of parchment from his pocket. He unfolded it once more and, this time without waiting for a prompt, handed it directly to Catafengi in his throne.

Catafengi took the sheet from Jurgen, pulling it close to his face so that his old eyes could make out the dark print on the grubby parchment. He gawped in astonishment which quiddy turned to anger.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he barked. ‘Lakatos, what have you done?’

In his hands, Catafengi clutched a wanted poster, just like the rather more anonymous example with which Jurgen had demonstrated his hidden writing. This one, however, was instantly familiar, bearing as it did, Lakatos’s masked countenance on its sepia background.

Lakatos chuckled as he approached the old man. ‘I thought it a rather good likeness,’ said Lakatos. ‘Don’t you? He’s as much an artist as a forger, our Jurgen,’ he said.

Catafengi raised his head and, through his tall, conical hood, glared at Lakatos with one eye. ‘Then this is a fake?’ he asked at last, only slowly starting to understand.

‘Quite,’ said Lakatos. ‘Though I wouldn’t call myself innocent of everything it says.’ He gave a deep belly laugh as he finished, far too proud of his own foolery for Catafengi’s liking. This Jurgen, Catafengi thought to himself, was proving rather interesting.

‘I didn’t have it in mind to make it known to the others,’ said Jurgen, ‘since you never know who you might need to fool, but I thought it only right and proper that I avail myself to Lakatos.’

‘And I, you,’ Lakatos said to Catafengi in turn.

‘Good, good, good,’ said Catafengi. ‘You are right, and I am glad none know about your forgery. Indeed, you never know how much more

smoothly things might pass the fewer people know about them. We will keep this our secret,' he said. 'Understand?'

'Yes, master,' said Lakatos.

'Yes... master,' said Jurgen. It took a swift dig in the ribs from Lakatos to elicit the address but Catafengi cared little. He only really enjoyed the formality when it came from arrogant fools like Lakatos.

'You see,' said Catafengi, 'we must be careful in all things not to reveal ourselves. We have many enemies, many troublemakers who need to be removed, but to act against them openly invites scrutiny. We must wait until an opportunity gifts itself to us. Until now that is...'

'Master?' asked Jurgen.

'If our enemies also happened to be wanted by the guilders, it would be rather easier for us to deal with them, would it not?' said Catafengi.

'Of course, master,' said Lakatos. 'We could strike them down with total impunity, if only they were wanted by the guilders.'

Catafengi detected the same smug tone in Lakatos's voice as in his own, and the pair both turned quizzically to Jurgen. He took a moment before nodding in reply, a wicked smile forming on his lips. Clearly, he understood the plan.

'Then I will go at once, master,' said Jurgen, 'and make wanted men of our enemies.'

'Patience Jurgen,' said Catafengi, turning to Lakatos. And the other matter? What does Jurgen know of it?' asked Catafengi.

Lakatos stepped forward with a start. He had clearly forgotten it.

'Ah, ah yes,' he blurted. This Lago is not unknown to you Jurgen, is he?'

'No, not at all,' said Jurgen. Catafengi leaned forward, listening closely as Jurgen began his tale of Alderman Greim followed by his own. He continued with the tale of Lago on his tail and a half dozen daring escapes from his clutches. Catafengi remained silent as the tale concluded, careful to give away nothing of his own feelings.

'If I were a rash man, Jurgen,' he said at last, 'I might jump to the conclusion that it is you who has brought Lago to our little corner of the hive and brought this trouble upon us.'

Lakatos gulped. His arrogance had led him to overlook this rather obvious condusion and Catafengi enjoyed watching him squirm. In the end, it was Jurgen who answered the accusation.

‘Perhaps, master,’ he said, ‘but I do not think you are a rash man.’

Catafengi was impressed. Jurgen clearly hid a wisdom easily the equal of any possessed by his other servants. Still, Catafengi was not yet sure of his motives.

‘Lago may well be looking for me,’ said Jurgen, ‘but I didn’t bring him here. I have never heard of this Handomel, and I don’t know what Lago wants with him. Seems to me we’re in this together.’

This much at least made sense to Catafengi, and he was satisfied that Jurgen was not more trouble than he was worth, though the mystery of Handomel’s demise still troubled him greatly. Even if Jurgen didn’t know the answers, Catafengi felt sure he was the man best placed to discover them.

‘How, then, do you suppose Lago’s bounty hunter found you here?’ asked Catafengi.

‘Well,’ said Jurgen, ‘I can’t be sure he did. Could just be blind luck. The fool got lost out in the storms and just happened to be carrying my poster on him when he did.’

Catafengi nodded. It was certainly possible.

‘Or it could be the guilders know more than I reckoned,’ said Jurgen. ‘I swore myself to the Redemption long ago, but I did my best to keep it from them.’

It was a familiar story to Catafengi’s ears. The Redemption had adherents throughout the hive from the very highest families of the Spire to the very lowliest dregs of the sump. Only two things united this disparate congregation: their unrelenting devotion to the Emperor’s good works, and the hateful persecution that their beliefs invited from the rest of the hive’s population. To those who did not believe, the Redemption was a dangerous, destabilising cult. They loathed its influence and feared its unseen agents, and hence punished all those who made their devotion known. Catafengi bitterly hated this ill treatment of his brothers, but he understood their need for secrecy and thought no less of Jurgen for his secret loyalty all these years.

‘I could be wrong’ said Jurgen. ‘Perhaps they always knew I was secretly faithful. If they did, then Lago’s just going through the list, I guess, and checking out every Redemptionist refuge he can find. He might

not even know I'm here yet. Maybe that's how Handomel ended up crossing him.'

Catafengi paused. This was compelling speculation. 'Very well,' he said at length. 'Jurgen, take one of Lakatos's men to meet what remains of Handomel's gang. Find out from them what you can, and then decide how to proceed. Once the matter of Lago is in hand, we can progress.'

'Progress?' asked Jurgen. From his post behind Jurgen's shoulder, Lakatos nodded deferentially, but Jurgen was as yet unaware of the greater scheme unfolding around him. Catafengi had no desire to waste his time explaining and was mercifully relieved when

Lakatos hurriedly stepped forwards in interjection.

'Yes, ah, Jurgen, there is *much* we must tell you.'

THE THREE OF them strolled over the cracked steps at the base of the dome. Most people aimed their gaze at Catafengi passed. He seldom left his shack these days, and even those that travelled with him would be more accustomed to seeing his rarefied litter than the man himself. The red-hooded men that scurried around, trying to look busy in the presence of their prophet, would take Lakatos and Jurgen for great and powerful figures to have drawn Catafengi from his chambers, and it was an impression Catafengi certainly wished to cultivate.

When the time for crusade came, it was men like Lakatos and Jurgen to whom he would have to entrust much of his plan, and any faith in them he could inspire now would be priceless. As much as he sought to introduce Jurgen to the ways of the cult, it was just as vital to introduce the cult to him. He foresaw greatness for this Jurgen... Great and fiery things indeed.

'These are our brothers, Jurgen,' Catafengi said. 'These are our brothers who bear the mantle openly, and they suffer greatly for it,' he said.

Jurgen looked away in thought.

'It is the reason, no doubt that you are before me dressed as you are,' said Catafengi. 'I think you know well how our faith suffers at the hands of unbelievers? The unbelievers hound us, in the name of the dark things in their hearts and in the name of that bastard Helmawr. They fear us because our faith in the Emperor is so great that we resist their lies and do not blindly serve them when it is not what the Emperor asks. Helmawr acts

for himself, and all who work for him do likewise. They are infidels, cowards and traitors. They do not serve the Emperor as we do, they enact nothing of his will but that which will make them fat and bloated, or sate their perverted appetites and fulfil their wicked desires. And yet they hound us.'

At this, Lakatos raised his gloved palm, firmly patting a passing Redemptionist on the shoulder as if in a sign of solidarity. It will take braver actions than that thought Catafengi, though he refrained from pointing it out. Lakatos was arrogant and prone to gesture, but he was faithful and his well-aimed zeal served Catafengi well.

'We are not alone of course. Our enemies prove their own cowardice in that they dare not fight us when we come in the guise of that brave House, Cawdor. That is why you are so important to us, you and your kind,' Catafengi said.

'You see, Jurgen,' he continued, 'it is not solely Lakatos who has pledged himself to our cause, but there are many like him all about this place The time is coming when, all together, we will act.'

'Master?' asked Jurgen.

'That we can hide ourselves away here is thanks to the hard work of Lakatos and his Union, and Addec and the others like them. It allows for time away from prying eyes, for the time to plan and to .prepare for what is coming. Do you know what is coming, Jurgen?'

'Redemption is coming. Redemption comes for us all,' said Jurgen, his voice strong and certain in his words.

'Very good,' said Catafengi, 'but it does not come quickly or easily. Nor does it come quietly when not called for. It comes by blood and sweat and sacrifice. It comes by crusade, Jurgen, it comes only by crusade. That is what is coming the crusade for redemption.'

Catafengi watched for the newcomer's reaction, but it was muted and hard to place. Indeed, Lakatos, who had heard such words many times before, seemed the more startled. Perhaps he detected in Catafengi's voice the imminence with which he saw events unfolding.

'I do not think we need wait long before our crusade begins, brothers,' he said at last as much to confirm Lakatos's suspicion as to inform Jurgen. Jurgen, he was sure, understood already, no matter how recent his arrival. Great things. Great and fiery things... You see,' Catafengi continued, the

three of them still strolling slowly across the rubble at the foot of what once must have been a considerable causeway. ‘You see, there have been many crusades, many brave and devout martyrs, Jurgen. They came as raging tides of fire and they swept away much that was unclean, but like all tides, they were driven back. It will not be this way for us, Jurgen.’

‘Emperor wills it,’ said Jurgen.

‘Indeed he does. That is why he has gifted us such territory as we now hold: Fall Sands, the Fulcrum Spike, the Ash Bluff, the Seven Domes of Fire. We bear all these things in his name though to our enemies they appear divided and spread amongst many gangs. All the Redemption holds, they take from us, the unbelievers, but all Cawdor holds, they fear to touch, the cowards. That is why they do not drive us out as they have our brothers: They do not realise what they face. They do not realise that we are so many, and when the time comes, they will be too few to stop us, I am quite sure.’

‘I am sure there is no one who could stand against us, master. We are well prepared,’ said Lakatos, his arrogance and craving of attention forcing him to butt in when he had little to say.

‘Indeed we are, though there are yet a few preparations to be made,’ said Catafengi, ‘and that is your job, Jurgen, to complete our preparations so that our crusade may begin.’

‘Me?’ asked Jurgen, his voice hinting at a modicum of surprise.

‘Yes,’ said Catafengi. ‘I have decided that when our crusade begins, Lakatos will be at my side. The Union will have its part to play, however, and it is you who must direct it. Are you ready for this responsibility?’

‘Yes,’ said Jurgen, ‘as the Emperor wills it, so it is done.’

‘Very good, Jurgen. Very good. There was a man named Handomel, what do you know of him?’

‘I’ve heard a thing or two from some of the others,’ said Jurgen. Lakatos hissed his annoyance. Still, thought Catafengi, if nothing else it proved Lakatos had at least chosen the most tight-lipped of his apprentices for a successor. This would prove a wise choice, he was sure.

‘Handomel is dead,’ began Catafengi, ‘and I am not sure that any of those he has left behind is yet ready to complete his work: our work. I will not have one hand with a missing finger before we begin, Jurgen. Just as

Lakatos has made sure of the Union's strength, we must be sure that Handomel's men are still strong without him.'

'You wish me to replace Handomel, master?' asked Jurgen.

'No, Jurgen, no. I simply wish to know that Handomel has been replaced by one of his own; someone with whom you can deal. Unity has always been our strength, Jurgen. Communication is vital to that and your secret messages will do much to bolster it. It is the Emperor who dictates this crusade, but it shall be I who interprets, and as I do so, word must be spread. It will be up to you, Jurgen, to see that all our brothers know their roles without our enemies discovering them... You must make contact with whoever is fit to succeed Handomel – at once, or you may wait until Lago is dealt with, I leave it to you – but then you must share your secrets with them so that we will have a network. Then you must spread word across it exactly as I tell you, when I tell you. Do you understand?'

'Yes, master,' said Jurgen. 'I understand everything.'

'We have already made such preparations with Addec, master,' said Lakatos, quick to interject.

'Good. Soon we shall begin, but quietly at first. You will produce wanted posters for the most dangerous of our enemies, and we shall eliminate them without suspicion and leave their gangs leaderless. Then we shall begin in earnest. Are you ready to begin?'

'Yes, master,' said Jurgen. 'I am ready for all of this.' 'Very well,' said Catafengi. 'Go now and do as I have said. Our crusade begins soon.'

'Yes, master.' Jurgen dropped to his knee in a hasty bow. He rose quickly, instantly turned on his heel and was gone, hurrying across the steps.

Lakatos tarried a moment longer, stopping on the steps as if awaiting Catafengi's approval. Catafengi was well pleased with Lakatos and his actions but had little desire to bolster the man's ego further and granted him no more than a single nod. This was enough, and Lakatos was gone. Their destiny awaited them all and all knew it was within touching distance.

Catafengi breathed deeply of the smoke-laden air around him. Exhaling, he felt more powerful than he had in decades. His time was at hand, a time for great things. Great and fiery things.

CHAPTER SIX

‘DEVERES!’ LAKATOS SHOUTED the name even before he reached the entrance to the ganghouse. Deveres didn’t think it especially wise to let him shout it again and quickly scrambled down the ladder from his perch on the roof.

‘Go with Jurgen,’ he said.

‘Okay,’ said Deveres. Where?’

‘The Ore Chasm. Jurgen is going to see Handomel’s gang.’

Deveres’s heart sank All around him he heard titters of laughter. Only Morden offered a sympathetic half-smile.

‘In the storms?’ asked Deveres, though having seen Morden sent out just days ago he knew any protest was pointless.

‘Yes,’ said Lakatos, ‘and take this stinking thing with you.’ Lakatos kicked the bounty hunter’s mutilated body where it lay on the exposed iron skeleton of the building’s plascrete floor. ‘Get rid of it.’

‘NO, WE’VE GOT to get right away from the track,’ said Jurgen. They had trudged through the ash for the entirety of the previous day and Deveres was sure there was no way anybody would find the body out here anyway. He had little stomach for a journey right out into the dunes.

‘There’ll be hell to pay if anyone finds out one of Lago’s men is dead. For a start, there’ll be a hundred damned bounty hunting idiots looking to cash in on all his unfulfilled contracts. Those contracts include me, and the rest of you I shouldn’t wonder, so let’s make sure we leave him where no one will ever find him.’

Deveres wasn’t sure the rotting corpse they hauled behind them deserved quite such an effort, but Jurgen was stubborn on the matter, to the point of seeming almost fearful, and Deveres saw little point in going against him.

‘Who the heck is he, anyway?’ asked Deveres.

‘I don’t know his name, but I’ve seen him before He works for Lago.’

‘Lago?’ asked Deveres. ‘I mean, I know he’s a bounty hunter, but what makes him so special?’

The pair trudged over the shallow bluff to their left, heading away from the more easily traversed route, which followed so far.

‘Lago is something else,’ said Jurgen. ‘He was the guilders’ first choice of hired gun for the most part. Back in Glory Hole, they used to say the only guilders not using Lago were the crooked ones; the ones Lago was probably already after.’

The ash began to drag at Deveres’s feet and with each step he seemed to be sinking deeper into the stuff, but Jurgen marched on, trying to get further and further from the track. At least with Deveres’s lagging, his section of the rope was going slack and Jurgen was doing most of the pulling. Deveres reluctantly followed him, jogging along so as to stay close enough behind for him to be able to make out what Jurgen was saying.

‘They trusted him, too, in a way you just can’t trust a hired gun. When I was still working for the guilders, Lago was the man they chose every time someone ripped them off. If one of the shipments came in not matching the inventory in the cipher, then Lago was the one they put on it’

They crossed another spine of dunes, Deveres almost tumbling down the opposite side as he incautiously ran over its crest. Ahead of them, there was nothing but an endless, shifting sea of ash and Deveres was sure this would be far enough, but Jurgen slogged on.

‘He was quiet, see, no fuss. Never left a clue as to why he’d come or gone. The guilders wanted it that way. You make too much mess knocking off the kind of people that he was knocking off, and someone’s gonna join the dots, gonna realise that the guilders are onto whoever’s ripping them off. If that happens, well, it’s only a short step until someone realises *how* the guilders got onto them, and that was a secret worth protecting, like I told you.’

‘Is that why they set him after you?’ asked Deveres. They’d stopped walking – or rather Jurgen had stopped walking and Deveres had followed suit – and both men gazed around them. The dunes rose up in every direction, one after another, in waves. The winds were stronger here too,

causing the dunes to grow and melt away right before their very eyes. There was no danger of navigable tracts here.

Jurgen pulled a shovel free from the kit roped to his back and dug its blade down into the ash, leaving the tool standing firmly upright as he delved into his pocket and pulled out a curious looking metal triangle. He fiddled with the metal object before dropping it to the ground at his feet as he answered Deveres's question.

'I reckon so. See, the guilders kill me, and people are going to wonder why. What did I do? What did I *have*?' he said. 'Bounty hunters are scum for the most part, in for what they can get. If they had the faintest idea that the guilders were after me for something I took, they'd find it. They'd have found those parchments, I could have bought my life by sharing the secret with whoever caught me and where would the guilders be then?'

Deveres and Jurgen both churned shovel after shovel of ash, but it was hard going. The high winds drove ash across the shallow hole and seemed to fill it almost as quickly as Deveres could dig. Jurgen was having better luck, though. Deveres looked across at him. He seemed to be almost digging across the ground, creating a shallow angle so that the winds worked with him, blowing the ash clear of what was already dug. Deveres did likewise and saw the hole deepen quickly, though it took him a minute more to realise he should really be piling the ash downwind of the hole.

'Not Lago, though. They trust him,' said Jurgen, still shovelling away vigorously. 'I bet they sent him after me to make sure I was done for and to get the parchments back. You know, apart from me, I bet he was the only non-guilder who knew about those things,' he said, patting his pocket in a brief break from the backbreaking digging. Deveres dug on, though he was making nowhere near the headway that Jurgen.

'Except for all of us, now,' said Deveres, his speech slightly rushed as he struggled for breath, exhausted by the heavy going with the shovel.

'Yeah,' said Jurgen, laughing, 'except for all of you, and that's just fine by me,' he said. The hole was still remarkably shallow, but Jurgen seemed satisfied. He said nothing, but laid down his shovel and moved over to the body, stooping by its feet. Deveres followed suit, bending down and grabbing the dead man's shoulders. He spoke as they shuffled towards the freshly dug shallow grave.

‘Where in the hell did this Lago come from?’ asked Deveres. ‘I’ve met plenty of bounty hunters, and they weren’t anything like you describe.’

They stopped at the holes edge. The body was heavy and neither man waited more than a moment before unceremoniously dumping it into its ad-hoc resting place.

‘No, perhaps not,’ said Jurgen, picking up his shovel and pushing the first shovelful of ash back on top of the body. ‘Truth is, I don’t really know where Lago came from. I doubt anyone does I heard a few things though.’

Deveres grabbed his own shovel, turning ash into the hole, but for the most part he found kicking over the great heaps with his feet to be more effective. Jurgen fell silent. Deveres looked up from his shovelling and Jurgen at last continued his story.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I heard one time that he was from the Spire, a bodyguard of sorts, but that his master was betrayed and killed, and all his men with him.’

‘Except Lago?’ asked Deveres.

‘Except Lago,’ said Jurgen. ‘He escaped and made it down here, and ever since he’s been loyal to whoever it was he served, or loyal to something they asked of him maybe, or loyal to a cause, an ideal. Kinda like he thinks he serves the dead or some crazy bull like that. Except he picked the wrong cause,’ said Jurgen, laughing.

‘Amen to that, *brother*,’ said Deveres, before returning to the body in the hole before them. ‘Loyalty like that is a pretty rare thing down here, so I guess it stands to reason that he’d have to be from up there.’

‘You think it’s any different up there?’ said Jurgen, and Deveres paused for thought. It was a rhetorical question, though, and Jurgen carried on.

‘Then again,’ Jurgen said, ‘another time I heard he wasn’t even real, and that every time the guilders wanted to put the frighteners on someone, they said Lago was after them. Anybody the guilders hired, they got to be Lago until the job was done. Then again, others say he’s real, but not really human. They say the guilders kinda just grew him in a vat to do their work for them, so who’s to say?’

‘Maybe he’s already dead. Maybe he died out in the storms just like this guy,’ said Deveres, dropping his tool to the ground as the last shovelful of ash filled the hole. The howling winds had already transformed the landscape around them and bare seconds after the implement hit the

ground it was covered in ash. The hole – or rather the shallow grave of this unfortunate bounty hunter – likewise was instantly indistinguishable from the ground around it and Deveres was quite certain it was a job well done. He looked up from the ground to congratulate Jurgen, but he was nowhere to be seen.

'Jurgen!' he yelled out. 'Jurgen!' But there was no reply. Deveres turned around but there was still no sign of Jurgen. Damn these storms, he thought to himself as the wind bit at his face and the ash clogged his eyes. The wind had picked up dangerously and Deveres could hardly stand. Where the hell was he? Where the hell was Jurgen?

Deveres almost leapt out of his skin as he felt a firm hand on his shoulder. He realised that when he had turned away from the grave, he had completely lost his bearings, and even turning back on the spot he couldn't be sure he faced the same direction in which he had begun. He gave a silent prayer that Jurgen had him in his sights all along.

'Come on he said, let's get back to the track.' Jurgen dropped to his haunches, almost kneeling in the ash. By his feet was the curious, triangular metal object which Deveres had seen him drop when they first reached the spot.

Jurgen held another curious metal implement in his hand: a skeleton-like rack of metal rods. Jurgen pulled at it with his gloved hands, unfolding the contraption and when he had finished Deveres saw that it was a triangular frame, a little larger than the other triangular object with the rods forming odd little legs of different lengths.

Jurgen placed it over the first triangular object and pushed it down into the ash until the triangular frame at the top dicked with the object's edges. With that Jurgen tapped it, and pulled the block and frame away, curiously leaving the rods in the ash. Deveres stared in amazement.

Jurgen pulled out one particular rod, taking great care to pinch it at the point at which it left the ash. He held it up to his face and by the awkward way in which Jurgen seemed to be moving his fingers up the rod, Deveres presumed he was measuring something. Jurgen froze for a moment, rubbing his chin before he at last rose to his feet. As he did so, he swiped the triangular object over the rods and they all leapt out clinging to it. It seemed as though the object was a magnet of some sort. With that Jurgen was off, pacing across the dunes. Deveres dashed to keep up.

‘What was that?’ he asked.

‘An old ratskin trick I picked up,’ he said. ‘We can’t just go back the way we came, ‘cos we can’t really be sure which way that is. Besides, winds this strong will be pushing at us all the way we walk, pushing us off course maybe pointing us the wrong way, you know?’

Deveres well understood what he meant.

‘That little trick catches the ash up against its edge, so I can see where it’s come from, and how much of its piled up. Gives me the direction of the wind, its speed and the amount of ash it’s shifting. It’s enough for us to correct our course as we walk. You got me?’

Deveres nodded enthusiastically, though in truth he had barely heard half of what Jurgen had said, let alone followed it. He couldn’t care less what he was on about, he was just relieved to be following someone with such a grasp of the treacherous conditions that surrounded them.

‘I’ll show you sometime,’ he said. ‘It might come in handy.’

JURGEN’S ROUTE HAD been quick enough, but it had brought them to what appeared to be a different track entirely, not at all where Deveres had expected. They had saved a great deal of time, according to Jurgen, but the drawback was that this next stretch would be all the more perilous for it, through the worst of the storms across a dome so ancient and so long abandoned that it no longer even had a name. Indeed, it wasn’t even really a dome anymore. Places like this were normally called deeps, for they surely didn’t deserve even the semblance of order that the word ‘dome’ conjured up.

They were the most decrepit edges of the Underhive, their architecture so utterly blasted, so totally collapsed to nothing, that they had become shapeless wildernesses with nothing to distinguish one region from another. They were uncharted and unchartable, and what form they originally took could only be guessed at from the intact domes further inhive. They were not nearly as deep as the sump or the lower regions, but at least there a constant trail of effluvium and by-products from the city above created areas of sufficient interest to attract settlements and, once in a while, even provided sufficient resources for people to survive.

Not so here. These forgotten edges of the hive's broad base benefited from no such run-off and were dry, blasted wastelands that Deveres could only imagine were every bit the equal of the terrible ash wastes that lay beyond the wall of the hive. He didn't know for sure since he had never left the hive, but he couldn't imagine the outside being any worse.

Indeed, right now, he wasn't very far from it. This western edge was where the ash actually entered the hive. A sheer wall covered with colossal turbine down-shafts that in an earlier age inhaled clean air from the atmosphere outside now did nothing but leak the ruined atmospheres foul detritus into the hive itself. That was why places like this had been abandoned, when the terrible smog of centuries in the world outside had built to such a level that it kicked back into the ventilation system. That was when the great and the good abandoned such places. They rose above them; building over the regions they could not repair and the people they had no desire to save. No matter the poison outside, the Spire always rose above it while those beneath it drowned. That was how Deveres felt now, drowned.

Jurgen seemed unperturbed, and Deveres was grateful that the ropes they had used to drag the bounty hunter's body out into the dunes were still tied around their waists. More than once he'd fallen to his knees and had been dragged over by Jurgen as he ploughed on ahead. Right now it was the only thing allowing Deveres to keep up with Jurgen.

The next stretch lasted less than an hour, but Deveres was a wreck by the end of it. Jurgen had led them right to the very wall itself, reasoning that being under the vast downpipes was probably the safest place to be. He was right, since their immense size meant they launched their ashy shot some hundreds of metres into the air, creating a kind of sheltered area directly beneath them where the air was still, though still choking thick with dust.

Now that they were at the foot of the wall, all Deveres wanted to do was sleep. There was little chance of that, though, as Jurgen kept up his frantic pace. It was too much for Deveres and he soon fell to his knees again. This time he didn't stand but instead gathered what remained of his strength to pull back hard on the rope, halting Jurgen's furious march and drawing him back towards him.

'What's up?' asked Jurgen as he returned to the kneeling Deveres.

‘Rest,’ said Deveres, barely able to muster that one word.

‘Fine,’ said Jurgen, replying in a terse tone.

‘COME ON,’ SAID Jurgen. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Huh?’ said Deveres, only slowly waking up as Jurgen shook him by the shoulder. He rubbed his eyes and stretched his sore shoulders, finding the strength to stand. ‘That’s it?’ he asked. It felt like bare minutes since they had stopped to rest

‘That’s it,’ said Jurgen. ‘Let’s go.’ And with that they did.

THE WINDS SEEMED a little less severe as they continued their trek or perhaps Deveres was better rested than he thought. He was grateful that they had avoided the worst of the storms, but following this southerly route along the wall had left them with a rather longer journey to the Ore Chasm than Deveres would have wanted. Still, he knew from taking the route in kinder seasons that the most direct route lay through half a dozen high-roofed, open and exposed deeps, and he couldn’t imagine how much worse the storms would be there. Three days in and Deveres was close to exhaustion. He was sure he wouldn’t have lasted three days by any other route.

Jurgen, though, seemed as strong as ever and his pace never slackened. Deveres struggled increasingly to keep up and soon found himself forced to jog to match Jurgen’s walking speed. More than once Jurgen had offered to slow down, but Deveres wasn’t about to admit weakness and, despite his exhaustion, he knew full well that if he didn’t keep up the pace they could be out here for days, and he dreaded that more than anything.

After another hour or two the landscape changed. A change in the direction of the wind, as often happened towards the end of the Ash Season, had driven the dunes up against the hive wall itself, as though the escaping winds had sucked the dunes up against it. Furrows close to the wall which had previously allowed safe passage were quickly vanishing before their eyes as the pair were forced to cross the treacherous drifts, further draining Deveres’s failing strength.

The dunes seemed to grow in size as they ploughed on, some of them so sheer that the men were forced to run in order to climb up them. One two,

three dunes in a row presented mounds so high that they could not be crossed at all and so the men's route became increasingly circuitous.

Another dune hove into view, smaller but all the steeper for it. Jurgen raced up, skidding a little but moving with sufficient momentum to carry him over it. Deveres followed, racing up the side, but his legs gave out. He crashed to the ground right atop the dune. He flung his arms forwards and rolled his bodyweight over the crest so that he wouldn't just slide back down to the ground and managed to haul himself down the other side. Clumsy as it might be, he had at least crossed the dune.

He pulled himself to his feet and gazed ahead. Jurgen was nowhere to be seen. He reached down to his waist, but the rope was gone. He cursed himself. He had untied it before drifting off to sleep earlier on. The rope's bulky knot had been uncomfortable, pressing into him as he lay, and in a moment of folly he had untied it.

'Jurgen!' he yelled out. 'Jurgen!' But there was no reply.

Deveres turned around but there was still no sign of Jurgen. Damn these storms, he thought to himself as the wind bit at his face and the ash dogged his eyes. The wind had picked up dangerously and Deveres could hardly stand. Where the hell was he? Where the hell was Jurgen?

CHAPTER SEVEN

COYNE RAN HIS fingers uneasily over the clip, turning it right round three hundred and sixty degrees, and pushing it back in until he heard the satisfying click before pulling back down on it and beginning the manic pattern all over again.

The gun had barely left his hand since Handomel died. Since Handomel was killed, that is. He'd reached for it the second he found the body – or at least what was left of it – and his finger had clutched the trigger every panicked step of the way back to the hideout. There had been no reports of Lago since then, but that didn't reassure Coyne any, and for the first few days he had cradled the gun day and night because of it. Now he cradled it for another reason. He cradled it because Vilhame cradled his pistol just the same, and the pair hadn't taken their eyes off each other for hours.

'This is my time, Coyne,' said Vilhame, his own manic fondling of his pistol betraying his attempts to present a menacing calm. 'You know Handomel would have picked me, if he'd lived. You know he would have. Don't make this any harder.'

'Handomel's not here to pick you, you dumb frik,' said Coyne, nerves showing through his genuine anger, 'and it doesn't seem like anybody else is picking you either.' Coyne didn't dare take his eyes off Vilhame, but he felt the support of the half dozen gangers shuffling around behind him.

'I'm picking,' said Frork from his position behind Vilhame's shoulder.

'And me,' said Chem next to him.

That was how this had all begun, with an honest attempt to stop the strife. Handomel's death left a terrible vacuum, and tempers threatened to fill it. Coyne had been successful enough in getting the others to agree to a vote, but he hadn't been so successful in making it stick. It was six to two in his favour, but the two backing Vilhame were Frork and Chem: the former carrying a heavy bolter, the latter a heavy stubber. Those two

weren't the smartest, so perhaps they thought their vote should count for more than the others. Either way, they figured Vilhame was the winner, and now the rules had changed. This was not going to be decided by a vote.

That had always been the difference between Vilhame and Coyne. They had always acted as Handomel's left and right hands, but they were totally unalike. Both possessed unrivalled leadership qualities, but Coyne practiced the smart-savvy kind of leadership where Vilhame acted as a fighting general, a follow me and no going back kind of leader. In Handomel's day, they had complemented each other perfectly. Coyne's cunning, his shrewd reasoning and quick wits used to get them out of trouble, Vilharne's fearlessness came into its own when the trouble had to be dealt with head on, while Handomel ruled over the whole bunch with his legendary oratory.

Handomel was more a preacher than a leader, and Coyne had always seen him going that way towards the end. He certainly hadn't seen him going so soon.

They weren't playing by Vilhame's rules yet. A few minutes of pointed pistols had quietened them down and left the entire gang stuck in the current standoff round the table. But they weren't Playing by Coyne's rules anymore either, and the longer this went on, the more chance Vilhame would just finish it his way – swiftly and violently. It was impossible to tell who would be the winner in the midst of this chaos, and Vilhame was smart enough to know that, and so for now at least Coyne could still try to win this battle with his wits alone.

'It's not as simple as that, is it Vilhame?' said Coyne. 'This isn't just about who replaces Handomel. This is about who serves Catafengi, and you know it as much as I do.'

The others round the table shuffled nervously at the mention of his name. Some knew nothing and cast questioning glances to one another; others knew the name, but feared to hear it mentioned so openly; and some still doubted the wisdom of doing so. That the gang – like all of House Cawdor – served the Redemption was no secret. That they served Catafengi and his cult in particular was not, however, common knowledge.

Coyne and Vilhame were well acquainted with Catafengi, having been Handomel's deputies and also his intermediaries, and they had dealt

frequently with the master. The others, however, were either ignorant or scared of him and so Coyne used his name like a weapon.

Sure enough, Frork and Chem became immediately uneasy at the mention of Catafengi. They were more than happy to use their brute force to pick their own leader, but to pick Catafengi's disciple? Perhaps even pick the wrong one... The oafish, muscular pair suddenly seemed far less certain of themselves as the realisation dawned on them that this was exactly what they were doing.

'Frag it!' yelled Vilhame as he rose from his seat. He spun his pistol in his palm, brought it instantly to a trigger grip and pointed its charred barrel directly at Coyne's head. In an instant the cluster of gangers behind Coyne raised their own weapons, every one of them trained on Vilhame. Coyne remained seated, resisting the urge to raise his own weapon. He knew full well this rash display was Vilhame's old battle savvy coming to the fore.

Vilhame had gambled and Coyne knew it. He'd aimed his weapon, but gambled that the others wouldn't shoot him instantly, and so he had created the standoff. All Vilhame needed was for Frork and Chem to let their tempers get the better of them, and Coyne and his supporters would be riddled with holes before they could get a single shot off.

But Coyne had already made his own play. He'd made his point. Frork and Chem knew they could triumph with brute force and heavy weapons right there and then. They would live, and Vilhame would be leader. And after that? How could they be sure that they were supporting the right man? Coyne could read the uncertainty in their eyes – kill him and what would Catafertgi say? It was a question they clearly didn't want answered.

Vilhame could still shoot his own pistol, of course, but he'd only get a single shot off before Coyne's men gunned him down, and then what would Frork and Chem gain by opening fire? Coyne, it seemed, had won the battle. Brains over brawn. Vilhame could still unleash his own customary havoc, but it would be suicidal. Coyne was ready to lay down the final challenge.

'Seems to me,' said Coyne, 'we could resolve all this with another vote. Bullets aren't going to sort this, are they boys?' He cast a stern glance at Froth and then to Chem. Their body language conceded defeat and even

Vilhame seemed to realise he was undone. He holstered his pistol and returned to his seat.

Boom.

It was as though Coyne could hear nothing but that single word whispered inside his own head. Blinding light flared around him, but the world seemed silent as he fell to the floor, a searing heat racing over his flesh. There was something before the boom, though, the last sound he could remember: breaking glass.

The window. A frag grenade had crashed through the window just as calm had returned, and now the chamber was engulfed in chaos once again. Vilhame, Frork and Chem were nowhere to be seen. The latter's heavy weapons lay burnt and twisted on the floor as the only evidence of their recent, explosive demise. The table at which they had been sitting pinned Coyne to the wall. One splintered corner was buried in his thigh, pinning it to the floor, while the table's top lay flat against his chest, face and left arm. Only his right arm remained clear of it, and he wriggled it up and down desperately to prove to himself that he was still alive. Coyne's head was pinned facing to the left, however, leaving his right arm out of sight, and his frantic grabbing at the air was not visible to him.

After a moment or two the panic subsided and Coyne drew his right arm closer to his body, wriggling it into the gap between the table and the wall. Coyne exhaled and arched his back against the wall as he began to push with his right arm and the table tilted forwards. It moved enough to release his head from the painful pressure, but at that upright angle it suddenly seemed as if it might come crashing back down on him all the harder. He had no time to waste, and Coyne roared in pain as he used his impaled leg to give him the extra push he needed to tip the table up and away from him, sending it crashing back to its original place in the middle of the floor, albeit upside down. He slumped back against the wall and breathed deeply, not yet daring to gaze down at his mangled leg.

The smoke had begun to clear and ahead of him he saw a pair of figures moving quickly out of the door, lasguns in hand. Scarr and Track had been caught in the blast too, but mercifully were flung clear, and without any rubble to trap them they quickly returned to their feet and dashed out in the direction of the unknown attacker. Whether it was by vote or default,

Coyne was the leader now, and he realised that he couldn't leave the survivors to deal with it alone.

He reached his arms up behind him, his fingers finding their way into the mass of holes and cracks that covered the wall's plascrete surface, giving his battered arms precious leverage with which to draw himself up onto his feet.

His right leg was a terrible mess, a gaping wound filled with scorched wooden splinters, and its tattered ligaments screamed with pain as he brought his weight onto it. His left leg remained as strong as ever, proving the value of the bionic one Doc Vesty had fitted for him a decade ago. The pain made it almost impossible to walk, and Coyne quickly found himself resorting to a hastily improvised gait, leaning the knee of his wounded right leg against the sturdy adamantium of the left. This provided a kind of moving crutch and allowed Coyne to stagger forwards in something of a cross-legged hobble.

His steps were pained and hurried and interspersed with desperate lunges for the wall, and the doorway. Coyne took every opportunity to grasp any solid structure he could see to take some of the pain off his horribly wounded leg. In this fashion he lurched out of the door and gazed out across the tangled mass of metallic walkways that ran for hundreds of metres in front of him. Track was kneeling down by the doorway, his gun pointed purposefully out into the dome, providing cover for Scarr who was already far up ahead, picking his way over the gantries in pursuit of some half-glimpsed enemy.

'Where are the sentries?' asked Coyne, his voice an agonised rasp, rising uncontrollably in pitch and tone as intermittent shivers of pain tore through him. Track just frowned in reply and Coyne realised his error.

The juves had always feared Vilhame. He was a tenifying bully and the careers of more than one of the gang's own juves had ended at his hands. Coyne had relied upon such terrified youngsters for support and it had been his idea to call them in from their sentry posts so that they could participate in the vote for leadership. Now they had all paid the price for such a lack of vigilance.

The pain in his leg grew again, and Coyne rested his hand on Track's shoulder as he rose and started to shuffle forwards carefully, taking up a new vantage point from which to better cover Scarr's advance. A heavy V-

shaped tunic hung across Track's shoulders and over his robes. Coyne tugged on it. Track understood his meaning and quickly cast the thing off, passing it to his wounded leader.

Coyne drew his knife from his belt and slashed through the tunic's cloth, cutting a metre-long strip from it with which he bandaged his leg as best he could. The pain was still agonising, but at least it seemed constant, and he could hobble forwards without collapsing in pain. He followed Track as he moved out onto the slender gantry that connected the gang's den to the wider dome beyond.

Track made a quick hand gesture and disappeared up a ladder at the gantry's edge, quickly rising out of sight. Up ahead, Scarr lurked behind a broad, circular pillar at the centre of a hexagonal platform that formed a hub in the dome's centre from which six walkways radiated at every level. Scarr waved his hand in a downward motion and it was clear to Coyne that their attackers were lurking somewhere on the level below (the den being located on the fifth of six largely intact levels). Coyne shuffled as far across the gantry as he could without exposing himself completely, just far enough to draw a line of sight down onto the platform below Scarr. He chanced a quick glance upwards and saw Track on the level above, two gantries away so that their combined lines of sight covered virtually the whole lower level. Both men nodded and Scarr nervously stepped out from behind the pillar, beginning the perilous descent down the ladder mounted on its side.

Instantly, a harsh report sounded and the noise of bullets ricocheting off the ladder rang throughout the dome. Scarr lost his grip, swinging sideways so that only one hand and one foot remained on the ladder. He hung perilously between floors, but at least he was able to press his body close to the pillar, escaping from sight.

Track unleashed two rounds of his own lasgun, and Scarr wasted no time in shimmying the rest of the way down the ladder under such cover as it provided. Scarr disappeared from sight as he dismounted onto the lower platform and Coyne hurried forward as best he could to take up a new position on one of the crossing gantries that turned the already confusing web of walkways into a veritable maze.

Coyne shuddered as a heavy clanking noise streaked over his head, then sighed in relief to see it was only Track, likewise taking up a better

position as the trio nervously stalked their prey. That they had this chance at all seemed like a miracle to Coyne. Surely in the confusion of the blast, their enemies could have gunned them down to a man. Unless, he thought, barely believing it, they weren't *enemies* at all.

He was quickly given reason to discount the theory as a shot thundered into the walkway beneath him, denting the mesh panel that hung down at the gantry's edge. The shot had come from the far right hand side of the dome, the complete opposite direction from which the last shot had come, and Coyne was suddenly afraid they were surrounded.

The same thought must have struck Track and Scarr, for both gazed nervously at Coyne, their confidence gone now that their careful advance seemed to have come undone. They were too few to avoid being surrounded, thought Coyne, but he could at least reassure the other two and give them a fighting chance.

He took a frag grenade from his belt and hurled it high into the air, watching it arc towards the source of the last shot. It must have detonated in the air, the noise of its crimson blast ringing out before any tinkling of a grenade hitting the floor could be heard. The edges of those distant gantries were briefly illuminated, but no living thing showed itself in the blast and Coyne couldn't be sure there was still anyone down there.

It would have to do, thought Coyne. It would have to do.

Coyne shuffled forwards again, nearing the platform directly above Scarr. This has to be a trap, thought Coyne as he advanced, but why? Surely they were sitting ducks in the moments of panic following the blast. This made no sense, no sense at all.

Two more shots rang out from ahead of them, aimed at Scarr, and there was only a moment's pause before another round rang out, followed by a dull groan. Coyne leaned over the platform's edge to see Scarr fallen to the ground beneath him, clutching his leg. He had been hit.

Damn it, thought Coyne, and without wasting another second he raced down the ladder, his hands and feet skimming down its smooth edges. He simply had no time to climb down it properly. Coyne was nearly sick with pain as the soles of his boots struck the platform below, his wounded right leg crumpling with the force.

He didn't bother getting back to his feet and just hauled himself along the tightly spaced steel bars that formed the platform until he reached the

prone Scarr. A bullet wound punctured his thigh. The wound was burnt black at the edges, though not nearly neatly enough to be a las-blast. Scarr had been hit by a solid shell; nothing fancy. That at least gave Coyne hope that they might have a chance.

It was a short-lived hope. As he stared at Scarr's wound, a terrible shriek rang out above him and he looked up to see Track teetering on the gantry's edge, his arms upraised, his lasgun falling from his grasp. It seemed to hover in midair for a moment before plummeting downwards, its heavy bulk giving off a deep tolling sound as it bounced off gantry after gantry. The weapon rushed past Coyne and Scarr where they crouched on the platform.

Track followed a second later, plunging to the ground from his perch on the highest level. He looked lifeless as he fell, and Coyne prayed that he was indeed already dead, for he had seen men survive a fall even as great as this one and that would be the cruellest fate of all.

Scarr looked up terrified, his tear-stained eyes begging Coyne to help him. Coyne was certain that there were two groups. One up ahead and to the far side of the platform that had earlier shot at Scarr when he went beyond the pillar; and a second group almost directly beneath the building whose upper storey housed the gang's den. It had been this second group that had gunned down Track as he approached too close to the gantry's edge.

There were three ways out of the dome: one to the rear-right gantry, one to the front-left one, and one straight ahead. Either of the diagonal exits would, by Coyne's reckoning, bring them into the sight of both groups. The exit up ahead, although presumably occupied by their enemies, was at least shielded from view by the base of the six-tiered platform on whose fourth tier Scarr and Coyne sheltered. They would have to go that way.

Coyne crawled on his belly, rounding the pillar and approached the platform's far edge. Scarr scrabbled along behind him. Nothing. No shots. He breathed a sigh of relief. The enemy was still clearly beneath them, and staying low had kept Coyne out of sight.

Scarr crawled on past Coyne, laying his body over the top of the ladder going down. He nodded, and Coyne hurled another frag grenade, this time in the direction of the entrance. At the sound of its blast, Scarr rolled his weight over the ladder and plummeted down to the next level in a

necessarily haphazard scramble. He landed, rolled onto his knee and unleashed a volley of las-blasts, just enough to buy Coyne the time he needed to follow him down the ladder.

There were no covering positions from here on in. Coyne just rose up, hauling Scarr up by his hood to follow, and ran down the gantry as fast as he could, his laspistol unleashing shots into the darkness ahead. Scarr followed and Coyne hoped that this weight of fire would be enough to open up the way ahead.

Fifty metres of agonising stagger and he reached the elevated doorway that led out of the dome. He grasped its black metal edge and pushed his gun barrel quiddy around to the other side: no one. Whoever was here had been driven off. That at least would give him and Scarr time to escape.

Breathless but relieved, he turned back to tell Scan-they were safe.

Scarr was dead. His body laid outstretched on the metal walkway, just metres from Coyne. He laid face down, his hood covering his face, but torn wide open at the back where a fist-sized hole pierced cloth, flesh and skull alike. Dum-dums: nothing else could have left a hole in his head like that, not without a blast.

‘Shit,’ yelled Coyne as he dragged himself round the door. How had they hit Scarr from there? It made no sense.

As he pondered it, his hand ran over a series of indentations in the metal of the broad buttress beside the door. They were fresh marks; the only part of the whole thing that glinted silver. Taking his glove off, Coyne could even feel a little heat coming off them. Ricochet marks.

They fell with an unnatural regularity, all centred around the same spot, none of them more than a hands-width apart. A horrible realisation came to Coyne at last.

The burn marks around the wound on Scarr’s leg was from a solid shot. The noise of pistol fire directly beneath him while bullets came from up ahead... Scarr killed from behind as they fled... There weren’t two groups at all, just one. Not even a group, just one person.

A handful of masterfully aimed shots had ricocheted off the bulkhead, filling the air around Scarr where he stood earlier on the platform and creating the impression of two separate shooters while all the while their enemy closed in from behind. Only solid shot could do it since las-blasts would never ricochet like that. That was a professional’s trick.

Coyne started to run, dropping his glove to the floor such was his panic, but it was too late. A vice-like grip wrenched his arm backwards while a sharp, stabbing kick cleaved into his wounded leg. He fell to his knees and dropped his laspistol all at the same moment, landing painfully and rolling on to his side. One word ran through Coyne's mind as he rolled onto his back and tried desperately to scramble his way backwards. One word ran through his mind as a hefty boot slammed down into his chest, pinning him to the walkway where he lay. One word ran through his mind as he gazed up into the face of the terrifying figure that stood over him, stub gun aimed at Coyne's head. One word ran through his mind as the final shot rang out: Lago.

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘DONE?’ SAID LAKATOS. The sudden raising of his voice caught Durn’s attention. He looked up to see Berzel and Lirbus enter the hideout.

‘No problem,’ said Berzel, dropping his heavy sack on the table. Durn had little interest in the stash of credits Berzel had collected; he’d learned to wait for his own meagre share to surface. It saved disappointment. He nodded a brief greeting to Lirbus and then carried on sharpening the stash of shivs on the table next to him, until mention of a familiar name caught his attention.

‘I told Goddlesby, just like you said, next week’s money better include Bok’s share, or the pair of them are gonna pay for it,’ said Berzel.

Bok, thought Durn. What were they doing taxing Bok? Durn had been around long enough to remember when the Union first took over Fall Sands. He had a bionic left arm to remind him of how well Bok took the news when they first demanded money for his ‘protection.’

‘Good,’ said Lakatos, redining on his stone chair ‘and what did the little rat have to say to that?’

‘Well, he kicked up a hell of a stink,’ said Lirbus. ‘Said Bok will never pay; says he can’t make him, says it’s not his fault, all of that.’

‘It’ll be fine,’ said Berzel. ‘Goddlesby has never dared once step out of line.’

‘Not quite true, Berzel,’ said Lakatos. ‘He’s managed a good few mistakes in his time and I’m sure more than a few of them have been wilful.’

That was more than true, thought Durn to himself, putting down a shiv and walking slowly to the middle of the room where he could hear more easily. He rubbed the metal of his left hand with the rough skin of his tight. He had Bok on his mind.

‘Perhaps we can help poor little Goddlesby out,’ Lakatos said, ‘just this once.’

‘What?’ asked Berzel.

‘Well, maybe we ought to explain to Bok how all of this works. Besides, way I see it, he owes us plenty enough in back-taxes to justify a visit,’ said Lakatos. ‘See to it.’

With that, both Lirbus and Berzel left the room.

Durn grinned from ear to ear to think of Bok getting his comeuppance at last and, as he returned to his table and picked up the next shiv, he ground it against the stone all the more vigorously, picturing Bok and thinking of how the Union owned him. It would be just a matter of time before he stepped out of line, and Durn hoped he would be the one to set Bok straight.

‘You too, Durn,’ said Lakatos from behind him. Durn dropped the shiv in an instant.

‘With them?’ he asked. ‘To Bok’s?’

‘No, I mean there’s work for you, too,’ said Lakatos, reaching into his pocket. He produced three sheets of parchment offering them out at arms length. Durn paced towards his leader, taking the sheets from him and flicking through them. They were wanted posters from the guilders.

‘It seems,’ said Lakatos, ‘that some of these here good townsfolk have been doing things they shouldn’t have and it seems like some of those things are going to catch up with them.’

‘You want me to bring them in, claim the bounty?’ asked Durn.

‘No, no,’ said Lakatos. ‘No need for that. In fact, we’re going to do all these good folks a favour. Tell them they’re safe, that the guilders won’t be coming for them. We’re going to protect them, but they’re going to be paying a little more from now on, understand?’

Durn laughed a deep and wicked laugh, the only sign Lakatos needed that he understood. He stuffed the wanted posters under his belt and headed out of the door.

OLBERT DIRK. HMM, he always had been a shifty little so and so. Morten? Durn found it hard to believe old Morten had gotten himself into trouble with the guilders, but there it all was in writing on the wanted

poster. It also struck him as odd that three such men should find themselves wanted all at once.

True, Ash Season often had the effect of leaving Fall Sands woefully behind the times, and the season's lifting would often be accompanied by a rash of news flooding into the town, but the storms hadn't yet lifted, and the sudden emergence of these wanted posters struck Durn as rather odd. No matter. Durn didn't give a damn what these people had done, he was going to bleed them dry for fear of the guilders and he was going to enjoy every moment of it.

HE FLICKED TO the last poster as he strolled through town. Lam; now there was a natural born victim. He would begin with Lam.

Durn crossed over the broad street and turned left into the maze of metal gantries that extended outwards like a cliff-face colony at the very edge of Fall Sands. These gantries were in fact the remnants of disused cranes, deployed in an ultimately fruitless attempt to save the failing dome and the machines themselves were abandoned just as quickly as the dome they had been intended to rebuild.

Centuries had passed since then, and where the standing cranes had once been a bare-bones skeleton, they had since been filled with a mass of rusted insulation and blackened, scrap metal skin. Their own beams were crisscrossed with dozens of others; girders flung down to create walkways between the pinnacles. Makeshift habs had sprung up all over the structures, occupying engine rooms, control boxes and maintenance baskets. Still other habs had been fabricated from scratch: sheet metal bolted to the hollow steel frames to provide four untidy walls and a shaky roof for their desperate occupants.

Generations of such down-and-out ingenuity had made the gantries home to a teeming mass of humanity, dinging on precariously, high up this most distant edge of the dome It was a desperate place looking for all the world like it should fall at any second. It never had, but it was named such nonetheless: the Falls. The ageless drifts that butted up against it in turn eventually caused the place to be called Fall Sands.

Durn loved this place He had been born in Hive City in a high-hab. When he first entered the Under-hive he had lurked for a long time with a

gang at Wind's Edge, a dome surviving on the site of an abandoned space dock, where the wind howled ceaselessly across the forest of docking pylons. Being high up was where Durn felt safest, where he felt the thrill most keenly, and the Falls were as high as it got for him these days.

He strolled out onto the nearest gantry, instantly feeling the elevation. From here he could look out over half a dozen domes unfortunate enough to lie further down than Fall Sands itself. Some were abandoned, but some thrived, at least by Underhive standards, and it was an open secret that soon enough these domes were destined to become part of the Union's territory, too.

There was no rush, though. The sheer height of the Falls made attack from below impossible, and having made the curious plateau of Fall Sands their own, this was a building time for the Union. The din of battle and the nervy rush of forays out into another gang's territory, that would all come again, but not yet. Grand plans were being laid, and Durn was content to wait and see them unfold at the will of his betters.

He dreamed of such things as he swung down from the gantry, onto the crisscrossing support girders beneath, which functioned as a makeshift ladder. He swung himself down by his hands, descending twenty metres in mere seconds. From here he swung inside the structure descending now by an enclosed ladder until he reached Jop Lam's little hab.

A row of tiny turbines, each no bigger than a man's hand, lined the deck at floor level, turning in the wind. As they spun, ash and muck caked onto the blades. As the blades turned, they ran through a row of stiff brushes mounted behind them, shaking the detritus into a grubby trough full of liquid below. Lam was a sifter, and the filth collected in this trough would be painstakingly drained, strained and sifted to harvest whatever miniscule specs of precious ores and minerals the ash storms carried in its grey haze.

As Durn stepped out onto the deck, Lam's arm snaked out from the window cut into the shack's iron front wall. He held a shallow, mesh-bottomed pan in his hand with which he scooped a load of the stuff out of the trough. As he drew the pan back inside, he caught sight of Durn and dropped the pan in sheer fright, giving voice to a girlish shriek as he did so.

'Now that's no way to greet an old friend, is it Lam?'

‘Get away from me!’ yelled Lam, slamming the shutter across his window. In his panic he seemed not to have noticed that the door remained open, and Durn stepped inside to see the little man cowering by the portal. He leapt in fright as Durn approached.

‘Unh! What do you want?’ he asked, fear etched into his grubby whiskered face. Lam had always been terrified of Durn. Back in the early days, when the Union had first come to this place, there were plenty who thought they could put up a fight, thought they could resist the Union’s rule, and these were people that, one by one had been made to disappear.

The Falls had been one of Durn’s favourite places for making people disappear. It was three hundred metres down to the next dome and the fall never left enough of a man for anyone down there to notice the slit throat or shit, in the guts that had really killed them. Accidents, on the other hand, were commonplace in the Underhive, and the victims of such unfortunate tumbles never aroused any suspicion or unwanted attention.

That was when Durn had first met Lam. He remembered seeing the scrawny man’s terrified eyes gazing out of that same little window as Durn clambered down on to the deck and unceremoniously hoofed a troublesome settler’s warm corpse off the edge. He’d hurled it from high above, but Durn had been new to the business back then and a dull thud had told him the body had landed on something only halfway down – leaving it there was a risk Durn couldn’t take. He’d clambered down by the exact same route he had just taken and found the body slumped on Lam’s deck, its shattered legs hanging unnaturally off the edge His second push had been decisive and from there he’d watched the thing tumble out of view, dusting off his hands and congratulating himself on his good work, he remembered. It was then that he’d turned to see Lam quivering on the other side of the window. A swift threat of the same treatment had left the old sifter terrified of Durn ever since.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Lam, unnerved by Durn’s long pause.

‘Oh, you know why I come down here,’ said Durn. ‘I need to give my throwing arm some practice.’

Lam squealed in fright. He knew well enough what that meant. Having seen the effect on Lam the first time, Durn had ever afterwards made a point of dragging new members of ‘the ole disappearing gang’ as he called them down to this particular deck. No matter the extra effort. To Durn it

was more than worth it every time he saw the terror in Lam's eyes when he was forced to watch another bye-bye dive.

Durn had always told Lam it was his turn next, told him he was getting old and that when he couldn't lift the big ones anymore, he'd be lifting a little one like Lam instead. He toyed with Lam, grabbing him by the collar, hauling him off his feet and instantly bringing to mind that well-aged threat.

He hauled Lam towards the door, the old sifter's feet kicking frantically in the air. He stopped in the doorway, reached into his pocket with his free hand and thrust the wanted poster into the terrified man's face.

'Now,' he said, 'any idea what this is about?'

Lam nervously opened his eyes, having shut them tight in fear of his imminent plunge. He squinted and Durn could read his lips as he struggled over the words on the poster in front of him. He squeaked as he reached the end and saw his own picture. Durn dropped him to the floor of the shack.

'I... I... It's not me, it's not me. I don't know what this is,' said Lam.

Durn just laughed. 'Well let me tell you,' said Durn. 'It says here, you are wanted for the "unauthorised peddling of uncertified ore, the trafficking of which has resulted in the contamination of guild supplies." Now that sounds pretty serious to me, Lam, and, oh look, yes,' Dun continued. 'They are offering a reward for you... dead or alive. Now I'm thinking that makes you a pretty big catch.'

'It's not me, it's not me,' Lam said. 'I haven't done anything!'

'No?' said Durn. 'Well it's your picture. Look at it, right there.'

Lam began to sob.

'Well, look here Lam,' said Durn. 'Seeing as we're such old friends, I'm going to help you out. I don't think you did these things it says, so I'm gonna look after you. Me and all the Union boys, we're going to look after you. Who could get you with us looking out for you, Lam? Eh? Who? No one, that's who, not with us protecting you... I mean, think of it Lam. Think of all the terrible things you've seen happen round these parts and yet you've always been safe haven't you, Lam?' The fact that almost all of those 'terrible things' were acts in which Durn himself had a hand was something he chose to omit, but Lam seemed to get the-point regardless.

'I didn't do it,' said Lam, still sobbing.

‘And I believe you, Lam, I told you,’ said Durn. ‘And I’m going to help you. But you’ve got to do something for us in return.’

‘What?’ asked lam, leaping to his feet.

‘Pay up.’ Durn’s voice lost every pretence of civility It was a snarling, menace-laden demand, a growl bringing instantly to mind every terrible thing Dun could possibly do to Lam, if he didn’t pay up.

Lam sank to his knees. He was skin and bones, his poverty was obvious, but he clearly realised he had no choice He dragged himself over to the metal counter that ran along the wall and provided the room’s only furniture, and pulled open one of the ill-fitting tin drawers wedged into its side Durn saw him scoop his hand along the bottom of the drawer and instantly held out his own hand. Lam winced and dropped three credits into the bigger man’s gloved palm. Three measly credits. It was nothing to the Union, but it was doubtless all Lam was worth. The fact that he had paid up at all was enough to show Durn’s mission had been a success.

‘I won’t be coming back,’ said Durn, letting false hope well up in the sorry spectacle before him, ‘but you’ll be paying Goddlesby the same three credits extra each time he comes calling. He’ll see it gets to us.’

Lam fell against the wall, sobbing, and Durn was on his way, smirking as he had seldom smirked before.

DURN’S EVIL SMIRK remained as he bowled through town, pushing his way through the crowds like the petulant bully he was. Lam had been easy and Morten had protested little more and tried even harder to keep hold of his credits, while Dirk had given him the kind of murderous look to rival Durn’s own, but it had been three easy scams in the end, just as Durn knew it would be. Nothing could dampen his wicked spirits. Nothing, that is, until he saw her.

Her. Scoosme, standing in the street, raging and stamping her feet at the bartender who blocked the door back into the Pipe Under Mile. She wasn’t just trying to get in. It was all too obvious from her drunken slurring as she yelled that she had been there for some time already, and it didn’t look like it had been her choice to leave. Oleg, the younger of the two bartenders that worked in the Pipe, held the doors barred firmly shut

behind him as the stroppy girl flung herself against his chest, pounding his shoulders with her fists and trying desperately to squeeze past.

Durn wasn't close enough to make out every word of what she was saying, but the little he could pick out, coupled with the accusatory stabs of her finger made her meaning all too clear. Scoosme was one of the girls from the brothel, though Durn hadn't seen her there during the eviction. Drunk and bitter, she stood in the street railing at those amongst the settlement's inhabitants who had long made use of her services, only to turn their backs and feign ignorance as she was cast out. Durn shuddered and a terrible fear rose up inside him. Guilt, and then anger, replaced it soon enough.

Scoosme had a point. She was only in Fall Sands because the business was good and would have left long ago if so many of the locals hadn't been willing to indulge, as Durn knew all too well. But Ash Season was as lonely as it was long, and girls like Scoosme were an affordable comfort. It was little surprise the town offered such rich pickings.

As Durn drew nearer, her words became more audible, though no clearer, thanks to the drunken garble of her furious tirade. The bartender held her at arms length while Scoosme lunged forwards, yelling over his shoulder at the patrons inside.

'You've let them do this, you fraggin' idiots! They'll take every credit you've got,' she cried, pointing at the approaching Durn in his distinctive Cawdor robes. 'At least I gave you something in return, you bastards!' she yelled.

With that, the bartender had dearly had enough and pushed her away harder. Scoosme's drunken legs failed her as she tried to walk backwards and she stumbled, falling to the ground and rolling backwards, feet over head. She lay sprawled on the ground, much the worse for wear, as Durn passed.

He didn't notice her get to her feet. At least, not until she was right behind him, pounding her tiny little fists against his back. He turned and snatched at her wrists, pinning her arms together in front of her body. Durn was all set to fling her to the ground and carry on his way, until he looked into her eyes. She gazed back and he realised a terrible truth.

She recognised him.

How could she possibly recognise him, thought Durn? He had only ever gone there barefaced, so that no one would know who he was. Now in the middle of the street, robed from head to toe with just his stubbled chin on show, how in the name of the Emperor could she have picked him out as one of the dozens of men who passed through her establishment every week? Every week for years, if Durn was honest, though he shuddered to think of how it was all catching up with him.

'You...' she hissed, and there was no escaping the fact that she recognised him, plain and simple. He prayed for a second that he had mistaken the look in her eyes, but there was no doubting it. She knew him instantly, and the name 'Caldus' – which he had always used as his alias when he was with her – formed on her lips. She broke one hand free of his grasp and struck at his face with her grubby hand, desperately trying to get hold of his mask.

'You, you're the worst of them, you frogging hypocrite,' she yelled.

He forced her hand away but didn't loosen his grip on her. He couldn't let her catty on in this state, not now that she knew who he was, and not now that she knew one of her clients was also one of the gang who had turfed her out of her premises that very morning!

Durn wrestled the girl down to the ground and dragged her to the narrow shaft opposite the Pipe Under Mile, an easy feat given her diminutive size and drunkenness. Rusted girders lined the shaft and Scoosme squealed as the sharp metal cut her bare feet. Durn let go his grip on her, letting her fall to the floor. He stood at the shaft's entrance, making quite sure she couldn't burst back out onto the street and continue her tirade.

'You bastard!' she yelled. 'You're one of them, and after all the times you've...'

Durn hurriedly shushed her, pushing his hand over her mouth, and she slumped drunkenly back against the wall of the shaft, dearly exhausted by her outburst.

'You won't get away with this,' she said, more calmly as Durn slowly removed his hand. 'I'm going to tell every single one of them just what you do, just how you like it and just what you-'

Durn dropped to his knees and thrust his gloved hand over the girl's mouth once more. She mumbled through it, but the sound was indistinct.

‘Shut up,’ said Durn, whispering in her ear. ‘Emperor damn your lies. I’ll kill you if you say such things again.’ Some of the struggle seemed to go out of the little waif and Durn chanced to remove his hand from her mouth.

‘What’s the bigger sin, you coward? Killing a girl or paying her to-’ she said with a crazy look in her eye before Durn’s gloved palm once more silenced her.

‘Once more, and I’ll kill you right now,’ he said. He felt her laugh a crazy drunken laugh as once more he dared to remove his glove.

‘You won’t,’ she said, her voice barely a whisper, as if playing along with Durn’s desperate plea for secrecy. ‘You can’t kill me with all these people watching.’

Durn turned his head slowly to peer over his shoulder. Damn the girl, she was right. Her earlier outburst hadn’t gone unnoticed and a crowd now milled around outside the Pipe They certainly wouldn’t try to stop him, he was too feared for that, but Durn didn’t exactly relish explaining to Lakatos why he was seen killing the little tramp or, rather, explaining why he had killed her at all.

‘Go away,’ he said, spitting the words as loud as he could without the crowd overhearing. ‘Leave here.’

‘Make me,’ she said, laughing. ‘Make me go away.’

Durn ground his teeth together, but he knew there was no other way. He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out the credits he had scammed from Lam, Dirk and Morten. He looked down at the tokens in his hand, knowing he would regret it, but thrust them at Scoosme all the same. He had no choice.

‘Now leave,’ he said, ‘and if you ever come back, I will kill you.’

With that he pushed past her and walked further down the shaft, deciding it best he return to the gang-house by another route entirely.

DURN TOOK AN age making his way back. He dallied at every opportunity, wracked his brains endlessly for a way to make the credits back and present them to Lakatos so that no one would ever know he’d bought off that little hussy to ensure her silence He thought about shaking down some of the other townsfolk, extorting yet more credits from them to

cover his earlier indiscretion, but he didn't really have dirt on any of the others to guarantee their compliance. He wasn't afraid of them fighting back, but one of them might just have enough spine to speak out against the excessive taxes, and he was in no mood to explain to Lakatos exactly why he was re-taxing the townsfolk.

He was so lost in his troubled thoughts that he hardly noticed when he had reached the Union's hideout and, his heart pounding with fear, he stepped inside Lakatos was in his 'throne' – the worn stone trough in the corner – and Durn unleashed a deep sigh as he stepped in.

'Done?' asked Lakatos.

'Done,' said Durn.

'No problems?' asked Lakatos.

'No problems,' said Durn. They'll be paying Goddlesby the extra every week just like you said! Durn toyed with the idea of telling Lakatos that he hadn't collected any 'back-taxes', that he didn't realise that was what Lakatos meant, but in the end he decided acting stupid probably wasn't the best bet.

At that instant a voice rang out from the doorway behind him, the voice of a saint.

'You better listen up, Lakatos,' said Jurgen, striding into the room full of purpose with a rather bedraggled looking Lirbus in tow. 'It's all gone down,' said Jurgen, 'and it's not good, not good at all.'

Lakatos leapt to his feet and paced across the room, stopping face to face with Jurgen. Durn couldn't believe his luck. Lakatos was engrossed, and Durn's mission and the expected profits were all but forgotten. Both Lakatos and Durn listened intently as Jurgen began one of the most horrifying tales Durn had ever heard.

'ALL OF THEM?' asked Lakatos, dearly disbelieving Jurgen's frantic account.

'All of them,' said Jurgen, sternly. 'You're lucky I heard the ruckus, or you could add Lirbus here to that tally.'

He was right Lirbus's tale had been no less harrowing either, thought Durn.

Durn had never heard anything like it: how Deveres got lost in the storms, how Jurgen found Handomel's gang, the Scarlet Skulls, dead to a man and fled as fast as he could, only to run right into the gunfight at Bok's. Durn had spent most of the week in the hideout and he hadn't seen hide nor hair of Deveres since he set out. He wasn't back yet and, though no one dared say it, it was plain he wasn't coming back. There was no point looking for him, either.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it,' said Lakatos, his voice rising as his anger grew He slammed his fist into the wall next to him and paced back and forth.

Durn was sure Lakatos was going to explode when Jurgen suggested that some of the Scarlet Skulls might have killed each other in a leadership challenge. This certainly angered Lakatos, but he seemed to find the suggestion sadly predictable.

Durn had listened to Jurgen and Lirbus's earnest accounts, all the while expecting Lakatos to smash them down at any second, to blame them for the catastrophe, but he seethed more ready to criticise the dead men for their idiocy. This surprised Durn greatly. Perhaps his own indiscretion would receive the same leniency, if ever uncovered. Slim hope, he told himself.

Lakatos continued to pace back and forth. No one dared speak not even the outlander, while their leader racked his brains for what to do next.

'Addec needs to know,' he said. 'If the Skulls are gone, he needs to take their territory and quickly the he's unprotected. Someone has to tell Addec,' said Lakatos. 'Durn, go to Addec tell him what happened. Tell him he has to capture Handomel's territory, *now*.'

Durn wasted no time in following his leader's orders, ducking out of the door and making good his departure, or rather his escape. If the matter of the newly raised taxes hadn't been forgotten already, it surely was no and with Addec's place three days travel away, there was no way it would ever be remembered by the time Durn returned.

He had gotten away with it, he thought to himself as he dashed away from the hideout. He had gotten away with everything.

HE'D HAD JUST about enough for one day. The taxes were an unexpected chore and the meeting with Scoosme was an unexpected problem. Durn had gotten away without his philandering or his pilfering being uncovered but he was thoroughly exhausted by the whole thing.

He couldn't get out of the ganghouse quickly enough with the guilty memory of Scoosme and those missing credits racing through his mind. Despite that, he could do without the effort, and obvious danger, of venturing out in the storms.

Durn, though, was no native of this cesspit, the Under-hive's most miserable depth. He was Hive City born and venturing this far down required the use of a dozen ancient routes with their myriad turns and doublings.

For creatures pitiful enough to be born in this lowly pit, crossing the derelict domes, which bore the worst of the storm's fury must have seemed like the only way, but Durn was not convinced. He was sure that he could find another route, crossing the hive at a higher level in domes that were free of the Ash Season's tyranny before descending into Addec's territory by means of the high vents, of which Fulcrum Spike formed the base.

He ascended the ladder at the rear of the ganghouse, first reaching its roofless second storey, which he was forced to ascend by means of its protruding window frames. Then he trod his way carefully along the crumbling wall's top edge, bringing himself to the neighbouring building where a solid ladder allowed him to ascend in safety once more.

Three more storeys and he left the ladder to cross a broad, if not entirely stable walkway, which crossed the settlement's main 'street'. In fact, this street was nothing more than an agglomeration of ash, dirt and rubble piled so deep that it had buried the floor of the dome and its lower storeys entirely, creating a flat, even surface where in fact it should be the same irregular, haphazard mix of walkways, beams and ladders as were found at greater heights. Solid ground was something Underhivers rightly feared – being found naturally only out in the deadly ash wastes – and Fall Sands's pretence of it did much to add to its reputation as a place to avoid.

From this height, the falseness of the 'floor' was apparent, and Durn could clearly see that the apparent first storey of buildings, like Jurgen's hideout and the ganghouse, were in actuality the seventh or eighth storeys of this lost generation of buildings for which the dome was constructed.

The thought of it caused Durn to cast his mind back to Jurgen and his peculiar choice of hideout. Jurgen had picked the building for its location, saying his work required certain conditions like the right ventilation. Durn wondered whether these ‘conditions’ included underground rooms where complete darkness could be found. It seemed a reasonable enough idea and Durn well knew that the brothel was one of the few buildings in Fall Sands that still possessed an accessible lower, now subterranean, floor. The likes of the ganghouse had become flooded at lower levels with the same tide of detritus that gave the dome its dusty streets, but a handful of buildings had been in sufficiently good repair to resist the filth’s incursion and so came to possess labyrinths leading down to what was once ground level. Perhaps this was why Jurgen so prized that particular building. The Emperor knew its basement had once been Durn’s favourite part of the building, too.

Without thinking, Durn cast his gaze down towards the street in general and the brothel in particular. His heart froze in terror.

Scoosme crossed the street, a heavy iron bar in her hand, heading straight for her former place of employment.

The crazy bitch just wasn’t going to let it lie and Durn had no choice. Fortunately, getting down was much quicker than getting up. He dashed to the walkways edge where a small, but nonetheless dangerous leap brought him to a platform pinned against the uppermost reaches of the same pipe that, at the dome’s floor, contained the Pipe Under Mile. Here, a tangle of other pipes and conduits, mostly no thicker than a man’s arm, ran down the outside of the much larger ‘Pipe’. Durn wrapped his legs around the nearest one, crossed them at the ankles and grabbed the pipe with both hands as he began his perilous descent.

His gloves allowed him to slow his slide before he let go his grip and dropped the last couple of metres onto the corrugated iron sheet. It butted out from the side of the pipe, forming a roof for one of the many ramshackle, temporary outhouses that constituted the Pipe Under Mile’s guest quarters.

A few astonished gasps from below did nothing to slow Durn as he plunged from the roof and dashed dawn the street staying out of sight thanks to the tangled maze of structures that extended outwards from the base of the pipe.

It took Durn a moment to spot Scoosme, but he found her easily enough. She marched up the tiny alley alongside the former brothel, iron bar still in hand. Durn slunk through the shadows behind her and edged to the alley's entrance peering round cautiously.

Ahead of him, Scoosme wedged the iron bar into the rusted up wheel in the centre of the building's back door. The wheel dearly hadn't been turned in years, but with the bar for leverage, the girl's tiny form had just enough force to budge it. A few minutes more strenuous heaving at it, and the back door was open. Scoosme pulled the iron bar dear of the wheel and strode in, looking just as angry as she had been when Durn first saw her, perhaps an hour earlier.

He waited a moment after she disappeared inside and then slipped out from his hiding place. Half-crouching as he ran down the alley, Durn slipped inside the wide open door. He'd always known that he would have to deal with Scoosme sooner or later, and it looked like she had just made it an awful lot easier for him.

CHAPTER NINE

‘WHAT THE...?’ SCOOSME pushed at the door but it didn’t budge. She stepped back and gazed up the wall above, though she couldn’t make out anything untoward. One more push and, with no further luck, she banged her palm hard against the door several times, yelling out in between thuds.

‘Lenka! Lenka!’ No reply came. ‘Banya! Gully... Morla?’ Scoosme’s voice faded from a powerful yell to a confused, hopeless mutter as she called out the names of the other girls. No reply.

She looked around for some clue as to what had happened to them, but there was nothing. She followed the wall to the corner and turned down the narrow alley that ran alongside the building, though she knew full well that the door on that side had been locked for years.

‘Step away,’ came a voice from behind her. She turned to see two cloaked and hooded figures standing at the street’s edge: Cawdor.

‘Step away,’ the taller of the two repeated. ‘This is our territory now,’ he said.

‘What?’ asked Scoosme. ‘What do you mean?’

‘We already turfed your friends out and we made quite a mess of them, too,’ said the shorter one, walking slowly towards her as he spoke. He was far smaller than the other Cawdor – shorter than Scoosme herself in fact – but he had a vicious, sinister sneer that suggested a soulless, hateful wickedness deep inside him. Scoosme was afraid of him in a way she wasn’t normally afraid of any man.

‘Don’t make us do the same to you,’ said the wicked little man.

Scoosme gave a moment’s thought to making a dash for the door and seeing if she could get inside. The second Cawdor, further back on the street, drew his pistol and gave her good reason to drop the idea. Still far from sure what had happened in the days she had been absent, Scoosme shuffled back towards the street, feeling a hint of revulsion as she

wriggled past the sinister little man who sneered and leched at her all the way. She stepped out into the street and slowly ambled off, turning and looking back every few steps, uncertain and desperately scared for her friends.

FOR THE LIFE of her, Scoosme couldn't fathom why the Cawdor had ordered her and the girls out of their modest little place. As she knocked back her fourth Wildsnake in quick succession, she wasn't getting any closer to working it out either. It had been like this all day since dragging herself into the Pipe Under Mile after those two robed thugs had turned her away from her former home-aim-workplace.

Sure the Cawdor despised fornication in all its forms, but they were smarter than to openly attack its purveyors. Half the dens in the Underhive were operated by guilders anyway, and those that weren't were obliged to provide the guilders with any hospitality they desired free of charge, just like everything else in the Underhive. With the guilders involved, everyone just turned a blind eye to such things. Sin was, after all, simply too profitable to be prevented.

Everyone knew House Cawdor was in thrall to the Redemption, but its members were careful never to make such an allegiance obvious. Cawdor was a respectable House, a bastion of Hive City, but the Redemption was banned and its members outlawed, and there was but a fine line dividing the two. No Cawdor wanted to cross it. Attacking a brothel so blatantly would probably serve to do just that.

Besides, if the Union was on some kind of moral crusade, Scoosme was sure they would have made much more of a point of it. As it was, she had simply been thrown out into the street with not so much as a judgement passed on her profession.

All the Cawdor seemed to be after was the building but as Scoosme knocked back her sixth Wildsnake, even that didn't make sense. They couldn't want the building for their hideout; it was right in the middle of town and would be useless for that. Everyone knew the Union was holed up on the edge of town, right atop the only reliable route into and out of the dome, exactly where they needed to be to keep their iron grip on Fall Sands.

There were other ways in, but not without knowing the intricacies of the derelict tunnels and vents that lined the dome. Scoosme had found her way through these very tunnels when she first came to Fall Sands, by accident as much as anything and she doubted greatly that any rival gang would manage to traverse them. No, the Union was best off where it was, guarding their only flank, and besides, when she found the brothel it had been all but deserted. The gangers would have been all over the place if they'd taken it for a hideout.

The seventh and eighth Wildsnakes offered few answers and, as Scoosme sat in the Pipe Under Mile growing increasingly bitter and angry, she was left with only more questions. After the ninth, tenth and eleventh Wildsnakes, Scoosme thought that it might be a good idea to ask her questions out loud.

'Do you know who I am?' she yelled at the wrinkled woman behind the bar.

'Excuse me?' the woman replied.

'Do you know who I am?' Scoosme repeated. 'He does,' she said, jabbing a half empty Wildsnake bottle in the direction of the bartender. The woman – his wife – snorted and turned to face her husband, one eyebrow raised quizzically.

'Ask him,' said Scoosme, not willing to let it lie. 'Ask him who I am and ask him what I do,' she continued. 'He knows. They all do. Bastards.' She swept her arm in a wide arc, casting an accusatory hand at virtually everyone in the watering hole, and then promptly fell off her stool. They hardly even looked up anymore. Virtually everyone in the place had heard Scoosme engage in this exact same rant many times before. This was always how it started, and pretty much how it ended, too.

'That's enough,' yelled the bartender, dashing out from behind the bar to silence Scoosme before she could reveal any more of his little indiscretions to his wife. He scooped her up from under the arms and dragged her to the door. Scoosme was not unconscious and regained her feet somewhat as he dragged her. As they reached the door, she had enough of her senses about her to fling her arms out wide, holding on to the doorframe, refusing to leave, making it almost impossible for the bartender to make her.

‘You know,’ she slurred as she struggled to keep her grip on the doorframe. ‘You all know. You do, Jeb, *you* know,’ she yelled, pointing an accusatory finger at one of the bar’s older patrons, and that was her undoing.

‘*You* know, Deak.’

With her hand raised to point at another hapless passer-by, she relinquished her grip on the doorframe and the irate bartender at last succeeded in barrelling her out onto the street.

She landed in a crumpled pile on her knees, but she was full of the unnatural energy of one drunk on Wildsnake. She leapt to her feet and dashed back towards the Pipe’s still swinging door.

Inside, the bartender glanced over his shoulder and saw her coming. Before she could reach the door he was back outside, his stanchion-like arms pinned across the doorway. She crashed into him as she ran and he grabbed at her, pushing her away as she desperately tried to wriggle past and get back into the Pipe.

Scoosme knew how drunk she was. She yelled curses from deep within her subconscious and even her own brain registered little of what she said. She was lost in a haze of anger and hate. She bawled through the Pipe’s door. As nonsensical as her drunken wails might have been, the accusatory stabs of her finger made her meaning all too clear. Drunk, bitter and angry she stood in the street railing at those amongst the settlement’s inhabitants who had long made use of her services, only to turn their backs and feign ignorance as she was cast out. She could see the guilt and fear on all their faces as she railed on.

They all owed Scoosme, she decided, and she wasn’t going to let them forget it. She was only in Fall Sands because the business was so good. She would have left long ago if so many of the locals hadn’t been willing to indulge, as those sorry fools feigning ignorance in the Pipe knew all too well.

And yet, when she had needed something, they had all turned their backs. They had left their sins at home, while her home was taken from her. She railed at their indifference, their abandonment, and their betrayal. That’s what they had done, she thought. They had all betrayed her, and she was going to tell them so.

‘You’ve let them do this, you fraggin’ idiots! They’ll take every credit you’ve got,’ she cried.

The stupid bartender, Oleg, held her at arms length while she lunged forwards, yelling over his shoulder at the patrons inside. He flung her back a little, and the jolt turned her head. She gazed down the street. Up ahead, a figure approached, garbed from head to foot in his distinctive Cawdor robes. She pointed yet another jabbing digit at the approaching ganger and continued her ranting.

‘At least I gave you something in return, you bastards!’ she yelled.

With that, the bartender had clearly had enough and pushed her away harder. Scoosme’s drunken legs failed her as she tried to walk backwards and she stumbled, falling to the ground and rolling backwards, feet over head. She lay sprawled on the ground, feeling much the worse for wear, as a long shadow fell over her.

The Cawdor, she thought, and suddenly her strength returned. Righteous anger wasn’t the sole preserve of the Redemption and she had plenty.

The Cawdor ignored her and the shadow he cast moved quickly away as she scrambled to her feet. He didn’t notice her, or pretended not to, until she was right behind him, pounding her tiny little fists against his back. Now she had his attention.

He turned and snatched at her wrists, pinning her aims together in front of her body. She suddenly realised how much larger and stronger he was than her, and realised, too, that she had absolutely no idea what to do next. She struggled in his grip and stared him right in the eyes, her lips getting ready to spit in the bastard’s face.

She stopped suddenly. She stared him straight in the eyes and she realised something extraordinary.

She recognised him.

His face was covered by one of those ridiculous masks the Cawdor always wore, but it was him nonetheless. He was robed from head to toe with just his stubbled chin on show, but she couldn’t fail to pick him out as one of the dozens of men who passed through her establishment every week. Every week for years, come to think of it. This was one of her most regular visitors, and she simply couldn’t fail to recognise him.

‘You...’ she hissed, struggling to bring a name from her mind. She thought for a second that perhaps she had been mistaken, but as his eyes

opened wide in terror, there was no doubting it. She knew him instantly, and now the name came to her.

‘Caldus,’ she said, though in truth the word had barely formed on her lips before her speech descended into another bout of drunken shrieking. She screamed madly as she renewed her ineffectual assault on him.

She broke one hand free of his grasp and struck at his face with her grubby hand, desperately trying to get hold of his mask.

‘You, you’re the worst of them, you fragging hypocrite,’ she yelled.

Caldus forced her hand away but didn’t loosen his grip on her. She couldn’t break free of his powerful hold, but she wasn’t going to give up. She wasn’t going to let him get away with.it not now that she knew one of her clients was also one of the gang who had turfed her out of her premises!

Scoosme kicked and screamed as Caldus wrestled her to the ground and dragged her to the narrow shaft opposite the Pipe Under Mile. She could do little to fight back given her diminutive size and drunkenness. Rusted girders lined the shaft and Scoosme squealed as the sharp metal cut her bare feet. Caldus let go his grip on her, letting her fall to the floor. Scoosme leapt at once to her feet, dashing back towards the street, but Caldus stood at the shaft’s entrance, making quite sure that she had no way out.

‘You bastard,’ she yelled. ‘You’re one of them, and after all the times you’ve..?

The Cawdor hurriedly shushed her, pushing his hand over her mouth, and she slumped drunkenly back against the wall of the shaft, exhausted by her outburst. She hardly cared what happened now.

‘You won’t get away with this Scoosme said, more calmly as the man slowly removed his hand. ‘I’m going to tell every single one of them just what you do, just how you like it and just what you-’

At this, the Cawdor dropped to his knees and thrust his gloved hand over Scoosme’s mouth once more. She mumbled through it, but doubted anyone could hear her.

‘Shut up,’ Caldus said, whispering in her ear. She could smell his breath as he did so and she was more convinced than ever that it really was Caldus, or whatever his real name might be ‘Emperor damn your lies. I’ll kill you if you say such things again.’

The struggle went out of Scoosme and she relaxed her tense, aching muscles. She remained still and quiet for a moment and sure enough the man removed his hand from her mouth, but Scoosme wasn't done yet.

'What's the bigger sin, you coward? Killing a girl or paying her to-' she said with a crazy look in her eye. Almost instantly, his gloved palm muffled her voice again.

'Once more, and I'll kill you right now,' he said.

Scoosme unleashed a crazy drunken laugh. That didn't scare her not anymore. She continued to laugh and Caldus once more dared to remove his glove.

'You won't she said, her voice barely a whisper playing along with his desperate plea for secrecy. You can't kill me with all these people watching.'

The man turned his head slowly and peered over his shoulder. Scoosme giggled as he at last saw what she had been looking at the whole time. Her earlier outburst hadn't gone unnoticed and a crowd now milled around outside the Pipe, staring straight at the burly Cawdor and scrawny girl scrapping in the shadows.

She knew the crowd wouldn't try to stop him, they were all too terrified of the Union for that but she gambled that he couldn't be seen killing her. That would leave too much explaining for him to do, not least to his own saintly masters, she thought. They might not care a jot for her life, but they would have precious little mercy for one of their own using one sin to cover another. She giggled as the man cursed and thumped his fist against the wall of the alley. He had clearly come to the same realisation.

'Go away,' he said, spitting the words as loud as he could without the crowd overhearing. 'Leave here.'

'Make me,' she said, laughing. 'Make me go away.'

With that, 'Caldus' thrust his hand in his pocket and pulled out a handful of credits. He hurled them at Scoosme.

'Now leave,' he said, 'and if you ever come back, I will kill you.'

With that he pushed past her and walked further down the shaft, clearly thinking it best to avoid the gathering crowd. Scoosme just lay back on the girder beneath her and laughed her crazy drunken laugh.

DERGEN RECK RAN the kind of trading post that every dreary, hopeless little settlement this deep in the Underhive seemed afflicted with. It was a ramshackle little heap. The kind of place apparently stocked with everything except what you wanted. Its sole selling point was that it catered to those unable to afford Bok's rather more varied and reliable wares sold from his shack on the edge of town.

Reck's wares could hardly be described as new, but they could hardly be described as old either. Useless, busted or trashed would be more fitting descriptions for the vast majority of Reck's stock. An array of pistols was on the table nearest the door, each had the wrong kind of bullets helpfully laid out next to it, in a vain attempt to disguise the fact that Dergen's collection of pistols seldom complemented his supply of bullets. The sharpened shards of scrap metal that populated Dergen's prize 'knife rack' – which was what he called the slab of resin into which they were all stabbed – and the free homemade sheaths with which each came, were all so shabbily made as to virtually guarantee injury to the user should he be fool enough to actually try and wear one.

Least promising of all was the collection of 'Rare Items and Specialities' that littered the counter: the much vaunted bionic eye with its ominous offer of 'free installation': the 'reconditioned' grapnel with its snapped cable hastily tied into a cumbersome knot halfway down; and the 'master-crafted', one-of-a-kind, archeotech hand-flamer. Its fuel canister bore an uncanny similarity to the seltzer bottle that had mysteriously gone missing from the Pipe Under Mile some weeks earlier.

Scoosme wondered how a hopeless little shack like this kept its roof on, let alone stayed in business. In truth, she knew full well that Reck survived by selling weapons to hopeless wretches like herself.

Scoosme perused the pistols on the table, if perused meant picking up and looking at items which one had no idea how to use. The first one she picked up was heavy to the point that she almost dropped it. The second one, well, she could hardly tell which end was which and thought it best to return it quickly to the table, nervously lying it on its side to make sure *both* ends were pointing away from her. The next was more promising: a little stub gun. She'd seen one like it before. Lenka used to carry one, and it was the only kind of gun she had ever held in her own hands. This one

was similarly dainty though not nearly so clean and shiny as Lenka's cherished 'special' had been.

Nonetheless, she found its similarity reassuring – that, and the fact that stub guns could fire virtually any bullet you could cram into the chamber, making Dergen's idiosyncratic stock-keeping less of a problem. Besides, she only needed one bullet. Well, maybe six just to make sure she wasn't squeezing on the wrong chamber. She picked up the stubber and spun it open.

Beside its resting place on the table was a pile of bullets: a particularly ill-matched mix of shapes and sizes. She went through the pile, one bullet at a time, checking their fit into the gun's chambers and, when she had a bullet safely nestled in each of the six, she strolled out of the shop, loaded stub gun precariously in hand.

DERGEN WAS NOT foolish to sit behind the counter, or indeed in his own shop. Most weeks, at least one passing imbecile would request a test firing, invariably inside the shop's four shaky walls. As a result, Dergen was always to be found perched on an ammo crate outside, taking payment from those who left the shop alive.

Scoosme strolled up to him, waving the pistol with ill-advised nonchalance.

'How will you be paying for it?' asked the toothless old trader, a seedy twinkle flashing across his foggy cataract-grey eyes.

A disappointed sulk spread across his face as Scoosme dumped a handful of credits onto the chest beside him. She gave a disgusted *humph*, turned on her heel and marched off down the street. As she reached the corner, she whipped her skirt up to the thigh and jabbed the little pistol into her suspenders. It was hardly necessary to hide the weapon, but she had left the old man two credits short, after all.

SCOOSME CROSSED THE street and walked calmly past the Pipe Under Mile. As she passed the grate on the door, the bartender caught sight of her and dashed forwards to intercept her. She didn't enter, though, she just blew the man a kiss and passed on by.

Fools, the lot of them, thought Scoosme.

The Pipe's collection of ramshackle outbuildings – at least half of them had collapsed – provided fine pickings for any scavenger and so Scoosme stopped to rummage through the nearest heap of rubble, quickly finding a twisted old iron shank that would be just perfect for the job at hand.

She scurried down the alley right up to the rusted metal door at its end. It was part of the same building as the brothel, though exactly which room was behind it, Scoosme couldn't be sure. No one had used this particular entrance in living memory.

The door itself was large, very large. It had no handle but was instead operated by means of a wheel in its centre. Pistons and bolted arms ran over its rusted, grey metal surface, connecting to the wheel at the door's centre so that by turning it pressure might be relieved and the door unlocked.

Scoosme already knew she had no hope of opening the door by hand, and so instead thrust the iron bar down behind the rail that ran around the wheel's outer edge. She jammed it sideways so that the bar rested against one of the many winding handles running round the wheel's circumference. In this way, the bar formed a solid lever at right angles to the wheel itself.

She pushed hard against the bar but it didn't budge an inch. Another good push and the winding handle tore clean off the door, sending the metal bar tumbling to the floor and Scoosme with it. She shrieked as she stumbled but was not perturbed. Dusting herself off, Scoosme again thrust the bar into the wheel, butting it against the next winding handle down. By chance this second choice actually seemed to be a better angle and Scoosme was able to put all her weight over the bar, pushing right down on it.

Fortunately, this second winding handle was not riddled with the rust that had torn the first from its bearings and, with the bar pressed down hard on it, the handle drove the wheel ever so slowly clockwise, away from the frantically straining Scoosme. Flakes of rust fell away from the wheel as it ground slowly round and it seemed for a moment as though the whole thing might simply canker and fall away like so much crushed rubble.

She managed a full half turn before trying to push the door itself. Nothing. She persevered with the metal bar, though having turned the

wheel almost two-thirds of a rotation caused the angle to be awkward. Scoosme was forced to position herself behind the wheel, on the opposite side to the iron bar and, with her feet and back wedged squarely in the door's frame, she continued to pull, rather than pushing on the metal bar, using every ounce of her little weight to drag the iron bar agonisingly past the upright position.

At last it came and the iron bar fell away, coming loose as the wheel reached a full turn. It was sufficiently loose that Scoosme could turn it herself, using the winding handles at its edge. Dropping to the floor from her precarious perch between the jambs, she did just that, and in a moment the heavy girders, locking pistons and plated hinges that covered the door began to creak and grind to life.

A second later and Scoosme was forced to leap back out of the way. Quite to her surprise the door did not open outwards but upwards and, with the wheel loose enough for it to do so, the whole thing lifted up in an eerie levitation.

The building alongside – one of the Pipe's derelict outbuildings – had clearly been built in the long years since this wheeled door last opened. The door rose up when opened, but its edge jammed hard against the neighbouring building before it could even become horizontal. Having slumbered so long, the heavy mechanisms of its lock were in little mood to give up now, and the force drove the adamantium door right into the masonry of the outbuilding next to it, carving a rut almost a metre long out of the building's wall. At last, though, the outbuilding's structure proved too much and the door froze, less than fully open, stuck in place against the wall. With its uppermost edge buried in the plascrete of the outbuilding, the door was as firmly jammed open as it had been jammed shut minutes earlier.

Scoosme cursed, not because the door was only partly open – its vast size meant that even half-open it formed a perfectly adequate entrance – but because she had intended to close it behind her. Scoosme could do without drawing attention to her little reclamation attempt, and leaving the door open would do that. She cursed again but could do nothing more about it and cautiously hopped over the door's raised lip and into her former residence.

The room she entered was not really a room at all. Its walls were entirely metal, seamless and airtight, and barely three metres ahead there was a second metal door identical to the one she had just come through. This one, mercifully, was caved in, hanging awkwardly through the doorway itself, as if sucked through by some unbelievable pressure. In fact, it probably had been, for two airtight doors so close together could only mean an airlock for access to whatever volatile substances the building had once been used to cultivate, harvest, or process.

She'd seen something like it before, near the sump, where such chambers could occasionally be found to still contain their precious chemical treasures. Extracting them was tricky though, and when Scoosme used to prowl the explorator's shacks along the sump's edge she more than once heard tell of foolhardy prospectors sucked to their doom by incautiously breaking the seal on such airtight containers. They would be stripped to the bone by a rushing torrent of chemical filth from within, released by the colossal pressures built up inside over centuries of ill-maintained containment.

She shuddered to think that such dangers could lurk even here in Fall Sands, though on reflection reassured herself that the noise was almost certainly just some crank still clunking uneasily against the jammed door. The ash pool, likewise, had a curious life to it: foaming, spitting and frothing, and offered up a few eerie sounds of its own. With this in mind, Scoosme was quite sure that she was alone, and the noise was nothing more sinister than the cacophony of decay.

This new room was small and offered only two exits, neither of them doors. A ladder led upwards on the wall to the left, while opposite that a small ventilation shaft was set into the wall. The shaft was too dark to see down, but a waft of familiar scent made Scoosme certain of her bearings. She was behind the rooms proper: the rooms that she had known in her time in the building, and the shaft led directly to one of the living rooms off the corridor leading from the front door.

Scoosme wandered over to the shaft. The creepy noises still coming from the rooms behind her frayed her nerves, no matter how much she told herself that no one was there, and so she cast a quick glance over her shoulder before flinging her arms up and hauling herself into the ventilation shaft.

The shaft was surprisingly clean. The gentle breeze that perpetually drifted through it allowed less ash to settle here than elsewhere and Scoosme dragged herself along without difficulty. A few more minutes and she emerged into a familiar room at last.

The bar, or what passed for it in an establishment like this. Tall metal urns mounted on the wall had been used to ferment all manner of noxious house specials, though Scoosme now realised that they once must have acted as release vats for whatever chemical soup had lain in the reservoir before the ash came. Suddenly the taste of the house cocktails she drank day and night to numb the mind was a little less appealing.

The urns were bereft of liquor now, though they were not disused. What had once housed Scoosme's noxious cocktails now contained a concoction of an entirely different kind. The urn nearest the ventilafion shaft contained an inky black mixture, much thicker than water and surprisingly cool to the touch. The next urn held a liquid of the same consistency, though it was bright red in colour. The other urns each held similar formulations, varying in colour and occasionally consistency.

Scoosme dipped her finger in the farthest urn as she glided .through the room. It was the consistency of water and she thought for a time it might be drinkable, though placing her finger on her tongue she discovered the liquid was not nearly rank enough to pass for drinkable liquor. She spat on the floor and wiped the rest of the muck off on her dress. It dried as it touched the cloth and, although deep brown in the urn, the liquid's colour faded, lightening almost to the colour of her dress. Indeed, if it wasn't for the fact that the liquid made hard patches on the supple doth, it would have been entirely invisible once dry.

She stole on through the room and out into the main corridor. At last her ears picked up on a definite sound above her and up the stairs. Scoosme pulled the pistol from its hiding place and sneaked slowly up the metal stairs towards what had been her and the other girls' boudoirs.

Nearing the top of the stairs she gazed straight ahead into the first room. She held the pistol out in front of her and inched through the door. It was empty except for a number of pieces of tattered parchment hanging from wires that were crisscrossing the ceiling. Most appeared blank, except the parchments on the foremost wire, all of them bearing lines of still-wet

black ink on their surfaces. Scoosme couldn't read, however, and could make out nothing more than this.

She shuffled back out of the door, turning into the long corridor that ran right to the front of the building with care not to reveal herself too quickly. Rooms lined the right hand side of the corridor while the left simply continued on from the metal staircase by which she had come up.

She passed the doorway of the next room on the right. It was dark and empty and so she gracefully sidled down the corridor towards the sound of what was now the only noise she could hear – a faint, wispy scratching sound accompanied by movement. The next room down the corridor, Lenka's room, was also empty, and the sound grew louder as Scoosme continued on down the hall.

The fourth room yielded what Scoosme had been looking for: the outlander. She saw him as she nervously peered round the doorframe. He sat at a large table in the middle of the room, facing away from her. His shoulders were hunched over as he worked at something in front of him on the table. The scratching noise broke off as the outlander raised his left hand and brought it inadvertently into sight. In that hand he held a long stylus mounted on a metal arm attached to the desk. Miniscule cogs in the arm whirred as the outlander guided the stylus away from his body and dipped its tip into a pot of black liquid beside him: the same liquid Scoosme had seen in the urns downstairs.

The outlander returned the stylus to its place in front of him and the scratching noise resumed. Noise enough, thought Scoosme, for her to make her move She tiptoed into the room, her bare feet padding softly on the grimy floor, the pistol held out in front of her. She got to within a metre of the outlander when he seemed to sense something and raised his head. No matter. She was close enough.

'Bastard,' she yelled, aiming the gun straight at the back of his head.

He showed no panic. The outlander calmly rose from his seat and turned to face her, moving sufficiently slowly so as to show no threat, and seeming completely unfazed.

'What do you want?' he asked calmly. His voice had poise and measure of a sort seldom heard in the Underhive. Scoosme had heard voices like it before, though; she was sure of it. 'I want you out,' she said. 'This is my place: mine and the girls'. Get out.'

The outlander seemed to smirk a little and Scoosme's finger tightened round the trigger, suddenly afraid he had something up his sleeve.

'It won't do you any good,' he said. Whatever game he was playing, he was winning and Scoosme could feel her courage ebbing away.

'What do you mean?' she asked timidly.

'This place. Being here will do no good. It'll be better if you leave I promise you that,' he said.

'You don't scare me,' she said, half-lying. 'Not you and not those Union thugs. Damn 'em all to hell, they don't scare me!' She waved the pistol threateningly but the outlander didn't flinch.

'So shoot me,' he said, and at last she could place it his voice his peculiar accent. There was only one other she knew like it and that was Morla's. She'd never known where Morla was from, or why she spoke the way she did, but her speech had always had a power to it. It was like a well-crafted weapon in its way, and there was only one place in the hive where the tongue was a weapon. That certainly wasn't Fall Sands and yet the outlander spoke in that same measured tone that sounded at once both wise and cruel.

'Go on, shoot me. That'll show them you're not afraid,' he said. Scoosme stared into his eyes – both real and bionic – but his gaze was almost too vexing to bear. Then she realised with horror that he wasn't looking at her at all, but right past her shoulder. He was staring past her shoulder at something, or someone...

Oh frag, she thought as a gloved hand clamped down over her mouth and she felt the cold steel of a dagger pressed to her throat.

CHAPTER TEN

LIRBUS HATED SENTRY duty, especially sentry duty on the front door. No one would ever be stupid enough to attack the front door, so what was the point of posting sentries there? At least on the other sentry posts you had something to do. It had been months since anyone seriously threatened the Union, but before that, sentry duty had at least offered a few good shootouts. Even now, sentry duty on the more distant posts at least offered the opportunity to loose pot shots down into the crowds of townsfolk to keep them on their toes. Not so on the front frikking door.

Worse still was the fact that Lirbus was assigned sentry duty on the front door with Erket. Juves were bad enough; Erket was the worst. Lirbus had met humble juves – the kind so eager to please you quickly wished they weren't – and he'd also met cowardly juves. He could live with either of them since both did as he told them.

Erket was a gobby little runt, owner of an ego inversely proportioned to its owner. He never let his gun down once the whole time he was on sentry duty his scowl always just a little too serious, his grip on the pistol just a little too tight, his posture keeping it just a little too close to his crotch. All of this gave Lirbus ample reason to dislike Erket. Everything else Erket did gave Lirbus reason to distrust him, as well as dislike him.

It wasn't long before Erket seemed to have another urge to show off his weapons. He continued to cradle his pistol in one hand, but now drew his knife and held it upright, clenching it in his left hand. He sat rigidly upright, every muscle in his body straining as he dutifully grasped his pistol and knife. Exactly what he sought to achieve by doing so was beyond Lirbus, but it seemed to please Erket. With his knife held upright like that, Lirbus wondered whether he could slap Erket hard enough on the back of the head to make him stab himself. He slipped the magazine of his autopistol down into the palm of his glove in anticipation of the attempt.

He wouldn't get the chance. Lakatos and Morden strolled into view up ahead and Lirbus thought it best not to brain one of the juves in front of their leader and his most trusted ganger. At least, Morden always used to be Lakatos's most trusted ally. These days Lirbus was starting to wonder whether the outlander might have usurped Morden's position.

As they drew nearer, Lirbus could see Berzel scurrying along behind them, the shorter man hidden behind the imposing Lakatos and Morden.

'Take one of these two with you,' said Lakatos as he passed. Lirbus knew instantly what that meant. There was work to be done, and he could either go with Berzel or be left here with Lakatos. As a leader, Lirbus thought the world of Lakatos. As company, he left much to be desired. Lirbus leapt to his feet before Erket could even loosen his grip on his pistol and heartily slapped Berzel across the back of the shoulders.

'Come on,' he said, 'what needs doing?'

'Taxes,' was Berzel's smarmy reply. Behind him, Lakatos slumped onto the rusted metal steps beside Erket. He was, at least fair in his sharing of duties, and Lakatos was never one to shirk the sentry's post.

'Put that knife away, you idiot,' Lakatos said to Erket and Lirbus couldn't help but chuckle out loud as he turned to follow Berzel down the ladder to street level.

'Wait,' said Lakatos, and a wave of fear passed through Lirbus; fear that his smirking had been taken as disobedience. Berzel hauled himself back up the ladder and the pair stood patiently in front of their seated leader As ever, he seemed in no rush, but eventually pulled out a folded-up parchment from where it was tucked under a cord around his arm.

'You can tell Goddlesby he's got a new donor,' said Lakatos. Berzel took the parchment and unfolded it as Lirbus peered over his shoulder. 'And tell him to be sure he collects.'

Lirbus squinted. His reading wasn't the best, especially not with the fancy language the guilders used, but he nonetheless recognised the document as a wanted poster, and he immediately recognised the face as that of the trader Gern Bok, a longtime thorn in the Union's side.

'I will,' said Berzel. He tapped Lirbus firmly on the shoulder folding the parchment back up before Lirbus had managed to make out what Bok was accused of. Berzel scampered down the ladder towards the dusty streets below and Lirbus wasted no time in following suit.

‘Put that knife *down*,’ was all Lirbus could hear as he descended out of earshot, still tittering to himself.

IT WAS A journey Lirbus hadn’t made often. Collecting ‘taxes’ from Goddlesby was Berzel’s job, really, and he was no friend of Lirbus’s. Today, though, faced with the choice between Berzel and Erket, Lirbus was glad to pick the former. For his part, Bezel seemed less objectionable than usual. Perhaps he was also counting himself lucky not to be charged with the feckless little juve as a companion.

Lirbus followed Berzel and hauled himself up through the narrow access shaft that offered the quickest route to Mayor Goddlesby’s shack. He rose from his knees as he stepped onto the narrow ledge and pushed open the airtight, circular steel door that shut Goddlesby off from the outside world. It seemed Berzel had long ago given up knocking when it came to Goddlesby, and the little creep knew better than to ever lock his door to the Union.

‘Back so soon?’ asked Goddlesby in a rare act of courage. It faded quickly enough as the pair strode across the room, and Goddlesby quickly shrank into the corner behind his desk.

‘We missed you,’ said Berze1.

‘Didn’t you miss us?’ Lirbus chipped in.

‘No company today, Goddlesby?’ said Bezel.

Lirbus hadn’t the faintest idea what he was on about. Lirbus was no fan of Berzel’s irreverent style of menace, but it seemed to do the trick with Goddlesby and he decided to go with it.

‘Not to worry, little man, we’ve got a new friend for you,’ said Lirbus, snapping his fingers and beckoning to Berzel with his upturned palm. Berzd passed him the folded-up poster and Lirbus clumsily opened it, tearing it a little along the creases before flinging it down onto Goddlesby’s desk. Goddlesby took one look at it and gulped in terror.

‘Oh no,’ he said, ‘not Bok.’

THE PAIR STEPPED out into the open air.

‘That little runt hasn’t got the balls to shake down Bok,’ said Lirbus.

‘Hmm, I don’t know. Who’s he more scared of?’ asked Berzel. ‘Him or us?’

That gave Lirbus cause to think True, Goddlesby was in the Union’s pocket out of fear and nothing else, but Bok himself was a fearsome proposition. He was the one trader in town who didn’t fear the Union and he had never paid them a cred in taxes. He sold what were without doubt the finest weapons in this part of the hive, and even the Union had to pay good money to get them. His shack was a virtual fortress and the man himself stood as tall as a scaly and almost as wide. The Union could have disappeared him long ago, like they did with other troublesome individuals, but Bok wasn’t without friends, and it had never seemed worth the bother of crossing him. Now that he was a dirty man, clearly that had changed. A wanted sign made any man an easier target, even Bok.

‘What did he do? To make himself wanted, I mean,’ asked Lirbus. Passing the poster to Goddlesby had given him time to take another look, but his benighted mind didn’t allow him to understand it any better. Bezel just laughed.

‘What did he do? He crossed us, that’s what,’ said Berzel.

‘What?’ said Lirbus, his temper flaring as he started to suspect that Berzel was playing games with him.

‘That’s all that got his face on the wanted poster, nothing else,’ said Berzel, ‘and that means we can protect him just like we said. He pays up, nobody will ever catch up with him, no matter how “wanted” he is.’ Berzel broke into another deep, cacophonous laugh.

‘He must have done something,’ said Lirbus, ‘for the guilders to want him.’

‘You see, Lirbus,’ said Berzel, ‘I don’t think it’s the guilders that want him at all.’

‘What?’

‘I saw Jurgen earlier – before he left town with Deveres – handing something over to Lakatos. I’m pretty sure it was that wanted poster,’ said Berzel.

‘Then where the hell did Jurgen find it?’ asked Lirbus, not yet able to shake the feeling that he was being toyed with.

‘Oh, I don’t think Jurgen found it all,’ said Berzel. ‘I think he made it. All that stuff about him being a forger – the wanted poster they found on

that bounty hunter's body – it's all true I'm sure of it.'

'I don't get it,' said Lirbus. 'He had those guilder codes and the hidden messages. He had them and he knows how to make them. He's not a forger.'

'Maybe he wasn't at first,' said Berzel, 'but even if what he says is true, he hasn't worked for the guilders for a long time. Perhaps he's turned his hand to forgery since then. I think that's the skill he's been using to get by on the run and it's a skill he's using for us now, though I guess Lakatos doesn't want us to know.''No, I guess he doesn't said Lirbus, still uncertain. 'Let's not make him think we do.'Bezel just nodded.

'NO PROBLEM,' SAID Berzel dropping his heavy sack on the table Durn was perched at the far end of the table, a clutch of shivs in his hand. He looked up and nodded a brief greeting to Lirbus but seemed uninterested and quickly returned to his work.

'I told Goddlesby, just like you said, next week's money better include Bok's share, or the pair of them are gonna pay for it,' said Berzel.

'Good,' said Lakatos, reclining on his stone chair, 'and what did the little rat have to say to that?'

'Well, he kicked up a hell of a stink' said Lirbus, with an honesty he knew would irritate the showy Berzel. 'Said Bok will never pay, says he can't make him, says it's not his fault, all of that.'

'It'll be fine,' said Bend. Goddlesby has never dared once step out of line.'

'Not quite true, Berzel,' said Lakatos. 'He's managed a good few mistakes in his time, and I'm sure.more than a few of them have been wilful.'

Lirbus and Berzel remained silent. It was a silence that, after a thoughtful pause. Lakatos broke.

'Perhaps we can help poor little Goddlesby out,' he said, 'just this once.'

'What?' asked Berzel.

'Well, we ought to explain to Bok how all of this works. Besides, way I see it, he owes us plenty enough in back-taxes to justify a visit,' said Lakatos. 'See to it.' His stem tone and terse conclusion left Lirbus and Berzel little room for retort. Both thought better of it and left the room.

BOK'S SHACK WAS indeed a fortress. Lirbus had never paid it such close attention before, but then again he'd never really had to. He'd always been content to leave well enough alone, and now that he was here on a mission guaranteed to raise Bok's ire, he suddenly noticed what an imposing fixture the place was.

Bok's shack was, in fact, the fortified entrance to the dome above Fall Sands: Pilgrim's Spire. The story went that, in an age long gone, the dome had in fact constituted the highest pinnacle of the hive (just as, Lirbus reasoned, many domes must have done over time). Legend told that at that time Necromunda had been ruled over by a rather more devout ruling House, and the highest dome had also been the most revered place of worship in the hive, earning it the nickname of Pilgrim's Spire.

The story was often told within House Cawdor, and the vision of a hive topped by an unshakeable bastion of faith was a vision they struggled daily to recreate. To House Cawdor, the Spire should be the greatest and most worthy symbol of man's devotion to the Emperor, not merely a high loft of decadence from which decrepit dilettante rulers looked down uncaring upon unbelieving subjects.

Still, that dream was not yet real, and the Pilgrim's Spire was little proof it had ever really existed. It was impressively well built however. The wall of the dome, which must have once divided ancient Spire from ancient city, was still imposing and bore only a single entrance: a broad, armoured gate twenty metres high. Centuries of ash storms had long ago barred it shut, piling such a weight of detritus against it that it could never again open, but its imposing figure still marked the edge of Fall Sands.

Bok's shack was, in fact, one of the gatehouses that adjoined this ancient entrance. Other similar buildings provided the only routes through to Pilgrim's Spire now that the main gates were forever closed. The gatehouses were abandoned and, with the exception of Bok's own shack, the wall provided no real barrier for all its solidity. The gatehouses allowed a man on foot to pass through easily enough but there was certainly no way through for the colossal transports that once made use of the gate proper. It was because of this that places like Fall Sands had slowly become isolated and fallen into dereliction.

Bok's shack was a gleaming reminder of another time. The adamantium surface of the building was kept as polished as possible, where it wasn't

already irredeemably scarred by rust, and the pistons that raised and lowered the blast shutters that covered door and windows alike were all in full working order - the only such working pistons in this part of the hive, as the mechanically minded Lirbus well knew.

The blast shutters they mounted were all but impenetrable, but today they were raised, revealing a heavy metal door in the centre of the shack's front wall with two slim, tall windows to either side Lascannons protruded from the windows, turning them more into murder holes than viewing portals. Lirbus had never seen the lascannons fire, though he was certain they would be in full working order. This, after all, was Bok's shack.

Lirbus himself was nervous, and Berzel seemed all the more so as they approached the sturdy door. Berzel gave a glance to Lirbus, but then seemed to decide it was better not to waste any time and pushed the door wide open. For all its sturdiness, the door was not kept locked. This was, after all, a trading post, at least by Underhive standards.

Bok was nowhere to be seen. This was instantly worrying. Racks of rifles – autopistols, lasguns and bolters – lined the walls. Trunks of ammunition covered the floor. Most ominously of all, bullet holes peppered the floor and ceiling.

The pair strode through the claustrophobic room, suddenly aware of just how little light penetrated the windows and just how much space was lost to the metre-thick adamantium walls. The 'counter' was in fact a broken down old console from which the gatehouse's former occupants would have received sensory information on everything going on outside their little bastion. Two screens were cracked and three remained intact, though all, of course, were lifeless. Lirbus stopped to look over the console for a moment before silently and cautiously following Berzel into the anteroom beyond.

Nothing. This room was much more lavish. Indeed, it looked like it once must have been positively comfortable. It was rather more humble now, however, but still infinitely more welcoming than the dark little hole they had just left. Well, it would have seemed more welcoming, thought Lirbus, if it wasn't for Bok's eerie absence. Something was wrong, very wrong.

Lirbus only advanced three or four steps into the mom. Stopping so soon might well have saved his life. Berzel up ahead of him already stood motionless in the middle of the room, and as Lirbus came to a halt a hush

fell over them, which allowed him to hear just the faintest *tick-tock, tick-tock* from a stack of boxes in the comer.

Lirbus didn't wait for a second. He dived back through the door by which he had just entered, stumbling and falling as he did so. Berzel charged through behind him, almost landing on Lirbus. Berzel was first back on his feet, leaping onto the counter in a headlong dash for the door. The *tick-tock, tick-tock* went on and Lirbus wasn't sure they had time to make it out. Desperation made his mind quick and in an instant he was gazing up at the doorway through which he had just come.

Sure enough the frame still housed a heavy adamantium blast door. Like everything else in the shack, Bok had kept it in perfect working order and for all its weight Lirbus had no difficulty in slamming the door shut He grabbed a fly handle on the wheel in the centre of the door and sent it spinning with all his might. The door rattled as Lirbus's spin sent the locking mechanism racing and barred the door tight just as a dull, crumpling oomph emanated from the room beyond.

Lirbus fell to the floor in shock as the door buckled outwards, but breathed a sigh of relief as nothing more than a hissing gout of smoke streamed out from its edges. The door had held and the blast had been contained. He'd dodged the bullet, or more precisely, the bomb. Berzel, shaking in fear, nervously inched back away from the door, reaching out his gloved hand to help Lirbus up from the floor.

Their relief was premature. A grinding noise above them alerted Lirbus to a circular hatch in the ceiling. Damn it, he thought. It had never occurred to him this might be a two-storey building. He flung himself to his feet, grabbing at Bead's arm as he did so, before barging past and sprinting for the door.

The hatch dropped open and Bok appeared. He stood over the opening with a heavy stubber pointed down through it, bandoliers of ammunition thrown over each of his hulking shoulders. He opened fire, sending a line of bullets chasing after Bezel and Lirbus that snapped at their heels as they fled. Mercifully, Boles height, coupled with the narrow angle of fire through the hatch, saved them, and the volley fell away as they got within a couple of metres of the door. Not for a second did they stop running, though.

They charged on so hard that Lirbus almost lost his footing as he leapt from the door back out onto the ashy ground. Bead burst through behind him, barging past and skidding quickly down the ashy slope that led down from the shack. Lirbus regained his footing and followed suit.

He made it only another metre before he stopped dead and recoiled back against the shack's wall. Up ahead of him, Berzel dissolved into a mass of smoke and flame. The lascannons mounted in the windows had grumbled into life, swung about and cut Berzel down at the junction of their scything beams. Lirbus squirmed up against the wall, too close to the cannon to be found by their ranging arcs.

He scurried to the left, ducking and scrabbling right under one of the throbbing barrels. He stayed close to the wall, sprinting as fast as he could for fear old Bok would abandon the lascannon and cut him down with that heavy stubber. If Bok came out of the shack now, Lirbus would be a sitting duck. Lirbus had to get to cover, and quickly.

He hardly dared pause to look around, but careering headfirst away from the shack was just as likely to get him into trouble, and so he found the resolve to drop to the ground and allow himself a second to look for cover.

He spotted it instantly - another gatehouse. It was the best Lirbus could hope for.

He clung close to the wall and dashed with all his speed towards it. Clanking to his rear alerted him to Bok leaving his shack and a raft of ammunition flew over his head as he reached the gatehouse. He dived inside, slamming the door shut just in time for a volley of shots to clatter into it, leaving a circle of indentations in the metal like the probing fingers of some angry giant.

Lirbus was pretty sure the door would hold against a heavy stubber but he had no idea what else the maniac Bok might bring to bear. He looked around. The room was identical to Bok's shack, though lacking in weapons and ammunition. He really could do with some right now, thought Lirbus to himself.

He made straight for the anteroom, hoping it would afford him a route out into Pilgrim's Spire. He reached the rear chamber just as a second volley of shots raked the door. They hit with a furious noise far above that of the first salvo and Lirbus was sure that Bok was closing in.

Lirbus dashed to the door at the back of the room. Its rusted handle tore off in his hand as he grabbed it and as his shoulder slammed into the equally rusted surface, the door showed little sign of giving way. He flung the handle to the floor and pulled his pistol out from its holster, ducking back behind the doorway joining the two rooms. He was trapped and his only hope lay in a lucky ambush.

A thud rang out in the gatehouse, followed by a dull metallic clang and a bright phosphor glow streaming in through the doorway. Bok had melta-bombed the door off its hinges and sure enough a raking volley of shots screamed in just a moment later. Lirbus crouched beside the doorway in the anteroom.

Two, three, four more metallic clangs rang out as Bok plodded over the collapsed door and into the first room. Lirbus heard a dissatisfied grunt come from the wily old trader, followed by a rather ominous *plinkle-plinkle-plop*.

A grenade. Shit thought Lirbus. A flat metal disc rolled out into the middle of the anteroom floor and Lirbus scrambled to his feet in panic. Even in this state of blind terror he knew that heading back through the door would be instant death and he somehow kept his wits about him enough to wriggle behind the anteroom door where it lay open against the wall behind him. He pushed the door forwards just a fraction, wriggling himself into an impossibly small gap between it and the wall.

Somehow it worked. The grenade unleashed its fury, and Lirbus was nearly crushed as the force of the blast pressed him flat against the wall. It felt like an eternity before he could breath again, every ounce of oxygen wrung from his lungs by the heavy, metal door pinning him to the wall, but at least he was alive. At last the door released its bear hug on him and he slumped to the floor. His ribs ached, every one of them broken no doubt, but he had no time to waste.

He wriggled out from behind the door and crouched, pistol held out towards the open doorway. He would only get one shot, so he'd better make it count he thought to himself.

Another grunt, this time a pleased-sounding one, was uttered. Bok must think I'm already dead, Lirbus thought. He even dared to hope Bok might leave without looking for his body.

It was a vain hope as a second later the tip of the heavy stubber barrel snaked through the door tracking left and right and it took all of Lirbus's nerve not to fire instantly, but he had to wait until he could get one good clean shot at Bok. Inch by rusty inch, the barrel came forwards, and then Bok's hand came into view his front leg, and his other hand. It was an agonising wait.

Suddenly a shot rang out. It wasn't the stubber – it remained motionless in the doorway in front of Lirbus – and Lirbus gasped, terrified that his frightened hands had fired without his nenrous mind commanding it. He tipped his pistol up a little to look at the barrel, but no smoke meant no fire.

He turned his gaze back to the door in time to see the heavy stubber fall to the floor. Another moment passed before Bok keeled over behind it, dead. His huge frame slammed into the floor and on reflex Lirbus leapt up, planting one foot on his back and aiming his pistol at Bok's head. He was definitely dead, though, and as much as Lirbus wanted to shoot, it would be nothing more than a waste of a bullet.

'What the...?' he mumbled nervously to himself before realising a third man stood behind him. He turned, terrified... only to see Jurgen's grinning face with a toxstick wedged firmly between his teeth.

'You gonna tell me what happened or just stand there pretending you shot him?' asked Jurgen, winking as he returned his pistol to its hiding place in the small of his back.

THAT'S THE MOST damned luck I've had in days,' said Jurgen. Lirbus jogged along beside him, still shaking with fear.

'It was a lot luckier for me,' Lirbus said.

'You think?' said Jurgen, his meaning not at all clear to Lirbus.

'What do you mean? What bad luck?' asked Lirbus, deciding to return to the earlier noint.

'It's not good, Lirbus, it's not good,' he said. 'I lost Deveres on the way. Damned fool just wandered off. I only hope he made it back here by himself. As for the others, well, they didn't make it anywhere.'

'What?' said Lirbus, biting his lip. He'd been gone most of the day, but Deveres certainly wasn't back in Fall Sands by the rime he'd left, and if he

wasn't back by then, well, Lirbus was smart enough to know he probably wasn't coming back at all. 'What about the others?' he asked.

'Handomel's gang, Scarlet Skulls or whatever they called themselves,' said Jurgen. 'They're dead. All dead.'

Lirbus gulped in disbelief. 'How?' he asked.

'One big bloody mess, that's how,' said Jurgen.

'Emperor judge us all squealed Lirbus. 'Do you think Lago is back? Do you think he's still after them?'

'Well if he is, he got them,' said Jurgen.

'Then do you think he's after us?' asked Lirbus. Jurgen said nothing at first. He just seemed to be thinking it over in his head.

'Thing is,' he said a moment later, 'half of Handomel's men were dead in their hideout – I found the gang badge graffed on the wall – and a bunch more were dead all over the place.'

'So?'

'So, if Lago did this – and I'm not saying he didn't – I'm not sure he did all of it'

'What?' said Lirbus. This was all too much: Deveres, Berzel, Handomel's men.

'I wonder if some of those Scarlet Skulls weren't a little too eager to replace Handomel, putting themselves before the cause, if you know what I mean, brother,' said Jurgen. 'Can't be sure they didn't go and shoot themselves up. Maybe Lago was there, who knows, but maybe they made themselves easy pickings for him.'

Lirbus frowned. He was confused and frightened and had little stomach left for the fight. He remained silent the rest of the way as he and Jurgen headed back to the hideout.

'ALL OF THEM?' asked Lakatos, clearly disbelieving.

'All of them,' said Jurgen, sternly. 'You're lucky I heard the ruckus, or you could add Lirbus here to that tally, too.'

'Damn it, damn it, damn it said Lakatos, his voice rising as his anger grew. He slammed his fist into the wall next to him and paced back and forth.

Lirbus was right; Deveres wasn't back yet. No one was saying it, but he hadn't made it. There was no point looking for him, either.

Lirbus had listened to the whole sorry tale again as Jurgen told it to Lakatos: how Deveres got lost in the storms, and how Jurgen found the Scarlet Skulls dead to a man and fled as fast as he could, only to run right into the gunfight at Bok's. Lirbus was glad of that last part, at least. He hadn't instantly taken to the outlander, but he owed him his life now, and what's more, he trusted him implicitly.

Lirbus was sure Lakatos was going to explode when Jurgen suggested some of the Scarlet Skulls might have killed each other in a leadership challenge, and it certainly angered him, but he seemed to find the suggestion sadly predictable. Deveres, too, and Berzel. Lirbus was sure their deaths would send Lakatos into a fit of rage, with him and Jurgen to take the blame, but Lakatos seemed more ready to criticise the dead men for their idiocy. Now he just paced back and forth. No one dared speak, not even the outlander, while their leader racked his brains for what to do next.

'Addec needs to know,' he said. 'If the Skulls are gone, he needs to take their territory and quickly, else he's unprotected. Someone has to tell Addec,' said Lakatos. turn, go to Addec; tell him what happened. Tell him he has to capture Handomel's territory *now*.'

Lakatos paced to the edge of the room as Durn wasted no time in following his leader's orders, ducking out of the door and making good his departure.

'Goddlesby,' said Lakatos, his voice barely more than a whisper, muffled by the gloved fist he held over his mouth.

'What?' asked Morden from his spot in the centre of the room.

'Goddlesby, the little runt, he must have done this,'

'What?'

'The little bastard said he wouldn't collect Bok's taxes, didn't he?' asked Lakatos. Lirbus just nodded in reply. 'I bet he decided to tip him off about it.'

It made sense. Goddlesby was a worthless little coward.

'Well then,' said Lakatos, 'let's give our town's fine mayor one last chance to make his proper contribution.' Lakatos's anger turned to a cruel laugh.

‘What do you want us to do?’ asked Lirbus, realising that the uncollected taxes were probably still his problem.

‘Go and get Bok’s body,’ said Lakatos. ‘Remember, he’s a wanted man.’

Jurgen looked up, offering a single nod to Lirbus. Lirbus nodded three times in reply. It made perfect sense.

‘I WON’T DO it. I can’t do it,’ Goddlesby said. His already filthy skin was washed clean in places by the endless streams of sweat working their way down his bald head and onto his wrinkled face. He was the very picture of terror, and vet he was resolute nonetheless.

‘That man is not wanted for anything, dead or alive, and I will not pay a single credit of bounty on him,’ he said.

‘I’ve got his wanted poster right here,’ said Lirbus, taking the parchment from his pocket and thrusting it into Goddlesby’s face. ‘Or don’t you remember?’

Jurgen stood silent in the corner with Bok’s body at his feet. Lirbus followed Goddlesby’s gaze as the little man stared at the corpse, frightened out of his wits.

‘I don’t know what’s going on, but if Bok was wanted I would know about it. I’m not paying up. I can’t pay up.’

‘It’s not even your money Goddlesby,’ said Lirbus. ‘I know you’ve got that special stash the guilders leave with you, for paying out on their behalf. Now you be a good boy and pay out.’

‘I won’t do it,’ said Goddlesby. ‘You want the money you take him to the guilders yourself’

Lirbus turned to Jurgen and frowned. It seemed Goddlesby had left them with no alternative. He’d blown his last chance, and now he had to disappear.

‘I’ll take him with me,’ said Lirbus, turning to Jurgen.

‘No,’ said Jurgen, ‘I’ll go. Seems I’m having more luck out there than most.’

LIRBUS PLODDED BACK to the hideout He was dreading being there.

They had lost two men in a day, after a year without so much as seeing a man go out of action, and all that on top of the news that some of their

most important allies were dead, apparently having torn themselves to pieces.

Sure enough, the atmosphere was so tense as to be painful as Lirbus returned to the hideout, every pair of eyes rising up to see if he was the bearer of more bad news. He walked to the rising steps at the back of the room in silence and slumped in a comer. He wouldn't sleep a wink and he didn't dare say a word to any of the others. As exhausted as he was, Lirbus almost wished it was him and not Durn going out into the storms.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MAYOR ERB GODDLESBY gulped a gulp of deep and unshakeable nervousness.

‘Oh no,’ he said, ‘not Bok.’ This was bad news, very bad news, indeed. He took another look at the wanted poster lying face up on his desk. It was Bok sure enough. Erb couldn’t believe it. Bok was a tough, ragged brute of a man, but one who had never so much as wriggled one little toe over onto the wrong side of the law.

Wanted, it read, for the theft of armaments sanctioned only for use by enforcers, watch and Hive City patrol agents. Surely this couldn’t be true, could it? Erb gulped again.

‘What are you going to do?’ he asked. The two Cawdor took their time answering him. They loved making him squirm, and he’d never really been able to avoid doing so. The one on the right was Berzel. He knew him. He wasn’t so sure of the other one’s name. He wasn’t sure he had seen him before, or rather wasn’t so sure he could tell him apart from any of the other vicious thugs that plagued the town.

‘Nothing,’ said Berzel, ‘nothing at all. You’re going to do it for us.’

‘What?’ said Erb. ‘What do you mean? I can’t bring him in! Not Bok!’ He still wasn’t sure that the wanted poster was genuine, or that Bok had really done the things it said. Even if it the poster was genuine, and Bok had done the things it accused him of, Erb certainly wasn’t going to be the one to bring Bok in. He wouldn’t stand a chance against a man like that. Civic duty could go to hell when it came to colossal arms dealers with bad tempers. Civic duty wasn’t for dealing with people like that, Erb told himself meekly.

‘Don’t worry little man,’ said Berzel. ‘We don’t want you to bring him in. We’re going to look after Bok, protect him. Same as we protect all of you in this town. We’ve always looked after you, haven’t we, Goddlesby?’

Goddlesby certainly didn't consider himself looked after, but he wasn't going to risk a beating by telling them so.

'Wh-what are you going to do?' he stuttered, his already short supply of nerve dwindling fast.

'Well, here's the deal,' said the other Cawdor, the one whose name Erb didn't know. 'We're going to protect Bok, and make sure nobody makes good on the "Wanted: Dead or Alive" part, but it's going to cost him.'

Erb gulped that familiar gulp. He could feel it coming every time he got nervous. He was nervous a lot of the time. He gulped a lot, especially when the Union was around. They weren't going to ask him to bring Bok in, but they were going to ask something just as perilous. They wanted him to tax Bok. Of all the townsfolk, Bok was the only one who had refused to bow down to the Union's extortion and gotten away with it. Others had tried and paid the price for it, or caved quickly when they saw others pay the price for it, but Bok had persevered and, as far as Erb knew, the Union hadn't troubled him for months. As far as he could tell, they had given up on squeezing so much as a single credit out of Bok. Until now, that was.

'I... I...' Goddlesby stuttered again, lacking the nerve to get straight to the point. 'Bok won't pay,' it came at last.

'Bok's going to have to pay,' said Berzel. 'He pays, or his hide pays for it. No other choice for him. It's us or the guilders, Goddlesby. You can tell him that when you go collect his taxes.'

'I... just can't. I can't get money from Bok. He'll laugh in my face, or punch me in it. I won't do this, I *can't* do this!' Erb's protest was passionate, but clearly making little headway with the hooded bullies in front of him. They were ignoring every word and already heading for the door.

'Same time next week, Goddlesby,' said Berzel as the pair departed. He had no choice. He would have to pay a visit to Bok.

BK's SHACK WAS an imposing fortress on the edge of town. It was a place Erb hated. He hated everything about it: how far it was from his own little hole, how big and nasty it looked. He hated the things inside it: all the guns, the bullets, the big vicious arms dealer himself. Erb hated guns, he always had. He used to own a little six-shooter as a token gesture but

got rid of it after he accidentally blew two of his own fingers off when his braces snapped.

Erb stopped about ten metres short of the shack's entrance. He didn't want to knock on the door, let alone walk in unannounced, and instead stopped in clear view of the windows, took his hat off and waved it in the air as he shouted out.

'Bok! Bok!' he said. 'Bok, I have to speak to you.'A single shot rang out and Erb's hat flew out of his hand and landed right at his feet with a smoking hole clean through the middle. He stooped down to pick it up. From the shack up ahead of him, he heard a heavy thud as the door swung open. Looking up, Erb saw Bok appear in the doorway, a lasgun wedged under his arm.'Then what are you doing standing there and waving like a target?' asked Bok. Erb wasn't exactly sure what mood Bok was in, and why he had just shot at him, but he decided to take the man's advice and scurried quickly up the slope to the shack.By the time he reached the door, Bok had retreated within. Erb pushed on the heavy door. It was an effort just to open it and, as he squeezed in through the tiny gap he had made between the door and jamb, the thing threatened to shut on him and crush him against the frame. It was hardly a dignified entrance. Then again, he was hardly in a dignified position.

'Bok,' he said, 'I've been getting trouble again. It's the Union, you see, they've been, erm..., They're...' his speech trailed off into another haze of nervy doubt.

'Those sons of bitches, what's it got to do with me? They leave me well enough alone, and I don't give a damn what they get up to,' said Bok.

'You see,' said Erb, 'they showed me something today, um, they showed me, kind of, like a poster... A wanted poster.'

'What are they doing? Showing off? Somebody finally put their ugly mugs up where they belong?'

'No, Bok. I mean, they showed me a wanted poster... for you,' said Erb. He fumbled with the brim of his hat as he fell silent and in those few brief moments he realised he had absolutely no idea how Bok was going to react. He could have guessed, though.

'What the frag?' Bok roared as his fist smashed dean through a mercifully empty gun rack beside him, reducing it to splinters with a

single blow. Erb gulped. It was time for a gulp. He'd felt it coming on for a while.

'They say you've been, um... The poster, it said...'

'Spit it out, Goddlesby!' Bok's temper didn't appear to be soothed any by the long time it was taking Erb to find his words.

'The poster says some of these guns are official weapons: weapons from the watch, the enforcers,' said Erb. 'The poster says you stole them, Bok.'

One of the broken pieces of the gun rack was further reduced to splinters as Bok picked it up and bashed it repeatedly into the floor, though this did little to dissipate his rage. He rose to his feet, roaring in anger: an animal cry from which Erb could make out no words. He half expected Bok to start beating his chest.

'This is a stitch-up,' he roared. 'I'm not standing for this.'

'Bok, Bok,' said Erb. 'It's okay. I don't think you did it. I'm not here to take you in.' Erb stopped, realising the stupidity of what he had just said, but Bok seemed to have found an ounce of calm inside his hulking frame and Erb continued quickly in an attempt to gloss over the faux pas.

'I don't think anything is going to come of this, Bok, but they say they want payment to keep quiet.'

'Uh-uh,' said Bok. 'I've never paid those crooks a cred, and I'm never going to.'

'Bok, it's only the same as everyone else has been paying all these years. It's not that much really, and if it keeps them off your back, then-'

'Keeps them off my back?' said Bok, butting in before Erb could finish. 'I'll keep them off my back *my way*, don't you worry, and it won't cost me a damned cred. You go tell them that; tell them they're getting nothing,' said Bok.

'I can't tell them that, Bok, please,' said Erb. 'You're making this hard for me. Just think, it's not much for a quiet life.' Erb pleaded but Bok was unmoved. He was already behind his counter, hauling out some truly monstrous metal boxes. Erb didn't dare ask what was inside.

'Bok, listen, if you don't pay up, I don't know what they're going to do. You remember what happened to the others?'

Undoubtedly Bok did. He'd been around long enough to remember the sorry ends of all those who had tried to resist the Union's demands when they first arrived in town, but Bok had escaped all that and had done okay

ever since. It didn't seem as if reminding him of it was going to sway him any.

'Bok, please.' Erb tried one last time, but Bok was ignoring him completely, lost in his frantic assembly of a terrifying-looking weapon that he was putting together from pieces pulled from the metal boxes that now covered the counter. Erb sighed in resignation and turned to leave.

He walked lightly down the ashy slope outside. A moment or two later he was startled by the most terrible grinding noise coming from behind him and he turned back to see the shack's armoured frontage rising up in two spots on either side of the door. As Erb watched with amazement – not least because such ancient machinery still worked – the blast shield revealed two tall windows. Erb stared in awe that quickly turned to honour as that same monstrous barrel he had seen on the counter slid into place in the left hand window. The sight of that thing was enough, and Erb turned tail, scurrying away from the place as quickly as he could. He had no idea what the Union was going to do if Bok didn't pay up, but he realised that what Bok was planning to do to avoid paying up might be much worse. This meant trouble for everyone, Erb thought to himself as he scurried back to the rotten little dump he called home.

'OH NO,' SAID Erb as he gazed down into the dead man's lifeless, yet still wide-open eyes. 'What have you done?'

Bok's huge frame lay on the floor of Erb's 'mayoral chambers' as he liked to refer to his little shack. A third eye – a blackened, bloody, brain-spattered mess of one – joined the mortified white ones to either side, erupting from the centre of his head like a sump-orchid in bloom.

It was a stupid question, really. What they had clearly done was kill Bok. Pretty swiftly by the looks of it: one shot dean through the back of his head.

'I WON'T DO it. I can't do it,' Goddlesby said. His already filthy skin was washed dean in places by the endless streams of sweat working their way down his bald head and onto his wrinkled face. He was terrified, yet he was resolute.

He had been terrified of the Union since the day they walked into town. He had been terrified of Bok, too: terrified of going to his place, terrified of telling him he was wanted, terrified of telling him he had to pay up, but when it came down to it, he was just that little bit more terrified of the Union. So, he had gone along with it and, for all his fear of Bok, he had done what they had asked.

If there was one thing that terrified Erb more than the Union – and there was one thing – it was the guilders. No matter what the Union could do to him if he didn't pay the bounty, the guilders would do worse if he did. It had come to a point where Erb was damned either way and that gave him no reason to cower any longer. He was done for, and all he could do was go with a little pride by standing up for himself just once before the end.

'That man is not wanted for anything, dead or alive, and I will not pay a single credit of bounty on him,' he said.

'I've got his wanted poster right here,' said the Cawdor they apparently called Lirbus. He took the parchment from his pocket and thrust it into Goddlesby's face. 'Or don't you remember?'

He remembered it all, of course, but he didn't trust it at all. Erb wasn't exactly the most powerful man in town, but he was its mayor. As much as he might be a puppet of the Union, his position did hold certain responsibilities, and paying bounties in the absence of a guilder was one of them. The little stash left with him by the guilders for just such an occasion was the one and only thing over which Erb truly had control. Even the Union feared the guilders, or at least didn't see the point in crossing them, and for all the credits that stash contained, they had always left well alone.

They could have demanded that Erb hand it over at any time. He wouldn't have, but they could have killed him and taken it all the same. Now they seemed to have found a way around the problem – by demanding that he pay them bounties from it – and they weren't about to give up now that the stash was at last in their sights. Erb couldn't stop them from getting it, but he sure as anything wasn't going to be the one to give it to them.

'I don't know what's going on, but if Bok was wanted I would know about it. I'm not paying up. I can't pay up.'

The outlander stood silent in the corner with Bok's body at his feet. Erb had heard nothing but talk of this outlander since he arrived in town, but this was the first time he had ever laid eyes on him. Erb couldn't resist stealing quick glances, trying to get a good look at him, but always fearing to be caught in his steely gaze. He wondered if it was the outlander who had killed Bok – he was sure it must have been – and that made him all the more frightening to Erb's poor, terrified mind.

'It's not even your money, Goddlesby,' said Lirbus. 'I know you've got that special stash the guilders leave with you, for paying out on their behalf. Now you be a good boy and pay out.'

'I won't do it,' said Goddlesby. 'You want the money, you take him to the guilders yourself.'

Lirbus turned to the outlander and frowned. They were clearly unhappy but Erb wasn't going to budge, and they knew it. That was as much as he hoped to achieve: to be strong, confident, resolute, just this once. It was done, and he knew what was going to happen next. They were going to make him disappear.

'I'll take him with me,' said Lirbus, turning to the outlander.

'No,' said Jurgen, 'I'll go. Seems I'm having more luck out there than most.'

The outlander stepped over the fallen Bok and grabbed Erb by the collar, dragging him out of the room. Erb just gulped.

'WHAT'S YOUR NAME, mister?' asked Erb. For some reason he felt compelled to talk to the strange outlander as he marched him out over the dunes.

'You don't need to know my name,' said the outlander.

'I want to,' said Erb.

'Then my name is "mister", you guessed right,' came the reply.

Erb sighed. It was a shame the outlander was so uncommunicative. Erb had the distinct feeling that a little conversation might make the time between now and the end a little easier, though he was pleasantly surprised at how he was holding out. It was a wonder what standing up for yourself could do, thought Erb. Ironic, really.

He'd known this day was coming. He'd always known this was how it would end. He'd known ever since they made him mayor.

They had only picked him for being so cowardly. He still remembered that day long ago, scrabbling at the ash, and digging handfuls of the stuff out from under that huge stone slab in the middle of town. He'd panicked, dived to the floor and scrabbled desperately at the ash. Somehow, he had dug enough of it out of the way to dig a hole big enough to fit in; a hole he had hidden in as it all went down in the square in front of him.

He'd been no more than a passer-by, but one with bad timing. He was crossing the square, right outside Mayor Hawk's, just as the Union .closed in on the place. Hawk had been a good man: strong, wise and brave. He had put up with nothing when the Union arrived in town. Half of them had done time in his cells when their violence first spilled over into the settlement and Hawk had never backed down, fighting against every one of their wicked little schemes.

He'd got away with it until Ash Season. That was when they came for him. No word could get out and it was old Mayor Hawk all alone against them.

And here we are now, thought Erb, another Ash Season, another dead mayor. Why did things like this always happen in Ash Season? He hated Ash Season. It didn't matter. This was surely his last.

The outlander stopped, reaching out and tugging the back of Erb's coat to bring him to a stop, too. Erb was vaguely relieved that this would be the end at last. He was sick of walking and wondering what it would be like. Best it just happened.

The stranger snapped open a box of toxsticks. With a deft flick of the tin's metal lid, the outlander flung one of the toxsticks up, catching it effortlessly between his lips. He held out the open box, offering its contents to Erb.

'No, no thank you,' said Erb. 'No point in starting now.'

'No harm in trying,' replied the outlander.

'No, perhaps not,' said Erb, reaching out to take the offered stick. He spun it round in his fingers, not really sure which end to put in his mouth. Not like it really mattered, he thought, and stuffed the thing between his lips. The stranger held out a sparkslate and the end of the stick flared into life in front of Erb's nose.

Erb sighed as he drew his first breath on the thing. No harm in trying, he thought.

CHAPTER TWELVE

‘ANTAL,’ SAID LAKATOS. ‘Mew, Rubik, Todor, Galamb: come to me.’

It came across as nothing more than a grainy crackle to Antal, perceiving everything, as he did these days, through the bionic implant in his ear. Nonetheless, Antal was slowly learning to interpret those grainy clicks, crackles and whines for their own sake, and followed his leader’s order easily enough.

The five of them wandered over to where Lakatos stood in the doorway of the gang’s hideout some getting there more quickly than others. Rubik and Galamb seemed particularly reluctant to put down their tools and do as they were told.

The outlander, Jurgen, was behind Lakatos in the doorway. Antal had barely said a word to the man since he arrived and he hadn’t seen him since he and Lirbus had been sent off to deal with Goddlesby. That sounded like it had turned into a nasty business indeed and Antal had little wish to be a part of anything involving the outlander. He shuddered a little to see him standing so prominently by their leader’s side.

‘I can’t have you just working territories anymore,’ said Lakatos, in reference to the duties that the lowly likes of Antal and the lame like Todor normally undertook. While the most thuggish acts of extortion, intimidation and outright violence were left to hardened veterans like Morden, Berzel or Lirbus (and now the outlander), gangers like Antal and Todor worked the gang’s territories by scouting for scrap, harvesting valuable weeds, slimes and goos, or salvaging what working equipment they could find from the dome’s derelict areas.

Rubik, on the other hand, was a man who largely avoided any form of turfwork at all and was pretty much excused from everything bar fighting on account of his esteemed position of heavy and his inescapable habit for

turning all situations into a fight. That he was being called upon was a surprise to Antal.

‘Goddlesby is gone, and we’re going to be collecting our own taxes from now on,’ said Lakatos. ‘We do it once a week, starting from today. Todor, you go with Rubik; Antal with Mero, and Galamb you’ll go with Jurgen. Jurgen has lists of who pays and how much.’

At this, Jurgen stepped past Lakatos and handed out two, long thin parchments, one to Todor and the other to Mero.

‘I can’t read this,’ said Mero. There was a pause before the last word, as though he added it afterwards, suddenly reluctant to admit he just couldn’t read at all. It was hardly uncommon. He thrust the list into Antal’s hand, for all the good that would do.

‘I can’t read either,’ said Antal Lakatos scowled.

‘You?’ he asked, pointing at Galamb. Galamb nodded eagerly.

‘Okay,’ said Lakatos, ‘Galamb, you go with Mero, and Antal you can go with Jurgen.’

Antal cursed under his breath. He was hardly relishing the job of shaking down the townsfolk and now he was stuck with the outlander. Emperor only knows what the outlander is going to do, thought Antal to himself. He was quite sure Jurgen’s powers of persuasion would be more unpleasant than they were subtle.

‘Go on,’ said Lakatos, ‘go.’

ANTAL KEPT HIMSELF just behind the outlander as they marched down the street. He decided walking alongside him would only make it more obvious that he wasn’t really talking to him, and that he had nothing to say. Jurgen stopped abruptly outside one shack in particular.

‘Lorgan Dreg,’ he said. ‘Three credits. You do it.’ The outlander was abrupt to say the least.

‘Me?’ asked Antal.

‘Go on,’ Jurgen said. ‘I’ll wait here. This doesn’t need both of us.’

Antal approached the door, raising a fist to knock. He wasn’t really sure he should be knocking, but then again, he wasn’t sure that he shouldn’t be. He faltered for a second, couching his balled fist in the glove of his other

hand before finally making his mind up and rapping sharply on the door three times.

The door was a rickety old corrugated thing, and the sharp rapping of the knock disintegrated into nothing more than a rumbling clang as the door shook loosely in its frame. It had none of the staccato interruption of a good, sharp knock and Antal was actually a little disappointed. It did the job nonetheless.

A rather stringy looking man emerged from the doorway, dressed in rags. They were oily rags, though, and that meant he had at least some kind of trade; perhaps even a skilled one. He squealed at the sight of Antal and Jurgen and tried to slam the door shut immediately upon opening it.

That gave Antal confidence and he acted on instinct, jamming his foot in the door and forcing it open with his shoulder. He stepped inside as the terrified little man recoiled from the door.

'What's wrong, Dreg?' said Antal. 'Aren't you pleased to see us?'

The man gasped and scurried back across the room, halting with his back pressed up against some gigantic contraption of blackened metal that occupied most of the far wall. Antal was secretly keen to get this over and done with, but thought stretching the experience out a little might make future visits easier. He strolled over to the contraption.

'What, in the name of Helmawr's daughter, is this?'

Dreg said nothing, but scurried away from it as Antal approached. Now Antal could see that it was something built inside the shack, and actually a part of it. Only two of the walls of Dreg's humble abode were solid – the back wall and the one to the right of it – and the contraption was mounted in the corner between them. It was a mass of pipes, pistons, cogs and gears. It was blackened, though moist with oil in that way all working machines were. It appeared to be just the foremost tip of a much larger machine embedded deep in the wall.

Here and there, panels of shabby grey once white, plasteel covered it, with arcane markings and numerals in turn covering its surface. Antal couldn't read them, but he was fairly sure that they were just part of a much larger covering that Dreg had stripped away to get at the machine.

It was a generator. Dreg had built his whole damned shack right over an old generator, hiding it behind walls so that no one would see him stripping away at its protective panels to get at the workings within.

There was no way Dreg could get at the bulk of the machine that lay deep within the wall and anterior structures as it was, but the exposed portion seemed pretty crucial to its operation and was probably enough for Dreg to keep it in some kind of working order. It looked in pretty fine working condition to Antal, and the dull hum coming from it suggested the same. Dreg was probably pumping power out of this thing to all those parts of the settlement fortunate enough to still have a physical connection, and no doubt charging for the privilege. A nice little earner that would be.

'That'll be four credits, then,' said Antal.

'What?' asked Dreg. It was funny how even the most fearful silence could be overcome when someone mentioned money.

'Four credits. Taxes. Now pay up.' Perhaps the outlander was wise in his abruptness, thought Antal as he tried to mimic it.

'Three,' said Dreg timidly, 'and I paid Goddlesby.'

'That was last week,' said Antal, though in truth he wasn't exactly certain that an entire week had passed. 'Goddlesby won't be collecting taxes anymore, we will. I will,' said Antal, hastily correcting himself for the sake of face. 'So you pay up like a good boy and I'll help you out.'

'Help me out?' asked Dreg. 'How?'

'Pay up on time, and you won't be having any problems,' said Antal, 'like a generator with a grenade in it. Now four credits, Dreg, and make them shiny ones.'

'Three?' said Dreg again, in one pathetic last attempt to avoid the increase.

Antal just scowled and folded his arms. Dreg slipped his hand into the leather apron tied around his waist and pulled out a couple of credits. Antal was sure there were plenty of credits stashed in there, but Dreg was careful not reveal too much of his wealth and pulled out the remaining two credits one at a time before dropping all four into Antal's open palm.

'A pleasure, Dreg,' said Antal. 'Same time next week.' Antal smirked and walked out of the little shack.

'GOT IT?' ASKED Jurgen.

‘Got it,’ said Antal. That was the fifth straight take in a row with no problems at all, and the third to have actually footed a rise in tat. It seemed Goddlesby hadn’t really tried to wring as much as he should have out of most of these wretches and now that Antal was there to see them in person, there were plenty, like Dreg, who clearly had more to spare. Antal toyed with the idea of letting some of the really poor ones off, but thought better of it He didn’t really see the point.

They marched down the street. They were getting much further out of town, and where the first takes had all been from the densely packed shacks and habs that lined the broad main street of Fall Sands, their targets now were the isolated holesteaders that littered the edges of the settlement. Nirin Hobb was next on the list.

Nirin Hobb’s hole was a truly rank place. The only way out to it was across a bridge leading over a sewage pit. The pit was still used, but Hobb had divided it up into dozens of pens, each no more than a metre across. Within these pens festered – for that was the only word for it – the most unpleasant of the Underhive’s denizens. Gigantic worms, bred large, grown bloated feasting on the sewage, writhed in pens barely big enough to contain them.

Their fanged mouths rose to the surface as Antal and Jurgen passed, clearly not averse to something more substantial than the repeatedly digested filth in which they languished. The odd boot to be seen floating here and there in the pit suggested that the worms were not entirely disappointed in that regard.

About halfway out, Antal noticed one of the worms writhing more strenuously than the others, and hardly dipping out of sight at all. As he drew nearer he saw it was engaged in some rather curious behaviour. It smashed itself into the wire of its pen, over and over, crumpling the fence little by little. It had clearly made advances and the edge of its pen extended well over halfway into its neighbour’s.

Antal watched as a few more determined charges collapsed a small section of fence and the worm launched itself over the crumpled barrier and into the pen beyond. It disappeared beneath the brown filth for a second before rising again, another worm grasped between its teeth. It shook the worm violently and bashed its head against the fence. The struggle lasted for a few seconds before the aggressive invader - much

larger than its unfortunate neighbour – disappeared beneath the now tranquil surface to digest its catch in peace.

Jurgen hadn't been nearly so fascinated, or distracted, by the spectacle and Antal suddenly noticed him with his arms crossed, waiting for him at the end of the bridge where Hobb's own hole nestled above the sewage inlet pipes.

Antal hurried across the bridge to catch up with Jurgen. Jurgen nodded up towards Hobb's place and Antal wasted no time in scampering up to the entrance, which was an upturned, badly rusted pipe.

Lowering himself through the pipe, Antal descended onto a mesh floor of a corridor above the maze of pipes that presumably regulated the pies contents. Whatever they did, they didn't do it very well, and the only thing more revolting than the endless belching noise that the backfiring pipes unleashed was the rank stench that followed every such eruption.

Antal crossed the meshed walkway and entered the collection of dimly lit rooms beyond. Each was identical; nothing more than a tiny dorm for the workers that once must have been required to operate the pit. A walkthrough corridor connected all these rooms and Antal passed through them, one by one, in search of Hobb.

The rooms were either empty or filled with all manner of junk. He passed five or six of them before finding one that looked even remotely lived in. A brightly glowing lantern perched on a stone bench in the corner and a Cot that wasn't so completely covered in filth as to be unusable were the only signs of life, but they were signs enough.

There was, however, no sign of Nirin Hobb.

Antal moved doser to the bench, dose enough to see that it was in fact being used as a makeshift desk. A scattered set of ledgers lay in the dim circle of light cast by the lantern. Antal turned one of them over and cast its cover open. He couldn't read a thing, of course, but he thought meddling was pretty much part of the job and began to flick uninterestedly through its pages.

'What do you want?' asked a voice from behind him. Turning, Antal saw it was Hobb.

'Taxes, Hobb, time to pay up,' he said, closing the ledger. 'It looks to me like you can afford plenty,' bluffed Antal. 'True, the holesteader's

chambers weren't exactly salubrious, but his business seemed to be booming in its own filthy way. 'We'll call it twelve credits,' Antal said.

'Get out,' said Hobb, raising a shotgun that Antal hadn't noticed before Antal's early successes had made him confident. He hadn't realised that those were just the easy jobs and he hadn't given a moment's thought to what he would do if anyone objected.

'You've gotta pay up,' said Antal unconvincingly, in one last attempt at genuine extortion. It clearly didn't work, as was indicated by the shotgun's barrels jabbing ever closer to his face.

'Whoa,' said Antal. 'Wait Ten credits. Ten credits same as before, that will do.' Antal instantly regretted the move. In his panic, going back to what Hobb had been paying Goddlesby seemed like a good move, but now he realised the folly. He had shown weakness, shown that he could be budged on his demands, and now the resolute Hobb had the upper hand. He grabbed the back of Antal's robes with one hand and frogmarched him back out of the room, across the mesh walkway and back to the base of the pipe by which he had entered.

'Now get out,' said Hobb.

Antal decided to cut his losses and did as he was told, scrambling back up the pipe and out onto the deck above where Jurgen waited.

'Got it?' asked Jurgen.

'Erm, no,' said Antal.

'What?' said Jurgen.

'He won't pay. He's got a damned shotgun and says he won't pay.'

Jurgen just sighed and, without saying another word, kicked his coat tails up behind him as he leapt feet first, into the pipe. Antal heard the clanging of his heavy boots landing on the mesh below and then the startled 'What the-?' from Hobb before a scuffling noise and the voices passed out of earshot.

It was only a momentary lapse, though, as Antal swiftly pulled a metal pick from the top of his boot and pushed it into his ear. He jacked the implant right up and focused on the noise coming from the pipe, homing in on every sound. That outlander was a nasty piece of work, Antal was sure of that, and he was certain Hobb was in big trouble, heading for nothing more than a brutal death at Jurgen's hands.

‘Listen here,’ came Jurgen’s voice - or rather, came the dicks and crackles which Antal translated into Jurgen’s voice – ‘I don’t want to have to bend you in half like I did that damned shotgun, so why don’t you just pay up and be done with it.’

Antal wasn’t sure the outlander even knew about his implants. He couldn’t have guessed that Antal was listening in but Antal was surprised nonetheless at his reasoned course of action. There was a depth of thinking to this Jurgen that he hadn’t imagined so far. He listened harder, curious to find out what Jurgen’s next move would be.

He didn’t hear another word, not so much as a crackle, or a click, or a ping. He recoiled in agony as a metallic *clang* rang out from the pipe. Somebody had smashed something, or dropped something very heavy and the noise was agony to Antal’s augmented, and currently overcharged, hearing. He dropped to his knees, covering his ears instinctively, but that only made it worse.

In his shock, Antal had dropped the metal pick and he had no way of turning down the implant or adjusting the frequency. His loss of concentration meant every sound from hundreds of metres around now flooded his ears and he walled in agony. He scrabbled on the floor desperately looking for the pick.

He found it, encrusted with muck, beside his boot and wasted no time in jabbing the filthy thing into his ear and cranking the implant’s volume and sensitivity down, all the way down. He breathed a sigh of relief and fell on to his backside, sitting panting on the deck.

That was how Jurgen found him, sitting and panting. Antal hadn’t even heard him coming and the outlander emerged from the pipe as silently as ash falling on ash. Even his boots made no noise as he paced across the deck towards Antal, a look of utter bemusement on his face, his pistol drawn.

Jurgen’s lips moved, but nothing came out. It was at that point that Antal realised he had turned the implant’s settings to zero and was temporarily profoundly deaf. He pushed the pick back into his ear and jostled with it for just a second, hardly daring to raise the volume one iota. Jurgen’s voice gradually drifted into audibility and Antal left it at that.

‘Come on,’ said Jurgen. ‘We’re going! Antal was glad not to be quizzed more rigorously on his unusual behaviour, or why he was jabbing himself

in the ear though he couldn't be sure that Jurgen hadn't already asked him for an explanation. He'd wait to be asked again, he decided.

'Got it?' asked Antal.

'No,' said the outlander. Antal was stunned. That the outlander had failed was astonishing, especially after he had apparently disarmed the man, and if he hadn't beaten his taxes out of him, what was the danging noise?

'What happened?' asked Antal.

'He said he ain't paying,' said Jurgen, 'so I pushed a little harder.'

Ah, thought Antal, so he *had* killed him for not paying.

'Ah,' said Antal, unintentionally thinking out loud. Jurgen ignored him and continued.

'So I pushed a little harder, and it seems he won't pay, because he has already paid.'

'Yeah, but that was last week,' said Antal. That was the same stupid excuse he had heard from every single one of the day's takes.

'Oh no,' said Jurgen, 'it was yesterday. He says he paid Erket.'

What?' said Antal.

'Exactly,' said Jurgen.

'WHAT?' SAID LAKATOS. 'What do you mean, you pathetic little wretch?' Lakatos sneered in Erket's face.

The juve tried to shy away but all he could do was turn his head. The heavy chains that bound his hands to the ceiling and his ankles to the floor allowed him little space for movement.

'I was taking taxes. Someone had to since you got rid of Goddlesby,' he whined.

'Yes,' said Lakatos, 'but you were taking them for yourself!' Lakatos turned and nodded to Morden.

Morden reached out and dragged the tongs from where they lay in the fire. He jabbed them into Erket's side, pinching at his flesh. The juve howled in agony. Antal shied away from watching the spectacle and took a step back. Even at this distance, Antal's eyes were dry and painful from the heat of the flames. Erket, suspended just metres in front of the fire, must have been in agony. Idiot, thought Antal.

‘Don’t make it too quick’ said Lakatos to Morden before turning and leaving, bustling his way past the assembled spectators.

‘Come,’ he said, as he passed Antal and Jurgen where they stood at the back of the crowd of gangers.

‘YOU GOT THE others?’ asked Lakatos, taking his seat in the rather less crowded and, rather cooler main room of the hideout.

‘Yes,’ said Antal, ‘all of them.’ He pulled a pouch from his pocket and hurled it to his leader.

Lakatos caught the pouch in one hand and shook the contents out onto his lap. He scooped the credits up a handful at a time and counted them back into the pouch. He paused once he had counted the last credit.

‘Give me that list,’ he said to Jurgen who immediately proffered the rather tatty strip of parchment. Lakatos’s gloved forefinger skimmed down the edge of the sheet. He mumbled to himself as he went, an almost silent tally.

‘I thought Hobb didn’t pay?’ said Lakatos.

‘No,’ said Jurgen. ‘Not a credit. That’s how we found out about Erket’s siphoning.’

‘But it’s all here,’ said Lakatos.

‘Oh, some of them paid a little extra,’ said Antal.

‘There is enough here to have covered Hobb’s share, you know that? You could have covered for Erket with this.’ Lakatos raised his gaze to Antal.

‘Hobb didn’t pay,’ was Antal’s only answer. It was greeted with a raucous, booming laugh from his leader who leapt from his seat and strode across the room, slapping Antal firmly on the shoulders in congratulation.

‘Very good, Antal, very good indeed,’ he said. Taxes will be solely your preserve from now on. I am most impressed. I am afraid, though,’ he went on, ‘before that there is some rather more urgent business to deal with.

‘Durn hasn’t come back yet.’

‘You want us to go to Fulcrum Spike and look for him?’ asked Antal.

‘I don’t think there’s much point in looking for him,’ said Lakatos, his voice tinged with bitterness. ‘But you must go to Fulcrum Spike and be sure the message got through.’

‘We will go at once,’ said Antal buoyed by the reception his tar raising efforts had received, and keen to show his loyalty to his leader. It was a chance he was to be denied, however.

‘No,’ said Jurgen, ‘I’ll go alone. There’s work to be done here still, and it seems I’m having more luck out there than most.’

‘Very well,’ said Lakatos. ‘Go it alone, Jurgen. Emperor fare you well.’

Jurgen nodded and left the room, leaving a mildly disappointed Antal to nonetheless bask in the glory of his leader’s admiration.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘COME,’ SAID ADDEC, beckoning to the stranger. He had heard of the outlander, but he had yet to lay eyes on him. He was greatly startled when he did.

‘I am Jurgen, your leadership. It is an honour,’ he said.

The stranger was tall and lean looking, his skin ruddy, almost red, though Addec thought it nothing more than the dyeing effect of the ash carried in the storm winds. He bore none of the garb of the Cawdor and was clearly a convert. He was also clearly a particularly hardy individual, having ventured here alone from Fall Sands at the height of Ash Season. These traits combined told Addec that this Jurgen might be rather more than a simple ganger, and perhaps a chosen convert working directly for Catafengi himself. Because of this, Addec was both openly welcoming and privately wary.

‘Very well, Jurgen,’ said Addec. ‘You are welcome, but what brings you here in a season such as this?’

‘Hmm,’ said Jurgen, frowning. Then I take it you haven’t seen Durn?’

‘Durn?’ asked Addec. ‘I have not laid eyes on him for perhaps a year. What do you mean?’ Jurgen seemed troubled by Addec’s reply.

‘Durn was sent here some days ago,’ said Jurgen, ‘bearing urgent news, Brother Addec. Urgent news.’

‘Hmm,’ said Addec, rising from his seat. ‘Best you come with me, Jurgen.’

Addec held out his arm and gestured for the outlander to follow him. Jurgen skipped the short distance across the floor in two purposeful strides and followed Addec off to the corridor at the right. As they passed the crowd of Cawdor at the edge of the room, Addec called out.

‘Deeran. Deer-’ but he was cut short as he noticed the figure perched behind his shoulder. His son was already at his side, following

instinctively. The three of them hurried down the corridor and into a much smaller, and rather sparsely furnished room at its end.

‘I am guessing,’ said Addec, ‘that this is not the kind of urgent news to be discussing in a crowded room.’

‘Perhaps not, Brother Addec, perhaps not,’ said Jurgen. He placed his hand in the breast of his jacket and rifled through his pockets. He drew out a parchment and passed it to Addec.

Addec unfolded it. *All well*, it read. Addec just frowned. Such a simple message was clearly no more than a foil. Addec gazed around, but he could see no canteen or trough. The best he could find was a puddle of murky, milky water in the corner, pooling on the stone where a steady trickle ran down from the pipes mounted on the ceiling above.

Addec stepped over to the puddle. With his old bones creaking he knelt and dragged the parchment over the water’s surface. Instantly he was interrupted by a determined and quite unnatural-sounding cough from the outlander. Addec turned and looked bath over his shoulder.

‘Brother Jurgen,’ said Addec, nodding in the direction of Deeran, ‘I give you Brother Deeran,’ he went on. ‘My *son*.’

Jurgen nodded, clearly satisfied at the explanation and the indication of trust. Besides, thought Addec, he had no particular reason for thinking that even this Jurgen was privy to the secret of the parchments, though his reaction had clearly shown that he was. For Lakatos to have sent him when Durn was already feared lost, clearly marked Jurgen out as a man more capable than most. He knew of the parchments and of their hidden messages and so was not some mere hapless messenger. Addec’s suspicion that Jurgen served a higher authority was growing rapidly.

He hoisted the damp sheet up out of the puddle and held it aloft.

The Scarlet Skulls are no moor. Lago is out for us. Be ready. - So it read. Lakatos’s dialect was crude, his hand cruder; not like Addec’s own, cultured language learned in the higher chambers of House Cawdor’s Hive City monasteries, but the message was clear enough.

‘You have read this,’ said Addec to Jurgen, more of a statement than a question.

‘No, though I know its meaning,’ he said.

‘Very well, then tell me what you know.’

Addec listened as Jurgen recounted his nigh unbelievable tale. How he had found Handomel's gang slaughtered to a man, perhaps by their own hand, perhaps by another when distracted by some internal strife. Addec was shocked, but far from surprised. Handomel had been less than wise in Addec's view, and the discipline he bred in his gang was an insubstantial thing, a careful balancing act for which he relied only upon his own finely tuned guile. He had always been confident of it in his own arrogant fashion, and convincing for it, but to Addec – a man three decades his senior – this fragile discipline had always seemed to be a thing destined to break down just as soon as Handomel's tongue was silenced.

That it had turned out this way was no surprise, and Addec felt precious little sympathy for any of them. He'd seen a hundred ambitious fools come and go in such a manner. He'd saved a hundred, too, but only those who listened, and Handomel had certainly never listened. He sighed as Jurgen concluded his tale, but offered no more a sign of his feelings than that.

'And this Lago,' said Addec, 'tell me what you know of him.'

So began yet another nigh unbelievable tale, that Jurgen was the author of the secret messages, and the architect of their very fabric. That he had once sewed the guilders with this expertise and that he had, by the same means, fallen foul of their jealous secrecy. That they had tried to kill him, that they had failed, and so entrusted the task to a man named Lago.

'I do not think, Brother Jurgen, that if I were Lago, I should be so keen to wipe out an entire gang that has never so much as met the man I sought,' said Addec, unsure of the relevance.

'Very wise, brother,' said Jurgen. 'I don't think that's what happened. I don't even think Lago knows I'm here. If he finds me, it'll just be blind luck on his part. He's here for somebody else or something else, and that's about it.'

'Handomel?' asked Addec.

'He was after Handomel, yeah,' said Jurgen, 'but he got him. Then he came back. He's after all of us, as far as I can tell.' With that Jurgen pitched into yet another chapter of the tale: of the body found out in the abandoned domes between here and Fall Sands bearing Jurgen's wanted poster, of Deveres's disappearance and now Durn's. It all added up to a tale with much drama yet to come.

‘Then Handomel’s men are done away with, and we are his next targets, is that what you are saying, Brother Jurgen?’ asked Addec, though he was already sure of the answer.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘and we’ve already wasted too much damn time working it out.’

‘There is still no reason for it,’ said Addec.

‘Maybe there isn’t,’ said Jurgen, ‘but at this rate we’ll be dead before we fathom the reason. Seems plain enough to me he’s out for us, and we should deal with it now or this whole damned scheme comes tumbling down.’

Ah yes, thought Addec. This, perhaps, was the real reason behind Jurgen’s urgency in the matter, and the reason why Lago seemed to be engaged in such a systematic extermination of the Scarlet Skulls, and now the others.

Addec knew of many ways to spread the Emperor’s word, to bring redemption to his struggling children, but Catafengi, and those that served him, were engaged in a particularly blatant mission to do so. Addec had never been entirely sure this was the best way.

His House, his own family, laboured as hard as any to do the Emperor’s work but always unseen, never drawing unwanted attention to themselves. House Cawdor was committed in its entirety to doing just this, and they were well advanced in those aims. They were populous, perhaps second only to the promiscuous litters of Orlocks in number. Certainly the Escher and Goliath couldn’t match them in size, their numbers cut short by brutality and male infirmity respectively. The mysterious Delaque were impossible to pinpoint in all things, though they certainly never appeared especially numerous, nor did the Van Saar, whose great minds seemed little given to the matter of dynasty and dominion. Cawdor were numerous, strong and prosperous, and because of this it had long spread the word of the Emperor.

Every Cawdor acquisition, new trade agreement, or contract fulfilled was tribute to the steps taken one at a time towards achieving the Emperor’s will. Was such slow, steady progress a bad thing? As a young man, Addec had been sure it was and wholeheartedly committed himself to the fiery revolution offered by men like Catafengi.

Now, as an old man, Addec was increasingly sure that his life would have achieved much more had he remained up there, working away unseen and unthreatened. House Cawdor had enemies, true enough, but there was certainly no Lago up there, threatening to upend the entire venture, root and branch.

Catafengi and his cult were secretive in their actions, but their existence was certainly no secret. Had their plot been uncovered, and their agents, too, then it was no surprise that men like Lago were after them. There would be no reward too great for bringing down a Redemptionist cult such as theirs, feared and loathed, as they were, by the hive's most powerful. Addec had long thought such a day might come, but he had long ago made his bed and now he had to lie in it. He breathed a sigh of regret as he pondered how to proceed.

'Tell me, Jurgen,' he said at length, 'what does Lakatos plan now that Lago is upon us?'

'If Durn is dead, then it's Lago who got to him. I'd bet a fistful of credits it was Lago,' said Jurgen. 'I lost Deveres out there, too, but that was further out, away towards Handomel's territory. If he got Dum this past week, then he's out there someplace between here and Fall Sands. That's where we can get them.'

'Them?' asked Addec.

'I don't think Lago is alone,' said Jurgen. 'We already found one dead bounty hunter out there, and if it was him who killed the Skulls, I don't think he did it alone.'

'How many?' asked Deeran, suddenly interested.

'Impossible to say, but we'll outnumber them. That's how we get them,' said Jurgen.

'How?' asked Addec.

'Lago's smart,' said Jurgen. 'He won't just go charging into town. He picked off Handomel, and let his gang tear themselves apart before finishing them off – if he even had to – and he's been picking us off one by one just the same. He's taken Durn and Deveres out there. It won't harm him any to take his time. We've got to force his hand, flush him out' said Jurgen.

'What are you suggesting?' asked Addec.

‘Well, he’s past here, well beyond Fulcrum Spike, I’m sure of it, and probably holed up out on the edge of Fall Sands,’ Jurgen said. ‘If you and your men can run a sweep towards Fall Sands, and drive him towards the town, we’ll pick him off from there. Give me a day’s head start and we’ll be ready... The edge of town is full of good spots, and it’s almost clear of the ash. We’ll be holed up there, and can pick Lago’s men off once you’ve driven them onto us. They’ll be trapped, they’ll be surrounded, and they’ll be sitting ducks.’

‘I’m not sure it will be so easy,’ said Deeran. ‘We’ve got to be precise about it and plan carefully, it’s true,’ said Jurgen, ‘but we can do it.’

‘Go on,’ said Addec, ‘tell me every detail of your plan.’

ADDEC HAD LISTENED to every word, hung on them even. He had repeated almost every word of it, too, saying it back to Jurgen for fear of leaving any single detail unaddressed. Even so, it had not been an easy decision to come to. Jurgen had been gone for a day, with Addec’s promise that he would do as was asked, but even then Addec had fretted and could not be sure wisdom was on the side of this particular plan.

In the end, he had settled on it as the only plan. It was a necessary course of action, whether it was pm-dent or not. Addec worried that it was simply the lethargy of age that disinclined him to the plan, and since Deeran seemed keener on it, Addec had at last resolved that it truly was a vital action they would be undertaking. Vital enough, Addec had decided at length, that he would lead his men in person, for the first time in many years, and perhaps for the last.

He strolled at a gentle pace from his private chambers, striding through the heart of his domain on his way back to the rundown old ganghouse where he would impart his orders, and his blessings, on his men. Deeran had gone ahead to the hideout, so at least some of the plan would be known to them, and practical preparations would already be well underway.

At length, Addec reached the ganghouse. He entered the building with a reluctant sigh and a heavy heart, but a firm resolve.

‘Brothers,’ he said as he stepped inside, ‘we have a fight, and this is how it will be.’ Deeran nodded from across the room and stepped forwards into

the centre of the crowd.

‘We’re going to fight out in the old dome around Fall Sands,’ said Deeran. ‘There is a man out there who is a threat to us all. His name is Lago.’

A gasp emerged formlessly from the crowd. The name had been whispered, rumoured for weeks, and now they heard it from their leaders. Their shock was of little surprise to Addec.

‘He’s not alone, but we will outnumber them, and we will be triumphant’ said Deeran. ‘This is the plan... Every one of us will wear one of these, plus whatever other dark robes you can find.’ Deeran flung a pile of black cloaks onto the table. Two more similar piles stood in the corner behind hint. The robes looked exactly like Jurgen had said they must.

‘The Union will be wearing black cloaks just the same. Do not fire on anybody with a black cloak. Anyone else, don’t waste a second in bringing them down.’

A boisterous cheer greeted the mention of violence.

‘We’ll head towards Fall Sands,’ said Deeran. ‘Lago and his men are out there. We’ll find them and take as many out as we can. The most important thing, though, is that none of them get past us and that we drive them towards Fall Sands. We’ll have them trapped there and the Union can pick them off from the edge of town.

The Union won’t be leaving Fall Sands. Lakatos will keep his men behind a line on the edge of town, so you won’t meet them out in the wastes, but remember the black cloaks, just in case.

‘Stick together,’ Deeran continued. ‘We’ll be fine as long as we don’t get separated out in the wastes.’

ADDEC LED HIS men in the long march out of town. It seemed like an eternity since he and Deeran had finally gathered the men, but in truth it had been no more than two hours. It had taken two hours to ready the weapons and to have everyone dress in black robes. Each and every one of the gang that marched out into the wastes was dressed alike in plain black robes, just like Jurgen had told them.

In truth, quite aside from the ease with which the garb would allow them to tell friend from foe, these heavier cloth cloaks would serve them well

out in the storms.

They were not underequipped by any means. Fulcrum Spike and the vast vents lying derelict at its edge had once been the lungs of the whole hive. In a lost age of industry, the dome's population had been engaged in maintaining the wellbeing of this intricate ventilation system. For a few, this had required venturing out onto the exterior of the vents, out into the ash wastes themselves, and the equipment required for such perilous work could still be found in Fulcrum Spike by a determined searcher.

It wasn't exactly archeotech, but as well as the grapnels used to ascend the high vents, Deeran had salvaged half a dozen respirator masks of the sort used by hive engineers. They were manufactured to the highest possible standard, far better than the unreliable, chemical filter rubbish you could buy in the Underhive, but they were aged and only three of them could be made to work. Addec himself had declined the offer of a mask, but beside him Deeran and his two heavies now wore the devices. They would be an unbelievable boon out amidst the raging storms.

For all this, Addec was still deeply wary. In his darker moments he contemplated leaving Lalcatos and the others to their fate. He considered arriving – quite by accident of course – just a little too late. Addec would shed few tears for the end of Lakatos, and fewer still if Catafengi were to meet his doom. He was quite sure that he could go on spreading the Emperor's word without that damned cult drawing attention to them and bringing trouble to all of them. But, as he knew all too well, there was simply no way he could be sure it was Lakatos that Lago would come for first. He had no way of knowing if he or his men might be Lago's first target, and for that reason alone he was certain that he must do exactly what had been asked of him.

With that curious resolve foremost in his mind, Addec led his men once more into the raging storms.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JURGEN CROSSED A Shallow bluff. Its shape had changed since last he saw it, but its location remained familiar. Reaching its crest, he could see down the shallow incline to Fall Sands, its silhouette dimly visible through the ash storms that raged around him. It was a long journey, but a familiar one and it troubled Jurgen little. Truth be told he enjoyed it: the solitude, being alone in the wilderness. He had always been a loner, an outlander.

He would be alone again soon enough, he thought to himself as he descended the far side of the bluff and made his way once more to the less than welcoming lights of Fall Sands.

'ADDEC SAW HIM,' said Jurgen, his tone hushed and his face pressed close to Lakatos's ear as the pair huddled in the tiny alcove. This was news that Jurgen certainly didn't want to break to the others. 'Three days ago, so he made good time.'

'Then why the hell didn't he make it back?' asked Lakatos.

Jurgen frowned but gave no other answer. There was no need since it was written on Lakatos's face. Durn had died out in the storms, just like Deveres. Lakatos had sent them both on their way, sent them both to their deaths. That was true: Lakatos had indeed sent them to their deaths, no matter the manner in which they found it.

'This is the message Addec gave him to bring back,' said Jurgen, handing Lakatos a sheet of parchment folded into quarters.

'Have you read it?' asked Lakatos.

'Addec read it to me himself,' Jurgen replied. 'It isn't good?

'IF DURN LEFT Fulcrum Spike but didn't make it back here, then Lago is close,' said Lakatos. Jurgen just nodded in grim agreement. Lakatos folded the parchment and passed it back to Jurgen, who returned it to a pocket

inside the breast of his coat. Its contents had come as no surprise to Jurgen: that Lago was still at large, that he had killed Handomel and later wiped out his gang, and that he was intent on doing the same to the Union.

Lakatos didn't seem to care exactly how Addec had come to know this and without being asked Jurgen had little inclination to explain. Clearly Lakatos's mind was elsewhere, troubled more by the news than the method by which it had been uncovered.

'Damn it,' said Lakatos. 'What do we do now?' Lakatos seemed genuinely scared by this latest turn of events, as if suddenly realising that this Lago presented a rather greater threat than he had so far imagined. Jurgen, of course, had not for a minute underestimated the danger.

'You know this Lago. What do we do now, Jurgen?' Lakatos asked.

'Way I see it, we've got two advantages,' said Jurgen, placing a toxstick to his lips and sparking it. 'One... the ash storms. We're at home in them, or near as a man can be and we know the lay of the land, which Lago doesn't.' He paused.

'And two... Lago is a fool. He's got no subtlety, no guile He just can't resist a showdown. Chances are him and his goons are gonna stroll straight into Fall Sands, expecting us to meet them right out on the street. That would be a very foolish thing to do. We wouldn't stand a chance in a shootout with Lago, but we do have a chance if we ambush him. I bet he just won't be able to resist making the big entrance. We've got to ambush hint out amidst the storms before he reaches town.'

Lakatos turned, taking a step away from Jurgen, his back to him. In the shadowy alcove, even this tiny distance was almost enough for lakatos to vanish completely into darkness. Even then, it was clear to Jurgen that Lakatos's mind was racing, and that he was wracked with uncertainty. The noise of his hobnailed boots beat out a fast rhythm from the shadows as he paced frantically. At length, his mind was made up.

'Okay, Jurgen. I don't see any other way. Let's do it. Let's go and get the others,' said Lakatos.

THEY ALL CLUSTERED round him. Even Lakatos was no more than a spectator, another face in the crowd, thronging round the table across which Jurgen held court. All of them were there; at least, all those that

remained. Morden, Lirbus, Hargitay, Antal, Galamb, Karman, Todor, Rubik and Mero. Ten with Lakatos, plus Jurgen himself. Todor was all but lame, and Mero was all but blind. The pair would be useless out there, but the plan would not be well served by leaving them behind. They stood and listened the same as everyone else. They were Union, and now was the time for them to show it.

Even Erket was within earshot, though he was clapped in chains, and had no part to play in what was to come. He was there, however, and he could hear what was being said.

'You've heard by now,' said Jurgen, his voice booming across the room, its timbre carrying every ounce of his stern resolve, 'that Lago is coming.' Each and every member of the assembled crowd exhaled and turned to look at his neighbour or hung his head to stare at the floor. They had known it was coming, but it was no easier to hear it said.

'Here's what we are going to do,' said Jurgen, unfazed. Lago is a stranger in these parts. The lay of the land, and the storms, are our greatest allies. We'll use them against him and we're all going to be fine. We're going to ambush him – as best we can in these storms, anyway – outside the settlement, out in the wasted part of the dome. If we let him get to Fall Sands, we're in trouble. We're not going to make ourselves obvious, either,' said Jurgen. 'We're not going out there like this just to paint targets on our backs. I want all of you changed, out of robes and into something he won't recognise us in. Nothing too Cawdor, nothing too Redemptionist, you get me? In fact, let's make sure it's something dull. The more we can hide ourselves in the ash the more chance we've got, okay?' A few scattered nods answered him.

'Lago is out there, somewhere between here and Fulcrum Spike. Durn never made it back but I did, so Lago can't be that close, or he could have cut me off on the way back into Fall Sands. There's only one way into Fall Sands from that direction, so we'll ambush him there. We'll get far enough from the settlement to get under the cover of the storms, and to get out amongst the dunes, but not so far as to make it possible for him to get past us, you understand?'

Half a dozen nods, a couple of swift hand gestures and yet more grim silence answered him. That was enough and Jurgen continued with his plan.

‘If there’s no sign of Lago, we can wait it out, we’ve got time. We’ll take up high positions on the dunes, and wait till Lago passes into one of the furrows where we can catch him in crossfire. He won’t stand a chance... He got Deveres and Durn, and Emperor only knows what happened to Handomel and the Skulls, but this will all be over soon. There is no problem here you all get me?’

Silence again filled the void left by Jurgen’s commanding oratory. Still, it would do. They had all absorbed every detail, out of fear if nothing else. They were ready to begin, if ‘begin’ was the right term for an endgame such as this. No, thought Jurgen, they were ready to finish this, and he was more ready than any of them.

JURGEN HAD LEFT nothing to chance. He had moved the gang from their regular hideout to a crumbling shack some two hundred metres from the pipe, just in case their enemies should approach while they prepared. Thus, it was here that the Union gathered in silent contemplation, here where magazines were filled, spares pocketed, weapons checked, bandoliers slung and minds readied.

‘Galamb, Karman, you ready?’ asked Jurgen.

‘Yes. I am,’ said Galamb, while the younger juve at his shoulder simply nodded. Their arms were meagre – an autopistol for Galamb, a laspistol and knife for Karman – and they had needed little time to ready themselves. He presumed Galamb also had at least one blade, though he had so far chosen not to draw it. The pair of them wore nothing more than rags, but dull, khaki rags, which would do a good job of hiding them out there in the storrns. Lacking enough rags for a new hood, neither Galamb nor Karman were masked at all and looked quite unlike their usual Cawdor selves. There were, of course, no black clot to be seen anywhere amongst the gang’s new panoply. Jurgen was quite clear about this point.

‘Go to the edge of town, no further than the first dune, and hide yourselves on opposite sides of the approach. If anyone comes, get right back here. Otherwise, do nothing until we get there, you understand me?’ asked Jurgen. The pair nodded vigorously at which Jurgen raised his hands and ushered them out of the door.

Rubik was some way from ready yet. His immense autocannon lay in pieces on the table in front of him, and as fast as he worked, it would be the best part of an hour before he was ready. Earlier, he had seemed ready to rush, to abandon some of his familiar routines, but Jurgen had demanded that he calm himself and take every care he would at any other time He had to be prepared as best he could, and if that took time, so be it. Even some of the others weren't yet done.

Ammunition wasn't in short supply, but it wasn't exactly plentiful either and Morden and Todor crouched in the corner, their hands hovering between a makeshift melting pot and the stone crucible from which they were churning out bullets. Another hour of that wouldn't exactly hurt them, and besides, Jurgen still had another matter to take care of first.

He crossed the room, those he passed hardly looking up they were so engrossed, and drew close to Lakatos.

'I have to go and see Catafengi before we do this,' said Jurgen. Lakatos looked up, surprised.

'You want to tell him about this?' asked Lakatos, clearly doubtful.

'No, but I must pass on a message,' said Jurgen.

'Send one of the others. Can't it wait?'

'No,' said Jurgen, firmly.

'Then I'll go with you if it demands such urgency,' said Lakatos. 'What is it?'

'It's a message from Addec. He wanted to speak to Catafengi himself, face to face but until all this is over, I didn't see how he could. He gave me a message and made me swear to pass it on to Catafengi,' Jurgen said.

'What does it say?' asked Lakatos.

'It is a message for Catafengi himself, and for Catafengi alone,' said Jurgen. 'Please, I'm only doing as Addec asked, and I serve Catafengi, too, Lakatos. I mean you no disrespect.' Lakatos nodded. Jurgen was gone.

PERHAPS THIS WAS going to be easier than Jurgen had thought. Preparations were not yet quite complete, but they were going smoothly and nothing had happened to make Jurgen think his plan might fail, or that he might be forced by necessity to change it. No, things were progressing

very well, and once he had seen Catafengi, he would be ready to begin in earnest.

He had no time to waste with the goons on the door and shimmied off the ladder a metre or so short of its peak. He caught a hold of the underside of one of the adjoining walkways and, finding it suitably loaded with pipes and metal ribbing, swung himself along underneath it by his arms alone. At the end he squirmed through a tiny ventilation shaft that was barely wide enough to accommodate his shoulders He needed to squeeze through for the metre it took him to get behind the deacons on the door. Emerging behind them, he was clear of the shaft and stepped out into the dome proper.

It had changed considerably since Lakatos first introduced him to the place. It had a sense of permanence that hadn't been there before. The Redemption seemed almost settled here, as monolithic as the stone walls that surrounded them. Perhaps Catafengi's plans for his fiery domain of the righteous were better advanced than Jurgen knew. Perhaps not.

Jurgen strode up the steps, flanked on either side by metal spikes bearing skulls: many, many more skulls, in fact, since Jurgen had first come here just two weeks earlier. Perhaps that was a good sign. Perhaps not.

Jurgen slid past the innermost of the two overlapping metal sheets, which served as an entrance to Catafengi's chambers. The room was busier than Jurgen had seen it before. Four robed and hooded acolytes knelt at the grand master's feet, his ministry to receive. Their devotion was plain, but it certainly wasn't a match for Jurgen's urgency and his purposeful stride was unbroken as he crossed the floor towards Catafengi's throne.

'I must speak, grand master,' he said. His voice must have sounded urgent, for Catafengi at once raised a bony finger and bade the acolytes leave him. They did so and Jurgen offered only the swiftest genuflection before coming to the matter at hand.

'What is it, Jurgen?' asked Catafengi.

'It's urgent,' said Jurgen. 'I've seen Addec, and he says Lago is coming.'

Catafengi gave the verbal equivalent of a frown, his actual expression hidden by his flame-red hood.

'Lago?' he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Jurgen. ‘Addec wanted to be sure the message reached you straight away... and he also sent this.’ Jurgen reached into his pocket, pulling out a crumpled parchment, its imprecise folding apparently indicative of its urgency.

Catafengi took it and peeled its edges apart. It was plain enough and he beckoned with his hand. Jurgen pulled his canteen from under his coat and passed it to the grand master. Catafengi pulled at its stopper, but it wouldn’t give.

His patience didn’t last long and, forced to drop the parchment on his lap, he wrapped both hands round the stopper, pulled it clear and flung it away moodily. He spilled the flasks contents onto the parchment and ran his hand over it to spread the pooling moisture.

Catafengi held the parchment aloft. He had wet it from the reverse side and the writing was a little dim. He raised the sheet above his head where a stronger ray of light piercing the shack’s ragged roof shone through the paper and made the writing a little clearer.

Catafengi, you are a dead man it read. He raised his glare to Jurgen.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he asked.

The bullet through his head answered him instantly.

JURGEN DESCENDED THE steps as purposefully as he had gone up them. He strode across the dome’s floor, passing out onto the walkway between the two deacons he had gone to such lengths to avoid minutes before He didn’t care now; they never stopped anyone on the way out, no matter how much his sudden emergence from the inside might startle them. He pushed them aside with his bustling pace and disappeared over the walkway, quickly vanishing into the Underhive’s murky shadows.

It might be hours before they found Catafengi’s body and realised they were leaderless, and what would they be then? Nothing better than a frenzied mob: nothing more than a collection of the same bitter, hateful, worthless individuals they have always been, leaderless, discontent and of little accord.

They might possess the same zeal and lust for violence, and they might still retain their senseless vitriol and fiery tempers. They might still have their weapons and their cruel implements of torture, but they had none of

the direction that Catafengi's demagoguery brought to them, and without that they presented no more threat than the raving madmen that hollered and yowled at passers-by in settlements across the Underhive.

They would be nothing more than disgruntled, petulant radicals, hating the world all the more for the realisation of their own inability to change it. They were nothing at all now. This was how it had to be.

JURGEN WAS PLEASED with his work, now that it neared its end. He passed the gang's old hideout, where Erket still lay clapped in chains.

Erket was a loathsome, snivelling wretch: a wicked, bitter little snake whom Jurgen had despised since first laying eyes on him, but he was ignorant and he was harmless. He was privy to nothing of consequence and responsible for nothing of note. He was a worthless creature, but he was no more deserving of death than he was of salvation, and he would find neither at Jurgen's hand. Were it not for his utterly detestable character, Erket might have been more a target for Jurgen's pity than his retribution.

Could Erket have imagined that the ferocious beating Morden had dealt him, the humiliation, and the hours spent clapped in chains had saved his life? Probably not. It didn't matter. He'd survived nonetheless. He had to.

Somebody would have to remain. Somebody had to tell the tale, to pass on the legend, to speak of the crippling fear that cowards like Erket deserved to carry in their hearts wherever they went. They were many across the Underhive: those who spoke the name and voiced the legend. Erket would be one more, and he would serve well in that regard.

Jurgen walked on.

He passed the building he had called home on and off for three weeks, that dirty little place where his tricks had been worked and his pieces forged. That was the place where the poor, desperate girl had come to find him to take whatever revenge her addled mind thought he deserved. That was the place where Durn had followed her, and where Jurgen had killed him.

He'd met a fate kinder than dying out in the wastes. Jurgen's lone bullet didn't make Durn wait for the end whilst choking, dehydrating or wasting away out in the storms. He hadn't let Deveres suffer, either. He'd come back to finish him off just as soon as he'd given him long enough to get

himself disoriented. There was no need to make them suffer, not the ones who were going to die, anyway.

The girl had chosen a wise place to confront him, though she would never have known it as he walked past the building he thought of the maze of lost corridors running deep beneath its few remaining floors. They were the reason he had chosen it, and they were the means by which he had smuggled that poor girl to safety in some distant dome where she would never be known. A handful of his best forgeries had given her everything she needed to buy passage all the way to the Spire, if she wanted it.

Jurgen walked on.

He passed the Pipe Under Mile, where it had first begun, and where the holy had first given themselves away as the loathsome hypocrites they truly were, crowded round their liquor as if it was the salvation they claimed to be searching for, though every single one of them knew better. Still, it had started there and it had been as good a place as any. He strode on, towards where it would finish.

* * *

‘READY?’ ASKED JURGEN. He had been back in the room barely ten seconds, and had done nothing more than throw the most cursory of glances around the place, but he could tell that they were all waiting for him. Every one of them was a completely changed figure. Their faces were still covered, as ever, but no longer by the heavy hoods and thick leather masks. Now they were swathed in rolls of dull cloth, wrapped so tightly that their features could be made out by the contours.

Their bodies were clothed likewise Heavy brown, yellow or dull green material had been hastily slashed into tunics, strips had been wrapped round and round their arms and legs forming layers six or seven sheets thick. They would serve them well out in the storms, both as protection and as disguise

Even Rubik stood ready, his knucldes white where his big hands braced the autocannon’s staggering bulk.

There was no reply to his question, but Jurgen knew they were ready to a man, and he was too.

The gang paced out onto the street an ominous feeling hanging over them. Jurgen marched at the head of the pack, leading them the short distance down the dusty track to the very edge of town.

As the swirling storms enveloped them, Jurgen stopped. He cast his gaze out to either side where the shifting dunes rose like shadows around them. Away to his left, a single figure skidded down the flank of a distant dune, coming into view again as he crested a nearer peak and scampered towards the gang. It was Galamb.

‘Anything?’ asked Jurgen.

‘Nothing,’ said Galamb.

‘Good,’ said Jurgen.

The gang continued its advance striding forwards line abreast. Galamb ran a short distance ahead, leading them out as far as he had dared go. Reaching this high bluff, the line halted, and a second figure appeared on the dunes away to the right: Karman.

‘Nobody has passed this point?’ asked Jurgen as the second juve rejoined the group.

‘Nobody’ said Karman. ‘Nobody got past me at all.’

‘Nor me,’ said Galamb.

‘Okay, said Jurgen, turning and raising his voice to address not only the juves but the entire gang. ‘Here’s what we’re gonna do. We’ll hold a line here Morden, Lirbus, Hargitay and Antal here with me; Todor, Rubik and Mero across the gully with Lakatos. Kannan, Galamb, you push on and scout out the land ahead and as soon as you see anything, get right back here and tell us, y’hear me?’

Both juves nodded before dashing off into the storms as the line of gangers gradually parted, Lakatos’s group making its way across the gully and up the ashy slope to occupy the dune on the other side. They were invisible amidst the storm before they had even crossed the gully, let alone by the time they had reached their hiding place on the crest above.

Jurgen lay back on the dune beneath him. To his left was Morden who lay flat on his belly, his gun aimed out into the gully. To his right was Hargitay, doing likewise, and beyond him, Antal stood scanning the

horizon, or at least scanned as far as he could see in the ferocious storms. Lirbus crouched just beyond him.

Jurgen was in no rush and tossed a toxstick to his lips, sparking it with the small slate palmed out of his sleeve, almost imperceptibly. It brought to mind Goddlesby, and the events of a few days ago. Jurgen had led the little man to this very spot before dealing with him as his actions deserved.

Jurgen ran his fingers over the scraggly flame motif crudely embossed in the lid of his toxstick tin. It was the same tin from which he had offered Goddlesby that small mercy though the contents at that time hadn't been quite the same.

Goddlesby was a good man, weak, but well-intentioned, and he deserved no ill-treatment at Jurgen's hand. The toxstick had been a true mercy: a dummy, laced with sedative. That first puff had sent Goddlesby into a deep sleep. He would be disoriented when he woke up, but he would at least be far from here, down in the domes beyond the Falls where Jurgen had taken him to a safehouse. He didn't want to trick the little man like that but he just couldn't have him asking too many questions, and he certainly couldn't have him finding his way back. Doping him and smuggling him out was the best he could do. Goddlesby had disappeared sure enough, that was all that was asked of Jurgen. He had just made Goddlesby disappear in a rather less gruesome fashion than the rest of the Union would have imagined.

Jurgen inhaled deeply on his toxstick. He exhaled, but it was imperceptible, the trail of vapours merging instantly with the equally toxic ash carried in the howling winds of these seasonal storms. The toxstick was nothing more than an affectation, anyway. The implants in his neck filtered out its toxins just the same as they did any other, and by the time the inhalant reached Jurgen's lungs it was nothing more than fresh air. It was an old habit, though, and one that died hard, no matter its ineffectiveness.

He finished the toxstick and readied himself. It was about time.

GALAMB ADVANCED CAUTIOUSLY, stopping and looking around almost every second step. Even then, he couldn't escape the feeling that he

had gone too far, that he had lost his bearings and that his enemy could well have got past him.

He moved on again, his visibility improving unexpectedly as the wind took another of its restless turns and drove the thickest of the ash cloud away from him.

That was when he saw them: perhaps a dozen cloaked figures, crossing the dunes towards them. Lago and his men, it had to be. He turned, ready to race back to the others, but he had barely gone a step before he caught sight of another figure way off in the distance. It was Karman.

Damn him, thought Galamb. It was hard to gauge relative distance out here but he could tell instantly that Karma had advanced perhaps a hundred metres further ahead and was already far too close to the approaching bounty hunters. Worse still, it looked like Kaman still hadn't seen them.

Galamb watched in horror as a flash of light pulsed out from the cloaked figures, tearing through the ash-laden air and dropping Karman's silhouetted figure to the ground without a sound. Shit thought Galamb, too late.

On instinct he opened fire with his own pistol, unleashing two, three, four autogun rounds at the bounty hunters, though at this range, and in this visibility he didn't stand a chance of hitting them. He should have run. He knew he should have run, but he had just seen Karman being gunned down and he was firing on impulse.

The ordered line of the bounty hunters broke apart and four or five of the figures faded from sight, presumably skidding down off the dunes and into one of the deep furrows that delineated them. The others turned straight towards him and a hail of fire rushed past his head. Galamb dropped onto his stomach and lowered his head to the ground as all hell broke loose around him.

* * *

ANTAL RAISED HIS head at the first sound of it.

‘Gunfire!’ he said, hollering across the line to the men crouched beside him. Hargitay and Lirbus dithered, their heads turning from Antal, to Jurgen, and back to Antal again, unsure of what to do. Jurgen and Morden showed no such indecision and the pair rose at once to their feet. A moment later, all five were dashing along the crest of the dune, advancing out into the storms but never once losing their precious elevation.

Luckily for them, the dune formed a great U-shaped ridge, and as they closed in on the sound of the gunfire they found themselves on its highest spur, overlooking a rapidly erupting battle.

Two groups of cloaked figures could be seen below. In the distance, one was already engaged in a firefight, though Antal couldn’t be sure who with. Below them, a second group rushed across a broad barrow, heading right for the base of the dune on which Antal and the others stood.

Antal raised his hand and without a sound pointed down at the men below. Jurgen and Morden nodded, Hargitay and Lirbus following suit a second later. All five lowered their weapons and unleashed a withering volley of fire on the cloaked figures below.

Two fell instantly. One rose again a moment later, hauling himself to his feet, before another cacophony of gunfire sounded and he was again felled, this time lying utterly motionless beside his equally dead comrade.

The other three scattered but they couldn’t escape the open ground. Antal raised his sights, tacking one figure that raced away back down the furrow. His heart raced and adrenaline coursed through his body but he kept his nerve and didn’t fire until he had matched the man’s speed with the slow movement of his own aim. At last he fired, a scorching las-bolt shooting out and striking the target square between the shoulder blades. He fell to the ground, kicking up a cloud of ash around him. Before he had a chance to see whether the man was dead or not Antal unleashed two more shots towards his prone form just to be sure.

The smoke began to clear and Antal realised his mistake. The follow-up shots had missed their target amidst the swirling ash kicked up by the man’s fall, and the target had got back to his feet and continued his frantic dash away. Antal fired off another blast as soon as he saw him, but it was a snap shot and it flew well wide, and now his lasgun’s power cell was overheating. He rushed on across the crest of the dune trying to keep the man in his sights, but it was a fool’s move.

Antal had strayed past the dune's highest point and suddenly found himself skidding down its steep-sloped side. He reached out an arm to steady himself but lost his balance and tumbled awkwardly down the dune. He came to a halt a few metres further down as the soft ash broke his fall and then slowly pulled himself back to his feet. He looked up, straight into the face of one of the cloaked bounty hunters, just in time to see the autogun pointed at his face. The last thing Antal ever heard – in terrible, stark clarity above the normal loud hiss of his bionic implant – was the crack of the shot.

TODOR ROSE AT the sound of gunfire. He looked around but couldn't pinpoint its source. It flared up again, and then another volley could be heard from another direction. Someone was returning fire.

Todor's gaze crossed the gully where five silhouettes dashed away into the distance. It was Jurgen and the others.

Todor called out. 'Lakatos! Lakatos!'

His leader turned to face him at once already aware of the sound of gunfire.

'Over there,' said Todor. 'Jurgen and the others have moved up ahead. They must have found Lago.'

'Good,' said Lakatos. 'Let's go.'

Todor trailed a little behind his leader as they crossed the gully. Todor was deeply uncomfortable out in the open and kept his wits about him. Lakatos didn't seem anywhere near as bothered and strode ahead, straight towards the sound of gunfire.

Todor stopped and turned, taking a good look behind him, fearful of ambush. It was then that he caught sight of a figure away to his right, crawling through the ash. He raised his autogun, ready to snap off a shot before the figure raised its head and revealed a bare face. It was Galamb.

Todor raced towards him but pulled up short ten metres from the juve as he realised that he was under fire. Todor quickly dropped to his belly and scrabbled across to Galamb, bullets racing over their heads all the while.

'What's going on?' yelled Todor over the noise.

'Lago... He's here.'

‘I know,’ said Todor, though in truth he hadn’t been completely sure until that moment, ‘but I saw Jurgen’s men over there,’ he said, pointing off into the distance ‘There was gunfire from over there. What the frag is this?’

‘They shot down Karman,’ said Galamb. ‘I saw them, so I fired back. There was a lot of them, ten, maybe a dozen, and they split up when I fired.’

‘Shit,’ yelled Todor, suddenly realising that they may very well be surrounded. ‘Let’s get back to higher ground,’ he said.

Galamb just nodded.

Todor raised his arms above his head and loosed a couple of rounds. The shots were woefully inaccurate but silenced their enemies for at least a moment. With that Galamb pushed up off his hands, leapt to his feet and dashed back away from the gunfire Todor fired another couple of shots and began to crawl backwards on his knees.

He stopped a moment later and glanced over his shoulder. Galamb had taken up a new position about twenty metres back. He raised his hand as a signal and Todor nodded in reply. Galamb opened up with his pistol and Todor got to his feet, taking the chance to dash back to the slight ridge that Galamb now occupied.

‘This isn’t high enough,’ said Todor, frustrated to find their view no better than it had been before. ‘We’ve got to get right back or we’ll never see them coming.’ Galamb nodded again and rose to his feet, dashing up the steep dune to their rear as Todor laid down some covering fire.

It wasn’t enough. Todor stopped and turned as he heard a scream and then a dull thud from behind him. Galamb had barely made it ten metres before being shot down. Todor thought at first that he was dead but as the little juve rolled over onto his back, Todor could see that his face was twisted in agony.

Todor had no choice He scrambled on all fours to where Galamb lay and thrust his arm under his neck to prop his head up.

‘Can you walk?’ asked Todor. As Galamb opened his mouth to speak, a rush of blood gushed out and his head rocked back. ‘Shit,’ roared Todor, but Galamb was dead.

Todor searched the terrain all around, desperately looking for a route he might take without exposing himself to fire. The noise of gunfire still rang

out ahead of him, and from his right where he was sure Jurgen was engaged with the second group. He looked back towards Fall Sands and his jaw dropped in horror. A tall, cloaked figure approached. How the hell had they got behind him, Todor thought to himself as the final, fatal shot rang out and silenced his thoughts forever.

THE MEN DOWN in the gully below were sitting ducks. From his high perch, Lirbus had time to take careful aim and fire without leaving cover for a moment. When at last he did pull the trigger, it rang out good and true, passing straight through the neck of one of the cloaked figures, dropping him to the ground instantly.

To his left, Morden opened fire from his position a few metres away. He had moved round, following the curve of the dune and Lirbus watched as his position lit up with a blaze of fire, catching the hapless bounty hunters below in a withering crossfire.

Lirbus forsook his precise aim. The bounty hunters were in disarray, fleeing out across the dunes and a blanket of fire would be as effective as any aimed shot. He rose up, standing at the dune's edge and sprayed his autogun fire indiscriminately over the chaotic scene below. Morden's shots spiralled in from his angled position and a second figure fell, his body riddled with bullets. Two remained.

One seemed to realise that flight was pointless and stopped dead, turning and aiming his weapon straight up at Morden. He cracked off a couple of rounds and Morden's position fell silent. Lirbus was sure he couldn't have hit him, but he had at least driven Morden back behind the crest of the dune.

Lirbus took aim on the plucky bounty hunter and pulled the trigger. Nothing. The bounty hunter below caught sight of him, turned, and unleashed a few wild shots towards Lirbus.

'Damn it,' he muttered as he dropped to his knees and frantically pulled at the clip in an effort to clear the jam. 'Cover me while I reload,' he said to Hargitay, who was still crouching next to him. Nothing happened.

'Didn't you hear me? I said cover...' Lirbus's words trailed off as he turned to look at the crouching figure beside him. Hargitay was dead, a single bullet wound piercing his skull.

The bounty hunter's wild shooting couldn't have hit him like that, could it?

'Jurgen!' said Lirbus, calling out louder than before. 'Jurgen, cover me!'

Again there came no reply. Lirbus had become too caught up in his own wild firing spree. The last time he had looked, Hargitay had been beside him, and Jurgen a short distance further along the ridge. Now Hargitay was dead and he couldn't see any trace of Jurgen. Lirbus was alone and in big trouble

He flung his jammed autogun to the dirt and wrestled the lasgun from Hargitay's warm but rapidly stiffening grip. He rattled off a couple of shots towards the two remaining bounty hunters below before rising and sprinting along the dune to where he had last seen Morden.

The sound of gunfire rang out behind him and he leapt and slid across the dune relieved to find himself crashing into Morden. Morden was fine keeping his head down, and seemed just as relieved as Lirbus to find he wasn't totally alone.

Morden raised his hand, three gloved fingers extended in a familiar gesture. Lirbus nodded and Morden rolled onto this stomach, stretching over the top of the dune to fire down onto the two men below. Morden's shots silenced the barrage from below and Lirbus, too, poked his head above the crest of the dune.

One of the bounty hunters was limping slowly away while the other positively sprinted. Lirbus took careful aim and picked off the limping figure knocking him dead with a blast right through the middle of his back.

'Come on,' said Lirbus. 'Let's get him.'

'Do it,' said Morden, and the pair rose dashing down the dune in pursuit of the lone survivor. Their target would quickly disappear from view in the cloudy air of the storms and Morden clearly had no intention of letting him out of his sight. He holstered his pistol and sprinted hard in pursuit of the fleeing bounty hunter. Lirbus did likewise without another thought.

They chased the man across the gully, towards the opposite ridge. Lakatos and the others should be up there, thought Lirbus. Why weren't they firing?

Morden outstripped Lirbus for pace and was quickly ahead of him. Lirbus was still lagging fifteen metres behind as he saw Morden crash into

the back of the fleeing man, sending the pair of them tumbling to the ground amidst a flurry of ash.

Lirbus carried on his own sprint, leaping straight at the scrapping figures on the ground in front of him. As he leapt he saw a boot rise up from the scuffle beneath him and Morden was flung clear, wincing as he took a sturdy kick to the chest. Lirbus came crashing down straight onto the cloaked figure and in an instant he was in agony. He rolled off him instinctively and reached down to the source of his pain: a dagger buried deep in his guts. He groaned, coughed and closed his eyes, falling onto his back and into deep darkness.

MORDEN ROSE TO his feet. The bounty hunter scrambled towards Lirbus's prone form, struggling desperately to pull his knife from the corpse. Morden wasted no time and leapt onto the man's back, wrapping his arms round his shoulders and drawing his own blade across his enemy's neck. The man struggled on for a few seconds, desperately trying to fling Morden off, but Morden held his grip tight until the man at last collapsed face forwards, blood streaming from his neck and forming a deep red stain in the filthy ash beneath him.

Morden sank to his knees, breathless and panting.

He barely had time to draw breath before a crackle of gunfire forced him instinctively to the ground. Mercifully, it wasn't aimed at him, and the reports peeled off into the distance sounding very much like shots passing to his side Morden raised his head but couldn't see the source of the gunfire and suddenly felt very alone and stranded out in the open.

He gazed around, but he'd already seen plenty of men – friend and foe alike – caught out in a desperate dash for cover and decided it was better to keep himself low to the ground.

This was insane, thought Morden. If this was meant to be an ambush, then clearly they had already sprung it, but the battle still wasn't over and Morden felt the whole adventure was slipping into chaos. Jurgen's plan had seemed like a good one but now he wasn't quite sure what it was meant achieve or that it would really achieve anything at all.

Morden lay vigilant for a minute or two longer before a number of figures – three as far as he could make out – appeared ahead of him. They

couldn’t have been the source of the gunfire since they were approaching from the wrong direction entirely. It was only at that point that Morden realised that the gunfire had died away to nothing, and the mystery deepened.

Morden raised his lasgun’s sight to his left eye and peered down it, readying himself for a shot just as soon as the dark silhouettes up ahead came into range. The sight offered no magnification as such, but squinting and concentrating on them as intently as he was, Morden gave pause and drew his finger back from the trigger.

He allowed them to approach a little closer. He was sure they wouldn’t see him anyway not with him lying flat on the ground like that, but he couldn’t wait for ever. They covered perhaps another ten metres before he was sure. It was Lakatos and the others.

Morden raised his lasgun and loosed three shots, clear and evenly spaced. Three shots, straight up in the air, just like Jurgen had told them: it was the only way to identify one another out in the storms. Sight was useless. Sound was everything.

A moment later and three shots rang out from the group ahead. Morden could just make out a single raised arm, firing what sounded like a bolt pistol directly up into the air.

Morden was reluctant to show himself, but if he didn’t they’d never find him. He leapt to his feet and quickly fired off another three shots in noisy reply. He had no way of knowing if they had seen him, or if they could tell that it was him who had fired the shots, and that he was a friend, but he just couldn’t waste any more time. He set off at a sprint towards the distant silhouettes.

‘JUST TO BE sure,’ said Lakatos.

Rubik nodded and trained his autocannon on the figure approaching through the dismal murk of the storms. Just to be sure, thought Rubik, just to be sure. He’d heard the three shots the same as everyone but things were not going well and, truth be told, if it hadn’t been for Lakatos alongside him, Rubik would probably have just gunned down the approaching figure anyway just to be sure.

The figure continued to approach at speed. Oddly, it seemed to drift to the right as Rubik followed its progress with his readied autocannon. Perhaps it was an optical illusion, caused by the rolling storms, or perhaps it was just impossible for anybody to run straight in such winds.

Rubik didn't so much as blink as he followed the figure's approach. He could feel his fist tightening around the hefty trigger grip of his autocannon as the figure at last came in to some kind of clarity.

It was Morden. Thank the Emperor it was Morden. Rubik released the grip on his trigger and breathed a sigh of relief.

It was a premature relief, to say the least, as a bullet ploughed suddenly into his shoulder, a second grazing him just above the elbow and a third whistling past, wide of its mark. He fell to one knee with shock and pain, barely managing to steady his colossal bulk even with his equally substantial strength. He roared in pain and the approaching Morden dived to the ground, obviously having heard the bullets that whistled past him.

Rubik grabbed at the trigger of his cannon but a searing pain in his arm stopped him before he could unleash so much as a single shot. Howling in furious agony, he used what little strength he had in his wounded arm to heave the autocannon across his body and into his uninjured left hand. His wounded right arm possessed too little strength to steady the great weapon, and Rubik was forced to kneel and rest the bulk of the thing across his thigh before unleashing a spitting, ripping volley of bullets in the direction of the unseen shooter.

At his feet, Morden crawled past him. Lakatos and Mero knelt alongside him, loosing shots in the moments when Rubik's great weapon fell silent. Between them, they provided sufficient weight of fire for their enemy to seem unable to respond, even with the Cawdor stranded out in the open.

Morden rose up from the ground behind Rubik. Rubik felt the searing heat of a las-blast pass by his shoulder as Morden took up covering duties, taking over from Lakatos who fumbled on the ground, desperately trying to reload the empty magazine of one of his bolt pistols.

Rubik unleashed burst after burst of fire, each one just a few seconds apart, but he couldn't go on like that forever. Even if he didn't feel the pain in his arm growing in intensity with every second, even if he didn't feel the drowsiness of blood loss descending on him like night, he would

eventually run out of ammo and he needed to make his shots count before that happened.

‘They must have followed my shots,’ yelled Morden from beside him.

‘How many are there?’ asked Lakatos from the opposite side.

‘I’m not sure. We ambushed five, I think, from up on the ridge but they’re all dead.’

‘There’s more. I saw Galamb shooting at another group. They must’ve split up,’ said Lakatos.

‘Galamb? Where is he now?’ asked Morden. Rubik shook his head before Lakatos had time to answer and Morden fell silent

‘Where’s Jurgen, and the others?’ asked Lakatos, as Rubik unleashed another staccato burst. ‘Where is Jurgen, and the others?’ he asked again, repeating himself now that the sound of gunfire had died down a little.

‘Lirbus and I chased the stragglers down from the ridge. That’s how I ended up out in the open,’ said Morden. ‘I didn’t see Jurgen. He must still be up on the ridge.’

‘Two more!’ yelled Rubik, cutting in.

‘What?’ asked Lakatos.

‘I’ve got bullets for two more bursts. Get moving.’

‘Shit,’ spat Lakatos before moving backwards behind the wall of fire. Mero knelt beside Rubik, stripping the bandolier from across his chest. Rubik winced in pain as Mero dropped the heavy belt down over his wounded shoulder.

‘Move!’ yelled Lakatos, loosing a couple of shots from his new position fifteen metres or so behind the others. They did as ordered and scampered back towards their leader, though Lakatos’s meagre bolts offered scant covering fire and a hail of bullets raced past them from their still unseen enemy.

Rubik crouched behind Lakatos, letting his cannon rest on the ground and taking the opportunity for a desperately needed breather as, beside him, Mero threaded another band of ammo through the weapon’s hopper. It was the last one, and the way things were going, it wouldn’t last long.

Morden rose in front of Rubik and fired off a handful of las-blasts, his gun held lazily at his hip. With his non-firing hand free, Morden waved the others backwards, an invitation they wasted no time in taking. Rubik hoisted the autocannon back up off the ground, feeling the weight more

than ever. He rested it against the wrist of his damaged arm that was numb with pain, and he could feel the exertion even more. He could barely keep up with Lakatos and Mero as they scampered backwards, heading for the safety of the ridge.

Lakatos fired off two rounds as Rubik reached them, Mero loosing two more as he set himself down between them. Morden turned, waiting for the signal to retreat and Rubik wasted no time in giving it. He hefted the autocannon up onto his bent knee to give Morden some covering fire and clamped down on the trigger grip with his good hand.

Nothing.

Rubik looked up in horror but Morden was already up and running. In desperation he squeezed again but there was no sound. The trigger was firmly stuck down, depressed against the weapon and utterly useless until he could reset the jam.

He looked up again. Morden had covered maybe a quarter of the distance between him and the others, but even at that range Rubik could see the look of tenor in his eyes as he realised what was happening. Rubik raised his hand, waving his palm in a frantic downward motion. Morden didn't need to be told twice and dived forwards, hurling himself to the ground as quickly as he could, but it was too late.

Las-blasts arced past him and the air filled with bullets. Morden's dive brought him crashing down to the ground in front of Rubik, but it was no controlled landing. His body slammed into the ash, singed with laser burns, riddled with holes and utterly lifeless. As the puff of ash thrown up by his falling body cleared, Rubik could see the deathly grimace on Morden's face and swallowed hard in a mixture of anger and fear.

Rubik looked across to see Mero gripped by that very same fear, yet Mero's own terror was not tempered by anger and Rubik saw him rise to his feet, instinctively sprinting away. It was a miracle he got away at all as bullets raced past the three surviving Cawdor, and Rubik quickly lost sight of the fleeing Mero as he was forced to consider his own safety and turned his gaze back in the direction of the approaching gunfire.

At last he could see them: five, no, six cloaked figures emerging from the storms. Lakatos dived across Rubik, pushing him to the ground as he fired off two more shots from his bolt pistol. Lying on his side, Rubik was at least free of the weight of his autocannon and wriggled his good arm

free of the harness to get his fingers at the jammed barrel. Damn Mero, he thought. Damn him for fleeing, and damn him for stuffing up the reloading. Rubik wrenched a tangled mess of ammo from the barrel to dear the jam.

He braced the weapon against the ground and used his elbow to bring his weight down against the back end, tilting the barrel upwards just enough to aim it at the approaching group. He unleashed a rash of fire and the six became five. Another burst and five became four. At this rate, they weren't going to get any closer, thought Rubik.

At this rate, he thought again, as he felt the dull click of his weapon's trigger. At this rate... He suddenly realised he was out of ammo.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it,' he yelled, rolling onto his back in a bid to draw his laspistol from the holster around his waist, but it lay on the same side as his bad arm and he couldn't prop himself up sufficiently to get at the thing.

Lakatos drew close to him, stooping over and pressing his face close to Rubik's.

'What the hell?' he said.

'Out of ammo,' said Rubik. Lakatos spat a curse in reply and slung his arms under the bulky man, half lifting and half dragging him backwards. With Lakatos supporting him, Rubik at last pulled his laspistol free of its holster and raised his gaze back towards the approaching figures.

Doing so gave him just enough time to see the las-blasts screeching towards him: the las-blasts that smashed instantly into his chest and made Rubik suddenly forget the pain in his arm and the bleary-eyed, drowsiness of his blood loss.

MERO HELD HIS lasgun to his shoulder, cradling the barrel with his left hand and staring straight down the crude sight on its top. In truth, he could hardly see a thing through the murk, but using the sight gave him confidence, and the Emperor knew he needed it now.

He cracked off one shot, and then another, before falling to the ground in a desperate attempt to hide himself from any shots that might come his way in reply.

Beside him, the hulking Rubik raised his hand and signalled for the waiting Morden to retreat – a signal Morden wasted no time in following. Mero watched Morden dash frantically towards him, just as Rubik raised his autocannon to provide covering fire.

It seemed like an eternity for Mero, wailing for the familiar *chugga-chugga-chugga* of the autocannon. He waited, but it never came. Mystified, he turned to Rubik, only to see the big man's face freeze in tenor as he fumbled ineffectively at the trigger of his jammed weapon.

Mero turned from Rubik's horrified visage and looked straight into the eyes of another. Morden made a frantic dive to the ground as he realised that the covering fire he so badly needed was well and truly stuck halfway down the autocannon's barrel. Morden's terrified grimace turned into a deathly one as blasts and bullets cut through his diving form and sent his body plunging lifelessly to the ground.

That was enough for Mero. If he was thinking about anything at all, he was thinking that running was better than staying where he was, and that a desperate, every man for himself dash offered more chance of survival than this supposedly ordered retreat, which was falling to pieces as he watched.

He took to his heels, turning in an instant and dashed away from the approaching enemy, away from Lakatos and Rubik, and the body of poor Morden.

The bounty hunters must not have seen him at first, and Mero found himself ten, fifteen, twenty metres away before the hail of gunfire swung predictably towards him. He dropped to all fours as bullets whistled around him and continued his desperate flight by scrabbling along on his hands and knees.

Behind him, he heard more shots ring out, but much closer by: Lakatos and Rubik returning fire, he thought, though it didn't sound like the autocannon was doing the firing. Either way, it seemed to draw attention away from him, and Mero hauled himself back to his feet and continued his frantic dash as the hail of bullets passed him, their owners concentrating on another target altogether.

Mero dashed on. He thought of Rubik as he fled, and was touched by a moment of guilt for leaving him behind, but then he thought of Lakatos and it turned to fear. Lakatos would never forgive Mero for fleeing; he'd

kill him. The thought of it made Mero run on all the faster, and he wished that Lakatos would die, Emperor damn him for thinking such things.

Mero reached the foot of the high dune that led up to the ridge from which their ambush had begun. The ridge on which, Mero thought, they should have stayed all along. More importantly, the ridge that would offer him precious cover.

Mero began to scramble up the steep dune as quickly as he possibly could, scaling its face. A spattering of bullets just above his head told him that it was a bad idea. Climbing up the exposed side of the dune would make him an easier target. He shrunk down to the ground, skulking through the ruts of ash that peppered the dune's base. Bullets still streaked past his head but at least he was afforded some cover.

Mero skulked on in this manner until he reached the edge of the dune He thought he could dip behind it and ascend from the other side, keeping out of sight of the enemy as he did so.

He waited a moment, carefully picking his time, and then made one sudden dash, exposing himself for just a second before turning sharply and racing to safety behind the dune's imposing bulk. He fell to the ground as he reached the rear of the dune, hurling his back against the steep pile of ash. He breathed a sigh of relief. He was out of sight. He was safe.

Mero took a moment to catch his breath before getting to his feet and beginning the long trudge up the side of the dune. From there, he could work out exactly what he was going to do. He would be safe up there at least and could better ponder his next move.

He could still hear the sounds of gunfire below. Perhaps he could redeem himself by picking off the bounty hunters from up on the ridge and save Lakatos that way. Perhaps.

Or perhaps he could just lie low, watch the bounty hunters until they moved off, and then make good his escape and get out of Fall Sands forever. He could flee to Fulcrum Spike, to Addec's place. If Lakatos were dead, there would be no one to say that he had fled and he could go to Addec with his head held high. He'd be a hero, a lone survivor.

Mero's chain of thought cut off suddenly as he caught sight of a figure up ahead of him, crouching down on the ridge. Who the hell could be up on the ridge? Then he remembered the bounty hunters had split up into two groups. Lakatos had seemed sure they were pursuing the nearer group,

and Morden said they'd encountered another group over at the far ridge. How the hell could they have gotten up on the ridge?

Mero realised he had become hopelessly disoriented in the chaos. It was only a fluke that they had found Morden out in the open and it was conceivable that the bounty hunters had surrounded them, doubled back on them or just plain got past them. He cursed his luck, but knew there was no going back.

Mero was sure the figure hadn't yet seen him, but for his part, Mero couldn't see past the figure on the ridge and had no idea if there might be more beyond him. He didn't dare use his lasgun for fear of alerting others nearby and instead drew his knife and began a slow, sneaking approach towards the crouching figure.

He crossed the dune against the slope, bringing himself around behind the figure. From here he could see that mercifully, the figure was alone. Summoning what courage he had, Mero rose from his stoop and dashed at the figure, leaping on its back, his knife outstretched.

He landed hard on the crouching man's back but instantly recoiled. One touch of that stiff, hard body told him something wasn't right. He grabbed at the figure and rolled it over. It was Todor, stone dead, his eyes glazed over, forever emblazoned with a last moment of fear.

'What the-?' said Mero to himself, but they would be his last words.

Mero's body slumped forwards onto Todor's. A single bullet was shot through his heart from a gun he never even saw, pressed to his back by a shadowy figure behind him.

LAKATOS THRUST HIS arms under the big man's shoulders, dragging him backwards, but it was useless. Rubik was already dead. The first shot had killed him, and the ones that followed would have done the same to Lakatos had they not slammed into Rubik's all too solid body. It was far from dignified, but Lakatos crouched behind the dead man's body. It was the only cover on offer now that Mero had fled, damn his eyes.

'Shit,' said Lakatos, though there was clearly no one to hear him. He was in deep trouble. He unclipped the magazine of one bolt pistol, and then the other, checking both were full. They weren't but it was a situation

he quickly remedied as he sheltered beneath Rubik's gargantuan frame. He would have precious little time to reload later.

He stashed the fully loaded pistols back in the holsters at his hips and pulled a grenade from his belt. He pulled the pin and hurled it as far as he could, not towards the approaching enemy, but laterally away froth himself, creating a huge explosion away to his right. It was a diversion and nothing more.

The explosion had barely sounded before Lakatos was on his feet and running, drawing both pistols as he went. The grenade bought him a few seconds and he heard several shots peel off harmlessly towards the site of the explosion before the approaching bounty hunters noticed his own sprinting form. He loosed several rounds from his pistols and carried on running, covering himself as best he could.

As bullets whistled past him, Lakatos saw a shallow dip in the ashy ground and took his chance. He leapt and skidded down its side, landing on his back. Pressed flat to the ground, even such a meagre trench as this, offered him some cover.

Lakatos lay for a second, drawing his breath, but he knew he had no time to waste. He rolled onto his front and rose slowly, just enough to take a peek out over the furrow's edge. Four figures were approaching, and quickly. Somehow, they'd lost sight of him.

He drew his pistols up, arms resting on the ground, and waited. He wouldn't get many shots. It was near impossible to gauge range in this weather, but Lakatos was a master. The figures continued their approach, close enough for Lakatos to make out the heavy cloaks they were wearing, which billowed out in the wind where they hung loose at the back of their legs. They were well-prepared for the storm. They were professionals.

Lakatos followed their approach for a few more seconds. They weren't coming directly for him. Rubik's body was still sitting upright fifty metres away and the bounty hunters were closing in on it, perhaps unaware that it was nothing more than a corpse. It would take an age for them to come into range, drifting across in front of Lakatos's view rather than coming closer. At last just as the bounty hunters closed in on Rubik, Lakatos reckoned he had a mark and opened fire.

He aimed his fire at a low trajectory, pistols pressed both together and spraying from right to left. It worked, and the bolts scythed through the

line of four figures. Two fell to the ground, one remaining there lifeless. The second dragged himself gingerly back to his feet as the other two fled and rolled to the ground. It was just as Lakatos had intended. He couldn't guarantee fatal shots from that range, but at least cutting across their legs would hamper their advance. The wounded figure limped forwards and Lakatos took his time in lining him up, picking him off with another spray of bullets and sending him tumbling lifeless, head over feet, into the dirt.

A shot skimmed the top of the dip in which Lakatos hid and he instinctively ducked his head down. The two remaining bounty hunters were advancing on him, and they were clever. They had split up, standing perhaps ten metres apart, and advanced in unison so that Lakatos couldn't possibly cover both of them. They had clearly worked out that he was alone. He would have to persuade them otherwise.

He unclipped another grenade, fumbling with the pin in his gloved hands and dropping it to the ground just in front of him. Frik it, he thought, and he leapt to his feet, setting of at a sprint away from the hollow.

Bullets trailed behind him, but he replied in kind and bought himself a few metres before the sound of the exploding frag grenade rang out behind him. It seemed to work, and he heard the bounty hunters' fire close in on his former position. Perhaps they had mistaken it for muzzle flash.

Lakatos raced away across the dunes, but he was too eager in his flight. He stumbled and fell. One of the bolt pistols fell from his grip, tumbling from his right hand as he collapsed. Feeling no pain, he presumed he had merely tripped and rose to his feet. Then his leg gave way and, looking down, he realised he had been hit square in the knee by a las-bolt. He couldn't stand on it at all.

He dropped onto his good knee and thundered off three more shots from his remaining bolt pistol. The two figures seemed unperturbed and were sprinting towards him. Their fire forced him to the ground and Lakatos began to think he was doomed. This had seemed like such a good plan. What the hell had happened? Even if he survived, his gang was in tatters and Catafengi would not reward him for this debacle. He cursed as he cautiously raised his head once more, extending his arm to loose two more shots with his bolt pistol. Two more, and then he tried a third.

Nothing.

‘Damn it,’ said Lakatos. He slunk as far down into the ash as he could, desperate for cover as he tried to reload the pistol’s spent magazine as quickly as possible. The bolts fell from his nervous, twitchy grasp and he scrabbled frantically in the ash, making terrible labour of a routine task.

A dark shadow, perceptible even in the dim light of Ash Season, fell across Lakatos and he looked up.

‘Oh shit,’ he said as he gazed straight into the eyes of the two cloaked figures. They stood over him with their lasguns aimed squarely at his head. Lakatos flinched and shut his eyes as he heard a bang ring out above him. He gasped, and then opened his eyes as he realised the impossibility of a lasgun going *bang*. He looked up just in time to see one of the two figures fall backwards, a spray of blood jetting up from his head.

The second figure looked up from Lakatos, suddenly concerned more with his own survival than Lakatos’s death. He started to raise his lasgun, but a second *bang* rang out all too quickly for it to be of any use. Another shot, clean through the front of the skull, another spray of blood, and another cloaked bounty hunter tumbled backwards. Lakatos was stunned and breathless.

He looked up and turned his head slowly, half expecting a third *bang* to ring out and silence him too.

Jurgen. Dear Emperor, thought Lakatos, it was Jurgen.

Sure enough, the outlander stood no more than ten metres away, arm outstretched, stub gun still smoking.

‘Jurgen,’ he said aloud. Jurgen said nothing.

Lakatos hauled himself to his feet, injured as he was, and stood up on his one good leg. He hobbled over to where the two cloaked bodies lay in the ash.

Lakatos dropped to his knees and smashed his fist into the body lying on the ground beneath him, pummelling the body’s ribs with punch after punch...

‘Lago, you bastard!’ he yelled, pulling the tightly wrapped cloth away from his mouth and spitting on the prone figure as he raised his boot and unleashed a crushing stamp on its motionless head.

‘You fragging bastard, Lago. Pah!’ He seethed with rage at the terrible, bloody mess this infidel Lago had made of his plans, but railed victorious that he had won, that it was over.

Lakatos wrenched the ventilator mask from Lago's face, desperate to look into the eyes of his slain enemy. He recoiled in horror as the mask came away.

It wasn't Lago at all. It was Deeran. He had hardly ever seen the man's face, but the gang tattoo on his left cheek made him quite sure that it was Deeran. He scrabbled over the body, to the second corpse lying behind it. This one bore no mask, and a square sheet of cloth merely hung across its nose and mouth, tied behind the head, with infrared goggles to cover its eyes. Lakatos dragged the cloth down with one hand, pulling the goggles away with the other. He ran his fingers gently over the face and was almost reduced to tears.

It was Addec.

JURGEN WALKED SLOWLY towards Lakatos where he kneeled over the bodies. He stopped just short of him and stooped to the ground. Lakatos's pistol lay where it had fallen when that first shot caught its bearer in the leg. He scooped up the pistol and examined the magazine. Three bullets remained.

Jurgen pressed his thumb into the tightly sprung magazine and pushed out the top bullet. He spun it round in his hand and reinserted it into the magazine, its tip facing the wrong direction. He clicked the magazine back into place and walked on towards the crouching Lakatos – he wasn't going to give Lakatos anything like the mercy of a swift end, or the satisfaction of having anyone to blame but himself

'You dropped your gun,' he said as he approached within earshot.

Lakatos rose slowly in front of him, taking the pistol from Jurgen's outstretched hand. Lakatos didn't say a word. He merely turned his back and took a pace or two away from Jurgen, who remained motionless standing next to the bodies of his two most recent kills.

'I thought they had you there,' said Jurgen.

'Me too,' said Lakatos. 'Jurgen, I don't know what in the name of the Emperor has happened here but whatever it is, it's your doing.' Lakatos raised his pistol, aiming it straight at Jurgen's head.

'You're trouble, Jurgen,' he said. 'Whatever you've done, you're trouble, and trouble follows you. Maybe this isn't of your making, but

trouble followed you here. This whole damn mess followed you here and it has got too many people killed... You're just too much trouble, Jurgen,' said Lakatos, squeezing the trigger.

The pistol backfired spectacularly. The explosive bolts it fired each contained its own propellant and its own charge and as Lakatos squeezed the trigger the top round propelled itself backwards into the rear of the magazine detonating as it struck the rear of the barrel and sparking off an explosion that covered Lakatos's right hand side in a gout of flame. He fell to his knees, roaring in pain.

Jurgen stepped forward, leaning over the howling Lakatos. His right arm was in pieces. Gristle and bone were visible down its length, and it was horribly twisted and merged with the burned skin and singed cloth of his clothing. The whole limb hung lifeless by his side, and shrapnel lay embedded in dozens of bloody welts across Lakatos's chest, neck and face. He screamed in pain, his agonised howls turning into a single, breathless word.

'Jurgen!' he screamed as the outlander drew nearer still, holding his face just inches from Lakatos's pained visage.

'No,' he said, 'I'm *Lago*.'

Lago placed a toxstick to his lips. He lit it and within a moment vanished into the swirling storms of Ash Season. He was gone, just like the Union, just like the Scarlet Skulls, just like Addec and his men, and Catafengi and the whole damned lot of them. They were all gone, just as Lago had always intended, and with that, he was gone too.

Behind him, Lakatos crawled along the ground, a short trail of his blood sorry evidence of the pitiful distance he had covered, though it had sapped all his strength. He hadn't the strength to stand, or to cry out, or even to grip his ruined arm and staunch the bleeding. Above him, moving like dark shadows through the haze of ash, carrion eaters whirled and danced, their mournful cries sure signs of a coming feast. They would not have to wait long if they waited at all.

A NECROMUNDA NOVEL

NATHAN CREED

JOHNATHAN GREEN

FOREWORD

N IS FOR Nathan Creed

Nathan Creed is a bounty hunter from the pollution-ruined hive world of Necromunda, a setting created for the game of the same name by Games Workshop in 1995.

Necromunda is a planet dominated by the mountain-sized cities that are separated by toxic ash deserts. The atmosphere of the planet is a poisonous fog and the spires of the vast hives are so tall that they pierce the stratosphere. It's a fantastic setting – a cross between the Wild West (complete with gunslingers and tribes of Ratskins) and the dystopia of urban decay gone mad (with rogue cyborgs wandering deserted city-domes miles across).

Nathan Creed himself started out as a rather one-dimensional character. He is Lee Van Cleef, Clint Eastwood, The Man With No Name and John Wayne all rolled into one, and thrust into a frontier, crumbling sprawl of urban decay in an almost medieval universe. He's a sharp shooter, a chancer, a charmer, a smoker, a drinker and a mean son of a Ripperjack who always gets his man, mutant, zombie or rogue psyker. He had a great line in put-downs, always having the last word in any matter, usually because everyone else was dead.

Creed didn't really develop as a character until I began to expand his world, building a cast of characters around him, who started to act as foils to the bounty hunter. So detailed did this background become over the next few stories, and in my ideas notebook, that I actually planned to pitch a Creed story as my first novel for the Black Library, but unfortunately it was not to be, and the story of a Genestealer Cult breeding and scheming in the depths of Hive Primus remains untold.*

The first Nathan Creed short story Bad Spirits appeared in Inferno! #3 (1997) and was ultimately re-printed in the Necromunda short story

anthology Status: Deadzone (2000).

Mama's Boys (2000) followed three years later and Boyz in the Hive (2001) - in which Creed goes up against an Ork, and which introduced the character of Doc Haze - not long after.

The fourth Nathan Creed story was Firestarter! (2001) and was re-printed in the 40K anthology Crucible of War (2003). Creed's last outing in Inferno! was Bad Medicine (2002)** and introduced a couple of characters who I planned to have appear in other stories - Creed's girlfriend Maisy-Lou (a.k.a. Crazy Maisy) and the Corpsemaker - but it was not to be. I pitched further tales (including an origin story) but for some reason they weren't picked up.

But the Nathan Creed story doesn't end there. In 2003 Games Workshop re-published the Necromunda games system in one book as Necromunda Underhive. I was commissioned to write some short pieces of colour text, each highlighting different aspects of the setting.

I managed to link all of the (very) short stories so that each one led into the next, even though they featured different characters. I even managed to write one involving Scuzman Veck, a pit slave I created for the Necromunda comic strip Slavebreak!

However, the editor didn't really appreciate what I'd attempted to do, and asked me to re-write the stories so that they weren't interconnected. In the end not all of them appeared in the book didn't appear in the right orderanyway. The effect was lost, including the story that resurrected bounty hunter Nathan Creed.

Not all of the Nathan Creed Inferno! stories were re-printed in anthologies but if you're a fan, or fancy reading them having read this post, I have it on good authority that they will be seeing the light of day in the second Necromunda Omnibus (although I'm not sure when that's due out). The first one is available now as part of BL's Print on Demand range.

And I've decided*** that I'm going to make my Necromunda Underhive stories available again, on this blog, over the next few days - and as originally intended.

I had already written two Nathan Creed adventures before Des Hanley became connected with the series, but from Boyz in the Hive onwards he was the unofficial Creed artist. It's a shame there weren't any more Creed stories because I would like to have seen more of Des's images.

* When BL attempted to revive the Necromunda setting in their fiction line I was disappointed not to be asked to contribute a Creed novel, but I was busy writing for Abaddon Books by then.

** Writing this now, I can barely believe that it's almost ten years since I wrote the last Creed story!

*** Again, during the course of writing this post...

BAD SPIRITS

PANIC REIGNED in the Ratskin camp. The great claw swept down again, this time decapitating an old Ratskin with a sickening crunch of shattering vertebrae. In the flickering light of the campfire, Grey Spider watched the slaughter in horror. Here he saw the corpse of a squaw, still clutching a mewling infant in her arms. There an elder coughed and breathed his last as his precious life-blood poured from a gaping wound in his frail chest. And there, silhouetted against the fire in the darkness of the Underhive, was the mountainous outline of the beast. Only the tribe's totem pole towered above it. Grey Spider pumped the barrel of the shotgun and raised it to his shoulder. Now he had the monster in his sights. Hearing the double click, the beast turned its misshapen head and fixed Grey Spider with its fiery gaze. The Ratskin felt the sick chill of fear creep down his spine and seize his stomach in its contorting grip. He found his gun sights wavering - he was shaking. Taking one hand from the shotgun he wiped the sweat from his brow. Roaring, the monster charged. Grey Spider fired. The report rang out across the vast, empty waste of the dome and echoed faintly from the plascrete ceiling far overhead. Grey Spider felt the wind punched from him M a rush of air as an iron-hard shoulder rammed into his body, carrying him backwards. The beast slid to a halt and Grey Spider fell to the ground, his chest heaving as he tried to recover his breath. He could hear the beast snorting in great gulps itself as its body was seized by a rage-induced adrenaline surge.

The Ratskin still had the shotgun gripped firmly in one hand. Struggling against the pain he primed the weapon for a second time. This was like no other Underhive creature the tribe had ever encountered. It seemed impervious to weapons and had no understanding of compassion. Why was it attacking their camp? In their search for new hunting grounds had the tribe angered the inscrutable spirits of the Hive? If only the hunting party

had returned that night as had been expected. If only more of the menfolk had stayed behind to protect the camp. But if he and his Braves could not hold off this monster, then who was to say that all the Ratskin warriors of the Redsnake Tribe would make any difference. If he was to die that night he would die fighting and with honour, as a Ratskin warrior!

The monster charged for the last time. Grey Spider pulled the trigger but still the monster would not stop. The great gleaming claw descended and Grey Spider's world exploded into darkness. The settlement burned.

'IT WAS UNDERHTVERS, I tell you!' Quaking Dome bellowed, shaking his skull-headed staff in fury. As he screamed his anger, the shaman's face turned red beneath the sacred spirals painted on his cheeks.

'Try to be calm, my brothers,' the old Chief pleaded, his age-lined brow furrowed in distress. The hunting had not been good, the Giant Rats had slunk off to nest deeper in the Hive Bottom this season, and now the warriors had returned to find their families slaughtered. Chief Thunderslag felt powerless in the face of his warriors' grief. Nothing he could say would take away their pain. He could only try to keep them from doing something they would all regret. 'We have always lived on fairly good terms with the hivers.' 'What've they ever done for us?' It was one of the more rebellious braves who spoke, having found his courage at the bottom of a bottle of Second Best. 'How can you say that, Howling Vent? They have traded with us, buying the skins we hunt for, and our blindsnake pouches. In exchange we have received weapons,' Chief Thunderslag eyed the bottle gripped in the brave's hand with contempt, 'and that poison you guzzle so much!'

'You call it trade?' Quaking Dome exclaimed. There was no stopping the shaman now. 'It's nothing more than exploitation! The invaders have never respected the sanctity of our lands and now they've shown their true intentions!' He was physically shaking, the bones strung onto his ceremonial armour rattling with every convulsion. 'While we were away providing for our families, they murdered them all to drive us from our homes - so they can steal our territory!' The shaman's tirade was greeted with a chorus of agreement. Many had sought solace in alcohol since making the gruesome discovery on their return. The shock of what they

had found in the cold, oxyacetylene haze of morning had been too much for even these hardened warriors to cope with. 'Stop, stop now!' the despairing Chief commanded. 'It is not the hivers who have done this. The spirits have been disturbed and become restless. We must find out why and discover who, or what, has done this. We owe it to the souls of our departed loved ones!'

'You don't know what you are talking about! You are getting old! Your words mean nothing to these people,' Quaking Dome hissed, turning on the ageing Chief his voice full of contempt. Dark eyes flashed in righteous anger. 'Words cannot bring back the dead. Actions are all that can appease their own troubled souls! We must put on war paint and prepare to die taking hirer scalps! It is the Ratskin way!' With that, the shaman turned on his heels and strode out of the camp. 'He who would avenge those who have been slaughtered here follow me!' he shouted back over his shoulder. The rest of the grief-stricken hunting party, high on Second Best, trailed after him. Chief Thunderslag stood alone by the tribe's totem pole, watching the Ratskin warriors disappear from view as they were swallowed up by the blackness of the Underhive. 'You will be renegade if you choose the war-path!' he shouted forlornly after them. 'You will no longer be my people! I will not be able to save you this time!' No reply came from the darkness beyond the camp.

Thunderslag turned towards the totem. As so often, his eyes were drawn to the grotesque image carved from plascrete beneath the stylised form of a snarling rat. The thing was almost human in appearance and yet there was something monstrous about it.

'Yes, the spirits of the hive have been disturbed,' he muttered to himself. 'They must be put to rest.' Thunderslag instinctively felt a chill in his bones. Something evil was abroad, he knew. He put an uncertain hand to the autopistol holstered in his rat's-tail belt, hesitated and then withdrew it again. The chief looked to the totem with pleading eyes as if turning to it for help. 'But what can I do?' As Quaking Dome had said, the truth of it was that he was getting old. From the evidence lying all around him, even his native skills might not be enough to help him overcome this beast - if beast it was. Yet there had to be a way.

Abruptly, the old chief nodded to himself and grinned. There was always a way.

'OLD THUNDERSLAG'S making trouble again? Didn't I always say those Ratskins couldn't be trusted?' the toothless bar-prop whistled.

'You sure did, Jemar,' Cooms, his middle-aged and overweight drinking companion, agreed.

And this was at the Jaygoth's place, you say, Calem?' Jack Finnian, the barman and proprietor of the Last Dregs Saloon asked, taking up his one-armed lean on the bar-top that he reserved for a genuine interest in what his customers were saying. 'That's right,' the grizzled miner confirmed. 'Old man Jaygoth and his wife and all their young 'uns - all dead. Scalped the lot of them!'

'Savages!' Cooms exclaimed, genuinely horrified. 'They can't be allowed to get away with that!'

'There's talk of some folks leaving town already 'cause of the troubles.' Finnian added, nodding knowingly.

'They need to be taught a lesson, that's what they need,' Jemar decided, slapping his hand on the bar. 'Did I ever tell you about the time I came across that band of Ratskins up by Mercury Falls?' 'You did,' Cooms interrupted.

'It's about time somebody did something about them,' Calem said suddenly. I would myself, only I'm sure I'm this close to striking a really big adamantorite seam.' 'That's what you said the last time,' Cooms muttered under his breath.

'What about the Guilders?' suggested Finnian. 'They should get their Watchmen to sort those Ratskins out once and for all.' 'They're only interested in what happens inside the town,' Calem muttered sourly. With the scrape of metal on metal, the doors swung open and the Bounty Hunter entered the smoky haze of the Last Dregs Saloon. Silence fell over the saloon, all eyes watching the stranger intently as he strode purposefully over to the bar. The tails of his long leather coat flapped around his knee-length boots. For a moment, the cluster of seals pinned to the inside of his coat that attested to successful jobs were revealed. Everyone in the bar could also clearly see the two, long-barrelled stub guns hanging over the man's hips. He walked tall, his back straight and his steps considered and certain. At the bar, the Bounty Hunter took the smouldering butt of a cheroot from between his teeth and sucked in a long, hissing breath.

'Wild Snake,' he drawled in a voice that was no more than a husky whisper.

'You got it,' the barman replied, hurrying to grab a fresh bottle.

'Hey, mister, you want to kill yourself some Ratskins?' Jemar piped up.

'Nope.'

'What d'you mean?' Jemar exclaimed, in disbelief. 'You're a Bounty Hunter, ain't you?' I've already got a job.' The man turned a piercing gaze on the old drinker. In the flickering sodium light, his steely eyes glinted under the shadowy brim of his battered hat.

'Then I would encourage you to finish it and move on, friend,' came a new voice, low and cultured, from the other end of the bar. At the moment, Toxic Sump isn't a place where self-respecting gentlemen like ourselves would wish to remain for longer than was strictly necessary.'

The owner of the voice emerged from the smoky gloom. He too wore a long, battered leather coat, beneath which could be glimpsed green trousers. His slender hands were enclosed in thick black gloves; in one he held a drink. He was of medium build, his features angular and well-defined. His carefully-trimmed black beard and moustache were in stark contrast to the Bounty Hunter's four day stubble. 'Why's that?' 'Well, to be quite frank, Toxic Sump is becoming a ghost town.' The bearded man placed his glass carefully on the bar and turned to face the Bounty Hunter. 'The local Ratskin tribe have been causing a lot of trouble recently. They are driving many of the settlers away. Claims are being abandoned throughout the dome; there's no work for anyone anymore.'

'He's right,' Cooms piped up, his companions muttering their agreement. 'So when do you leave?' the Bounty Hunter asked bluntly, fixing the bearded man with a calm gaze as he raised his drink to his lips.

I am a trader and unfortunately I have a personal financial commitment to fulfil, otherwise I would have departed long ago. When the next Guilder convoy arrives I'll conclude my business here, and when it leaves I intend to be on it.' The Bounty Hunter downed his drink in one quick mouthful. I'm not going anywhere, yet. Like I said, I'm on a job.' I was merely looking out for a fellow man's best interests,' the man said with a hint of sighing despondency. 'Let me introduce myself. My name's Cyrus Beckerman.'

I look after my own interests.' The Bounty Hunter replaced the cheroot between his lips. 'Now if you gentlemen will excuse me.' He turned to go.

With a ringing crash, the saloon doors were flung open and a ragged man burst into the bar. His grimy face was gaunt and drawn, his hair grey and tangled. His filthy and unhealthy appearance made him look far older than he probably was.

'Quinn? Is everything all right?' Finnian asked in surprise.

'Quick, get me a drink!' the wild-eyed man gasped, slumping down on a stool. I need a drink!' The barman didn't need to be told twice. Downing the shot in one go, Quinn slammed the glass back down on the bar. 'Another!' The second went the same way as the first. The grimy character stared directly ahead of him. 'It was terrible, I tell you. I ain't seen nothing like it!'

'What's the matter, man?' pressed Finnian. By now everyone else in the bar was crowding around in concern. The Bounty Hunter paused. He turned back towards the bar but said nothing. His keen eyes took in the blood-stains beneath the dirt and the sodden red patches on the prospector's filthy clothes.

'I was attacked, out on my claim up on Blackash Ridge,' the prospector whimpered. 'I paid my dues. I don't deserve to be treated like this!'

'Blackash Ridge, eh?' Beckerman interjected. 'Let me get you another drink. Wild Snake!' He clicked his fingers and at once Finnian started refilling Quinn's glass. 'There were dozens of them!' the bewildered man went on. 'They were all screaming their war-chants and wearing their horrible rat hides. Their arms were covered in snake tattoos!' The man gratefully accepted the glass handed him by Beckerman. 'Sounds like the Redsnake Tribe,' toothless Jemar offered. 'Didn't I always say-' 'That's them!' Quinn exclaimed, fixing the old man with a wild stare. 'They were mad, gone renegade. Said they were going to scalp me and feed me to the Ripperjacks! They stole my finds and all my gear. I was on to something special up there, a really big strike! Then the monster came and I fled!' 'What monster?' Cooms asked.

'He's mad!' Beckerman scoffed loudly, looking around him. 'The man's obvious delirious.'

'Hear him out!' the barman said forcefully. 'Go on, Quinn, tell us more,' he encouraged. 'What was this monster like?' 'It was like some horror from

the Sump, big as a test rig, with blazing eyes and one massive claw!' The prospector paused, sucking in ragged breath.

And?' Cooms pressed. 'Don't keep us hanging.'

Quinn made no reply. Instead the prospector clutched at his throat and his face started to turn purple. He tried to speak but all that came from his throat was a horrible croaking sound.

'He's choking!' Finnian exclaimed. 'Quick, someone help him!'

Before any of the startled crowd could do anything, Quinn collapsed face first onto the bar with a strangled groan and lay still. The drinkers looked on, dumbstruck. Eventually Calem reached over to the prospector and felt cautiously' for a pulse on the man's neck. 'He's dead!' the miner announced, in bewildered surprise. 'I guess it was all too much for him,' Finnian suggested, stunned. 'Heart must've burst! Shock'll do that to a man.' He paused, face infused with anger. 'Those Ratskins must have done him over worse than we thought'

'Well, that's it!' Cooms declared. 'I say we raise a posse right now, go up to Blackash Ridge and lynch old Thunderslag. Send the last women and children to Mercury Falls until it's dealt with. The old snake's gone too far this time!'

'Never mind all that,' Finnian interrupted, pointing at the body slumped over his bar. 'What do we do with him?'

And what about the monster?' Jemar reminded everyone.

'If there was one!' Beckerman snorted. 'Yeah, but what about Quinn?' Finnian pressed. 'I guess we just lay him out back and let the Guilders deal with it,' Cooms suggested. The Bounty Hunter eyed the corpse suspiciously. His instincts told him that something wasn't quite adding up. Despite the convictions of the saloon's regulars, the prospector's wounds hadn't seemed to be that serious. And anyway, the man had choked, not bled to death.

Realisation abruptly struck the Bounty Hunter. The last thing Quinn had done before he died was to have a drink. The prospector's glass still stood on the bar. While the others talked, the Bounty Hunter surreptitiously picked it up and, swilling around the dregs left in the bottom, gave it a cautious sniff. A bitter scent assailed his nostrils. He had consumed a fair amount of Wild Snake in his time but the glass smelt strange even for a particularly potent brewing. He thought back: only the barman and

Beckerman had handled it. He put the glass back down on the bar and said nothing. Frowning, the Bounty Hunter looked around the room. Beckerman was nowhere to be seen. 'That trader left in an awful hurry,' he drawled. 'He's a busy man,' Cooms grunted over his shoulder by way of explanation. Finnian was fidgeting nervously behind the bar, unable to keep his hands still. 'Come on, let's take Quinn out back,' he urged. 'Having a corpse in the bar's not good for trade. Makes customers feel uneasy.'

Between them the men picked up the prospector's body. The Bounty Hunter surprised everyone by taking Quinn's feet and helping carry the body out to the back room. 'Gotta show respect for the dead,' he drawled. No one saw him deftly withdraw a scrap of paper from the dead man's boot, secreting it in the long folds of his coat.

OUTSIDE THE Last Gasp Saloon, Nathan Creed, Bounty Hunter, took out the scrap of parchment and unfolded it, grimacing at the stale smell of the dead man's boots. The spidery scrawl and worn lines forming the map were faded with age but their meaning was clear. If the map was genuine - and something in Creed's gut told him that it was - then it would appear that Toxic Sump's dome was built directly on top of another, much older settlement.

Who knew what ancient treasures lay buried beneath the ash? Creed took the cheroot from his mouth and spat into the dust. The prospector had known. Now he was dead, thanks to the aid of a little poison.

I guess someone else is in on the secret too, the Bounty Hunter thought to himself Well, Beckerman, or whoever you are, Nathan Creed is involved now so you'd better watch your step.

There was no one else around: Toxic Sump really was turning into a ghost town. Cocking the brim of his hat, Creed let his robo-sight visor scour the rocky outcrop to the west, beyond the barbed-wire topped settlement wall. Beyond the rim lay Blackash Ridge where the dead prospector's claim was situated.

Suddenly he caught the flash of a whiplash coat tail as a bearded figure disappearing around a corner on the other side of the street. Creed grinned. Guess it wouldn't burt to do a bit of poking around of my own before!

leave town, he thought to himself. His suspicions aroused, the Bounty Hunter set off

Making sure he kept well out of sight, Creed followed the man in the coat until the furtive figure stopped outside a long, low building. The barn-like construction stood close to where the town wall had been built, almost on top of the rocky outcrop beyond. Its windows were smeared with grime and the structure gave the impression that it had long been abandoned.

As he unlocked the door, the furtive character glanced around to make sure he hadn't been followed. Back in the shadows, unseen, Creed grinned. It was Beckerman, just as he had suspected. The trader ducked inside the building and closed the door. Creed darted down a side alley, stopping next to a grimy window. Rubbing the dirt from the panes with his coat sleeve, he peered inside. There was no one about -Beckerman appeared to have vanished -but there was plenty to see nonetheless. The building was crammed full of crates that, from their condition, had only been packed recently. Their sizes suggested to Creed that whatever was inside was pretty big - and as a result probably quite valuable.

There was something else. At the back of the warehouse the Bounty Hunter could make out a large door, slightly open. ' So that's where you've gone... What exactly are you up to?' Creed muttered. The door's rusty surface suggested that the door had been scaled for some time and only opened again recently.

Creed considered his options. He still had a job to do at Blackash Ridge. He crushed the stub of his cheroot beneath a worn boot heel and strode away. Beckerman could wait.

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THE GLOW-GLOBES hanging from the ceiling of the dome were dimming by the time Creed crested the ash-covered rise. Before him lay the prospector's wrecked camp. Broken pipes jutted from piles of rubble, leaking steaming green fluid onto the crumbling masonry. Creed surveyed the devastation emotionlessly. The place was a mess: a cooking pot lay upturned next to the remains of a campfire; the prospector's shelter had been demolished; the seismic equipment the man would have used was

missing. The dirt and dust around the site had been churned up; here and there lay a feather or scraps of fur. Ratskins had been here all right, but so had something else -something far more sinister.

Among the countless moccasin prints that covered the site, Creed spotted something unusual: boot marks. The pattern of the boot treads had the precision and regularity of a machine press. They hadn't the look of handmade Ratskin moccasins. Something else troubled Creed: why would Ratskins steal machinery and seismic gear? His keen eyes scanned the camp. It was common knowledge that the indigenous tribes of the Underhive worshipped ancient archeotech hoards. They had been known to go on the warpath to recover stolen sacred treasures, but to take modern equipment from a lone prospector? Ratskins had no need of such things. Their knowledge of the treacherous Underhive was unrivalled. There was definitely something strange going on. It was easy to find where the prospector had been working. Close to a jutting outcrop of rock, a hole had been blasted in the side of the hill. Creed flicked down the photo-visor from beneath the brim of his hat. Peering through the gloom beyond the opening, he could see the pitted walls of a cave and the entrance to a man-made tunnel, shored up with metal props.

Entering the cave, Creed felt a breeze blowing up from the tunnels below. The fetid air testified to the fact that whatever was down there had been there a long time, sealed away with the decomposing effluent that filtered down from the hive-city far above.

The dirt floor of the cave was covered with yet more Ratskin footprints and the same boot marks from the camp, leading both in and out of the tunnel entrance. And there, stamped into the dust, were the footprints of something else too, something much bigger. Creed crouched down to study the prints closer but couldn't identify them at all. They were large and flat, and ended in clawed tips. Claws that had cut deeply into the ground with every step. Maybe there was some truth to the old man's monster story after all. Creed grinned in the darkness.

Getting superstitious, Creed? he thought to himself. Pieces of the puzzle began to lock together in his mind. Dusting himself down, the Bounty Hunter began to rise. 'You're not going anywhere!' hissed a cultured voice. Beckerman!

Creed froze in his crouched position, feeling the cold muzzle of a gun pressed against the back of his neck. He had been so intent on his investigations that he had not heard the softly booted approach. Another footprint explained. ' So it was you,' Creed said calmly. T guess you aren't any kind of trader at all. what's Van Saar's place in all this?'

The man didn't bother to confirm his identity T thought you were on another job,' he snapped, almost in annoyance. I'm sure I can make time for you.' 'You have become a... complication.' Beckerman, or whatever the Van Saar's real name was, was about to kill. Creed recognised the signs from long years on the trail of untold killers.

In a fluid motion Creed slid the knife from his boot, the movement concealed by the tails of his coat. Twisting the blade around in his hand he jabbed it backwards. The knife sank deep into the ganger's leg, cutting through his boot, until it scraped against hone.

Beckerman cried out in pain. Dropping his hands to the wound, he gritted his teeth and yanked the blade out of his shin. It was all the time Creed needed. He sprang forwards, away from the muzzle of the gun and into the tunnel. As he did so, he turned to his enemy. On his feet again, he faced the ganger, a stub gun in each hand. Depressing both triggers he fired off a couple of rounds, feeling the familiar explosive recoil in his wrists. At the same moment the ganger fired. An instant later Beckerman's body-suit tore apart at the shoulder, leaving a ragged hole - only a flesh wound, but it was enough to ruin his aim. Creed threw himself out of the way as the dust at his feet kicked up in bursts and the shells impacted against the rocky floor. Lying on his back in the dirt, Creed pushed himself up onto his palms. Through the clearing dust he saw the ganger stumbling backwards, his own weapon dropped on the floor of the cave. Too late, the Bounty Hunter noticed the wires trailing away from the tunnel entrance. Before he could aim his stubbers, the Van Saar fell onto the detonating device. There was a shuddering boom, the roar of shattering rock and the passageway began to shake violently. The ground quaking beneath his feet, Nathan Creed hurled himself down the tunnel. Behind him the cave mouth collapsed in a jumble of rocks and wreckage. Creed knew only too well that an uncontrolled explosion in a weakened dome could easily cause hivequakes. He had no idea how much of the rubble above him might come down at any second, so he kept on running. One thing was for

certain: the way back was now blocked by the explosion. There was no going back. Regardless of what lay beyond, in the twisting network of tunnels, that was the way he would have to go.

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CREED PAUSED in the semi-darkness. The artificial lighting in this section of the cave system had failed, forcing the

Bounty Hunter to peer more closely through his photo-visor. Ahead, to the right, the tunnel opened into a larger cave, possibly the remains of an ancient habitation dome or industrialised area. The passage to the left looked like a dozen others he had wandered along for the last few hours, always leading him deeper towards Hive Bottom. He chose to go right. He was about halfway across the cavern when he heard an unexpected sound that froze him in his tracks. His hands hovered over the holstered stub guns. It was like the sound he had heard when he had once encountered a nest of Milliasaurs. They had been picking at corpses from just another Badzone shoot-out. The sound was unmistakably the tearing of flesh. Ominously, as he listened, the noise ceased.

Moments later, through the gloom Creed was startled as the half-light caught in the jaundiced eyes of some kind of Zombie as it raised its scabrous head to look at him. The creature was half-clothed in filth-encrusted rags, beneath which its diseased skin was visible.

'Plague!' Creed gasped. Everyone knew about what happened to the victims of the neurone plague, but the Bounty Hunter had never been confronted by the results face-to-decomposing face.

The once-human thing hissed through its pock-marked lips. Instantly, the rest of the pack left off devouring the corpses, more interested in the prospect of fresh, tender flesh. Half-rotted muscles dragged the Zombies towards the Bounty Hunter, spittle dripping in long strings from their gaping, moaning mouths. As the foul creatures shambled forward, Creed quickly glanced behind him. As he had feared, out of the corner of his eye he could see yet more Zombies stalking towards him from behind. Part of him knew he had to save his ammunition for as long as possible. He had no idea where the endless tunnels would lead him or what else he would

have to face before he found a way out. If he ever found a way out. But the likely alternative at the moment was the risk of catching the Zombie plague himself There was nothing else for it. Aiming a stubber at the head of the nearest horror, Creed pulled the trigger. The Zombie's skull exploded in a shower of blood, bone and brain matter. The walking corpse stumbled on a few feet further before it collapsed, still twitching. This violent display did nothing to stop the advance of the other Zombies. The brain-eating disease had obviously deprived them of both fear and pain. A second shell tore a hole in the side of another of the advancing Zombies as it slunk forward, a portion of putrefying intestine flopping from the wound. Marshalling his strength, Creed did not run but kept walking at a steady pace. He figured that until the brainless creatures caught the smell of blood it was unlikely that they would charge him. Hopefully the occasional shot would keep off the closest of them and clear a path across the cavern. Whatever, he knew full well that there was no going back now He could only go on, despite not knowing what lay ahead. Creed felt time slow to a crawl as the interminable Zombie-shoot played itself out. He reloaded as he walked, always careful to keep a healthy distance between himself and the Zombies. Every instinct screamed at him to run, to put as much distance between the flesh-eating creatures as he could. But Creed resisted the temptation. The ground underfoot was uneven, with hidden pot-holes and twisted pipes jutting from the ash, ready to trip an unwary fugitive. A number of the creatures broke off from their laboured pursuit to feed on the carcasses of the Zombies that had already fallen. Creed smiled his fatalistic smile. Maybe you ugly sons of bitches have no attention span. He knew he had no option but to keep going. He just hoped that he found a way out of the cave system before he ran out of slugs. Creed walked on through the abyssal twilight.

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CREED CROUCHED down behind the crate and allowed himself a deep breath of relief. He had left most of the Zombies behind in the deeper, darker recesses of the cave system as they lost interest and began fighting amongst themselves. After several hours trudgiung through the

underworld, he found himself at one end of a much larger cavern. As he had reached the properly lit passages leading up and out of the depths, the Zombies had seemed unwilling to follow. Maybe they feared something that lay beyond, Creed pondered, something to which they reacted on an instinctive, primal level. Hearing the sounds of raised voices, Creed peered over the edge of the crate, careful to remain out of view. This cavern stretched out before him for over a hundred metres. Numerous halogen lamps illuminated the chamber, revealing the mouths of distant tunnels leading of into darkness. Twenty metres or so away, a band of maybe a dozen Ratskin warriors were in heated discussion with six members of a Van Saar gang, easily identifiable by their familiar padded green body suits. The two groups were clearly in league with each other.

Hmm... thick as thieves, Creed said to himself. Looks like the old man really was onto something. He scanned the cave for further evidence of his suspicions. The place was a Guilder's dream. It was full of the most incredible archeotech Creed had ever seen. Bizarre clusters of machinery, dust-covered control panels and chrome-plated artefacts were in the process of being packed into crates... crates like those in

Beckerman's warehouse. Creed nodded to himself. This is bigger than I thought! It all added up. Creed cursed himself for not piecing the clues together earlier. There was an absolute fortune here. The credits raised from the sale of this stuff could buy the whole of ?War Sump, with Mercury Falls thrown in as well, he thought.

A shout brought his attention back to the discussion taking place in the centre of the cavern. Something was going down: the Ratskins and the gangers were almost coming to blows. Every now and again, the breeze from unseen vents carried wisps of conversation to the Bounty Hunter's ears.

'Not enough Trader tokens, hair facer 'Not enough Wild Snake!'

'You agreed to the deal.'

'The spirits are disturbed"

'Crap - nothing but superstitious fear.' 'The totem beast walks!' 'Rubbish.'

'Our ancestors are watching!'

Creed narrowed his eyes: now things were really getting interesting. The gangers had their backs to him. If he could just get a little nearer he might be able to identify the individuals. Keeping low behind the piles of crates,

Creed slunk closer. He closed the distance between himself and the gangers without being seen, before ducking down again. Cautiously he peered around the edge of a crate.

Creed felt his coat tail sweep across the screwdriver just a moment too late to stop the object rolling off the top of a tool box and rattling onto the stony floor of the cave. He cursed silently. Gangers and Ratskins all turned in his direction. Creed knew he could not hide now

'Way too slow!' he drawled as he loosed a fusillade of shots from behind the crate, slamming several rounds into the assembled conspirators. One of the gangers flew backwards as a bullet shattered several ribs: another screamed as a dum-dum punctured a lung on its passage through his body.

Then Ratskins and Van Saars were returning fire. The chamber echoed with the crack of the tribesmen's muskets and the zinging scream of rounds fired from the gangers' superior weapons. Creed knew he was hopelessly outnumbered, but he was confident that he was by far the better marksman. Despite the dazzling array of targeting devices bolted to the Van Saar's autoguns and bolters, his shots were hitting home. Creed grinned. He liked a good shoot-out. For every ten shots that impacted against the crate behind which he sheltered, one coolly executed shot from him found its target in the form of a renegade Ratskin or a corrupt ganger. The hail of bullets from a bolt gun tore through the empty crate. 'Durability exceeded,' Creed muttered, and bolted for new cover. He ran, wooden boxes exploding in an eruption of splintering planks behind him. Diving forwards he just avoided a glowing plasma burst as it streaked over his head. The barrel it eventually struck, on the far side of the cavern, contained some volatile substance. Forty metres away, Creed felt the wash from the resulting ball of superheated crimson flame. The cave was lit up momentarily by the inferno. 'What the...?' In the shadows did he catch sight of something big on the move? Then the scorching blast found the Bounty Hunter, and even protected by his thick coat he felt its fierce warmth on his back. Creed wrinkled his nose at the rank smell of singed leather. Somebody screamed. As he lay face down on the ground, he discarded the spent cartridges from his guns and reloaded. Once these precious rounds had been used up there were only enough bullets left for one more reload. 'Looking tough, girls,' he whispered to the stubbers.

'Looks like you're all but done.' His encounter with the Zombies had cost him dear.

A bestial mechanised roar suddenly rose above the deafening sounds of the firelight.

As Creed looked around, the monstrous noise was joined by the agonised howl of what could only be a dying man. Creed risked a look over the ancient piece of machinery he was hiding behind. To his horror he saw a nightmarish shape. It was fully three and a half metres tall, silhouetted in the bone-white glare of the halogen lamps. The thing lifted a screaming Van Saar into the air by a great curved metal hook. The cruel blade had been thrust through the man's back and was now projecting from his stomach. The hideous monster tossed the dying ganger carelessly aside and ploughed forwards through the mass of men, crushing a petrified Ratskin under one of its great, clawed steel feet.

Now or never! Creed thought, and with his adversaries brutally distracted he made his move. Skirting the edge of the cavern he saw the terrible creature revealed in the glare of the lamps in all its startling glory. Once-human, muscle and bone portions of the creature had been spliced to a droid chassis, so that the creature stomped across the cavern through the carnage on pistoning legs of solid metal. Something about its shape was strangely familiar, but Creed wasn't about to stop for a closer look. The psychotic cyborg's visage was a grotesque parody of a human face. One bloodshot eye glared out from a head malformed by a serrated, metal jaw. Its bionic, red-glowing counterpart observed everything unblinkingly with electronic intensity. Atrophying tissue around the artificial implants had begun to peel away from the partially metal skull to reveal the corroded circuits of the endo-skeleton beneath. Creed saw that the beast-machine's naked torso was crossed with livid, purple scars. The huge, steroid-enhanced muscles of its left arm, coursing with telescoping steel cables, supported the weight of a crude three-fingered talon. The claw flexed spasmodically. The right arm was missing entirely. The massive metal contraption in place of the limb began at the shoulder, plasteel-shielded wire bundles connecting with the monster's spinal cord beneath the skin. From its design and the aged condition of its components, Creed was sure that this was no modern day cyborg escaped from higher up the Hive. How long had it been trapped down here, he wondered, its power cells on

standby? Maybe a hivequake had reactivated it. Its program must have been corrupted along with the slow deterioration of its body in the inhospitable conditions in the caves. Now it was loose once more.

The cyborg was proving more than a match for the surprised conspirators. It seemed to be almost totally impervious to their weapons. Cauterised holes in its gore-splattered flesh attested to the fact that both the gangers and Ratskins had hit the creature. However, its armour plating had halted the shells, and seemed to have stopped them from doing any severe damage.

The gangers and Ratskins fought on with increased vigour. This time it was they who felt out-gunned and out-numbered by the sheer might of the rampaging cyborg. Their agonised cries rang in Creed's ears as he ran from the cavern, leaving the carnage behind him.

The Bounty Hunter fled along a large, well-trodden tunnel. Halogen lights illuminated the passage and Creed noticed power cables running along its length towards the world above. Desperate, he followed the sloping path upward, his lungs heaving. At the mouth of the tunnel, Creed ran into the first and last piece of his puzzle. Wounded shoulder bound up in a temporary bandage, a bearded man was crouched over a small black box. Beckerman was trying to make the final connections between a pair of wires and a small detonator, his lacerated fingers scrabbling. The Van Saar looked up on hearing Creed's approach and a crazed, leering grin parted his lips. A pair of twisted wires ran along the access tunnel in conjunction with the power cables 'Not this time, Beckerman!' Creed roared, charging the last few paces. Ignoring the weapons at his belt, the Bounty Hunter lunged forwards, his fatigued muscles fuelled by the adrenaline rush of exasperated desperation. His hands slick with his own blood, Beckerman's fingers slipped on the detonator screws, unable to get a grip. Powering up the tunnel, Creed reached the entrance and flung himself bodily forward at the ganger before he could make the final twist of the detonation cord. As Beckerman fell, he grabbed Creed in two strong hands and twisted. Using his own weight and momentum, the Van Saar ganger flung the Bounty Hunter over his shoulder. Creed hit the ground hard, cracking his head on the rocky floor. He lay still, momentarily stunned by the shocking pain. As his vision began to clear, Creed looked up. Death looked back. Beckerman stood at his feet, a great chunk of

plascrete raised above his head. The ganger smiled coldly as he prepared to destroy the Bounty Hunter once and for all. Desperately Creed fumbled for his guns, trying to shake the concussion which all but overcame him.

The Bounty Hunter blinked suddenly as something splashed against his face. Putting a hand to his cheek he felt a warm wetness. His grimy fingertips came away red with blood. He became aware of a horrible gurgling noise and through the fog of pain he looked up at his would-be killer. Beckerman's feet were hardly touching the ground as his body hung in the air, convulsing, a great, metallic claw thrust through his chest. With a growl like iron scraping on iron, the cyborg took hold of the ganger's head with its vice-like claw. With one savage tug, the man-machine tore Beckerman's head from his shoulders. In seconds Creed was on his feet, all pain forgotten. He had only one chance. In a supreme effort of willpower he ran towards the monster. 'Chew on this, clawfinger!' he rasped, raising his guns. Both stub guns blasted the last of their precious cargo at the insane cyborg at point blank range. The sound in the confined tunnel was deafening. Under the constant bombardment the creature was forced back by the impact of the shells. With clumping steps it staggered into the mouth of the tunnel as it tried to keep its balance.

Then Creed could hear nothing but the sound he had been dreading: the click, click, click of empty barrels. Flinging his guns aside, the Bounty Hunter dove for the detonator where Beckerman had dropped it. The cyborg roared and stomped up the tunnel. With one final twist of a screw, the connection was made; with the flick of a switch, the detonator primed. Hurling himself to the ground, Creed thumbed the lit red button then scrambled backwards up the tunnel as fast as he could propel himself. With a distant rumbling boom, the last explosives set by Beckerman detonated. At the echoing sound, the advancing monstrosity turned, confused. The rumble became a roar as the charges set along the tunnel triggered one another in quick succession. A great cloud of dust and stone shards erupted from the tunnel mouth. Face down on the dusty ground, hands flung over his crumpled hat, the Bounty Hunter waited for the stony hurricane to devour him. Scant metres behind his prostrate form, a hundred tonnes of rubble crashed down on top of the cyborg and Beckerman's mangled corpse alike.

Rocks and rubble rattled about the prone Bounty Hunter, but the fatal crush of the avalanche on his back never came. As the rumbling din and shaking subsided and finally ceased, Creed thought that perhaps he could hear the whirr of grinding servos for a moment. Maybe it was just the buzzing from his tortured ear drums. Then there was silence.

Coughing, he staggered upright and looked around him. The Bounty Hunter was covered in a fine grey dust which choked his mouth and clogged his nostrils. He was standing at the tunnel mouth, where it led into another, smaller cave. Through the settling dust he could see a hefty iron door that had been left slightly ajar at the other end of the chamber. Daylight crept around the door frame, piercing the dust.

Cautiously entering the cave, Creed hauled on the rusted door, which opened with surprising ease. Stepping through, he found himself surveying the crated contents of Beckerman's warehouse.

Limping towards the door, Creed winced at the pain from what felt like a hundred bruises. Nevertheless he grinned, a white slash of teeth in his black grimed face. 'Puzzle solved,' he said to himself. 'Guess I'm about done.'

THERE'S A WHOLE warehouse full of the stuff Creed explained, pointing at the chrome sphere in the open crate at the old Chiefs feet.

'It shall be treasured and given due reverence,' the Ratskin said solemnly. He dropping the bag of oblong, ceramite chips into Creed's hand with a sigh. T knew there had to be a way.' Creed said nothing.

'I feel that perhaps I have betrayed my people,' Chief Thunderslag continued, looking around him. 'Many young braves have died. Such a pointless waste of life.' He shrugged sadly. 'But the spirits had to be appeased; our families had been killed. At least now the spirits are at rest once more.' The old Ratskin turned to face Creed.

'What do you think? Have I betrayed my tribe?'

I'm not much of a thinking man,' the Bounty Hunter replied.

'Does it not trouble you to accept what is no better than blood money?' Thunderslag asked him, a suggestion of anger in his voice.

Creed took the stub of a cheroot from between his lips and squinted again at the totem pole and the grotesque image carved upon it. He saw it

now a creature with one great claw and an ugly, fanged square face.

'A job's a job, old man,' he said, turning his gaze on the old Ratskin chief Creed's expressionless features were an inscrutable mask, giving no due as to his true feelings on the subject. 'See you round, old timer.' With that, Nathan Creed secreted the money in a deep recess of his long, trailing coat. Pushing his battered hat firmly down over his brow, he turned and strode off into the fading light of the dimming globes.

MAMA'S BOYS

WITH THE SPANG of metal on metal a bullet ricocheted off the girder next to the bounty hunter's head. Pushing his battered, wide-brimmed hat firmly onto his head, Nathan Creed sprinted for the shelter of a pile of crates, a large-muzzled stub gun in each hand. A trail of fire chased him across the warehouse wall as one hot shot charge after another blasted from the shotgun in the Savvy's hands. Still two metres from the safety of the fungus-wood crates Creed flung himself forward. He landed in a roll as a round exploded against the wall at the spot where a split-second before his head had been. The tails of his long, leather coat flapping about him, the bounty hunter came to a halt in a crouch, the cluster of skull and crossbones bounty seals, attesting to successfully collected bounties, glittering in the globe-light of the killer's warehouse hideout.

Where did the Ripperjack-loving scavver get hot shot ammunition from? Creed wondered. Probably his last unfortunate victim, after he'd skinned and eaten him!

From his hiding place, Creed peered through the gap between two containers. He could just make out the scavvy's pockmarked face peering over the top of an oil-drum at the back of his camp. In front of the oil-drum lay all that remained of the murdering cannibal's last victim. Creed had interrupted the scavvy serial killer as he was in the process of skinning the last hired gun who had come looking for him.

Now Creed was caught in a shoot-out with Django Kaynn, youngest of the Kaynn Clan Gang and vicious as a milliasaur on slaught, in the middle of the abandoned warehouse dome where the scavvy had made his lair. A network of rusted air-conditioning ducts and pipes were suspended from the warehouse ceiling by rusted chains. From a number of these Django Kaynn had displayed his curing trophies. In all the scavvy had killed, skinned and eaten sixteen men, women and children, and those were only

the ones the Guilders knew about. Crouched behind the crates, reloading his guns by touch alone without looking at what he was doing, Creed counted at least five skins more than there should have been.

Django Kaynn, you sure are one sick son-of-a-sumpsucker, Creed thought as he slammed home the last dum-dum round into the chamber.

'Well, girls,' the bounty hunter said quietly in his distinctive Underhive drawl, addressing the guns he held in his hands, 'we're not going to get him while he's holed-up tighter than a lashworm in a bore hole.'

The problem was that, while the scavvy cannibal was trying to kill the bounty hunter, and no doubt eat him, Creed needed Django Kaynn alive. He looked up at the tangle of pipework above him again. But there's always a way, he thought.

'Django Kaynn,' Creed called out, 'I'm taking you in!'

'Yeah?' came a high-pitched snarl of a voice from the other side of the building. 'Yous an' whose watchmen bounty-man?'

'Just me and my girls!' the bounty hunter replied, jumping to his feet and letting fire with both barrels at his target.

In a shower of sparks, the rusted chains holding up one end of an old pipe shattered. The heavy metal tube swung downwards and over the top of the oil-drum, smashing into the scavvy's head and sending him flying.

With calm, measured steps, Nathan Creed strode over to where the killer's prone body lay among the debris of the firefight, blood running from a jagged gash on his forehead. Django had let go of the stub gun when the pipe had hit him and it was now lost among the barrels and boxes. Having checked for any hidden weapons and cuffed the scavvy, only then did the bounty hunter check for a pulse. It was there, strong as his own.

Good, only knocked out, Creed noted. Holstering his stub guns and hauling the dead weight of the unconscious scavvy over his shoulder the bounty hunter left the warehouse lair.

* * *

DJANGO KAYNN OPENED his eyes. He blinked a few times, in an attempt to clear his blurred vision, and tried to sit up. He immediately

regretted the decision as grey stars flashed inside his aching head. He lay back again, moaning and screwed his eyes shut. It felt as if a pile driver had been pounded against his skull. Cautiously, and without opening his eyes, he felt for the egg-sized swelling he must have on his forehead. Sure enough, there it was. He moaned miserably again.

'You're awake then,' drawled a voice that was little more than a husky whisper.

Django tried to sit up again and this time succeeded, despite more black supernovae exploding within his brain. He was sitting in a cell, which was in fact part of a larger room divided in two by thick iron bars. On his side of the barrier were a plain pallet bed and a slop bucket. A small, square, grilled window shed fractured globe-light into the lock-up. Beyond the bars there was another bed, although this one had a thin mattress, a table and chair. The keys to the cell door hung from a hook on the wall, well out of reach.

Leaning against the jamb of the open doorway, one booted heel resting on the peeling frame, was a tall man, wearing a long leather coat and a battered hat. Striking a match against the doorframe, the man lit the cheroot in his mouth and took a long drag on the cigar. As the blue smoke escaped from his nostrils the man fixed Django with a steely gaze from under the shadowy brim of his hat.

'Wheres am I?' the degenerate cannibal demanded.

'Where's it look like?' the figure at the door answered bluntly. 'But if you mean which town - Sulphur Creek. You might have heard of it. You killed eight of its citizens including the entire Lanzo family, you murdering sewer snake!'

Slowly Django's memory re-engaged and he pieced together the events that had brought him here and the person responsible for his present predicament -the bounty hunter!

'You gonna be sorry you didn't kill me when yous had the chance, dead man!' the scavvy threatened. 'I gonna bite out yer spleen and feed it to ya!'

The bounty hunter grinned, gesturing at the iron bars and firmly locked cell door. 'I don't think so,' he said quietly.

'Whys did you take me in alive, gun-boy?' Django asked, genuine curiosity provoking his question.

The bounty hunter took a yellowing piece of parchment from inside his coat and, carefully unfolding it, read it out loud. ‘Django Kaynn, scavvy Outlaw. Wanted alive for murder and cannibalism. Bounty 50 credits.’ The man re-folded the poster and stowed it away in the folds of his long coat. ‘If you were dead, I wouldn’t get paid. It’s that simple.’

‘Well,’ spluttered the scavvy, trying to recover some of his earlier bravado, ‘you realise that when my brothers hear ‘bout this you is spider-food? They’ll come for you, bounty-man!’

Pushing the brim of his hat up with the barrel of a stub gun the bounty hunter replied coolly, ‘I’m counting on it.’

* * *

A METHANE GREEN MIST hung over the Sumpscum Acid Marshes, a smothering blanket of toxic gas and airborne pathogens. A hundred square kilometres of polluted waterways, festering fungus beds and briars of rampant wire weed, the industrial marshland wound among the ruinous domes of Hive Bottom eighty metres below Mercury Falls and ten kilometres below the gleaming spires of Imperial House Helmawr. In fact, the closest the nobility of the Spire ever got to this Emperor-forsaken place was in the snakeskin bracelets they wore, encrusted with crystalline spider eyes: both species flourished in the effluent-charged Acid Marshes.

Nathan Creed gazed out over the rooftops of the shanty houses, from the higher ground on which the lock-up stood, and through the gloom towards the ammonia-reeking swamps. Wreathed in choking, sulphurous fumes, with the small barely habitable settlement of Sulphur Creek at its easternmost point, the Sumpscum Acid Marshes were home to sludge jellies, milliasaurs and worse. Much worse.

Everyone from Toxic Sump to Cable Pass had heard of the Kaynn Clan Gang. More degenerate a ‘family’ of scavvies you couldn’t hope to meet this side of the Effluous River. Ruled over by the matriarchal, homicidal Mama Kaynn, the scavvy gang had their hideout deep in the Sumpscum. Only the Kaynn Clan was twisted enough to claim the marshes as their territory. In fact they were probably the only ones mutated enough to be able to survive in such a toxic environment in the first place.

So horrible and notorious were their crimes that the Kaynn Clan had become a nightmare fairytale parents used to naughty children to behave: ‘If you do that one more time, Mama Kaynn will come for you!’ Scavvies, mutants and scalies made up the Kaynn Clan and their loyalty to each other and Mama Kaynn was unswerving. All of them were killers. They killed for food, they killed for fun and they all loved their dear old ‘mum’. Creed didn’t want to even contemplate what Mama Kaynn must have got up to, out there in the swamps, to produce such a brood of degenerate mutants.

The citizens of Sulphur Creek knew the Kaynn Clan all too well. Eking out a living by extracting industrial strength acids and hydro-carbons from the marshes, which were then sold on Uphive, the citizens of the small settlement had come to an agreement with the Kaynn Clan long ago. If they kept out of the swamp and made their regular payment of flesh the scavvy gang would hopefully leave them alone in return and prey on some other poor unfortunates.

So what if from time to time a chem prospector went missing or a foolish child strayed into the effluent bogs, never to be seen again? If a man was lucky, he could make his fortune, in Sulphur Creek. From time to time the extraction process would reveal traces of a rich mineral deposit in the swamp. The precious minerals could then be filtered out and refined. The profit from such a lucky strike was enough to buy a man out of Sulphur Creek - sometimes out of the Underhive itself. Stories of those who had succeeded before were enough to keep the poor and desperate who remained behind risking everything, their lives especially, on the off chance that they might make their fortune. It was greed and the promise of easy money that kept people in this stinking chem pit, pure and simple. Besides, Sulphur Creek was untroubled by interfering and expensive watchmen or Underhive gangs vying for possession of the petroleum processing stills. And, as many an old timer was heard to say when there was yet another disappearance, ‘Worse things happen Uphive!’

But the Guilders didn’t see it that way. Mass murder and extortion weren’t good for trade, not unless they were implemented by the Merchant’s Guild itself, in which case they were viable tools to encourage greater demand and profitability.

Many had tried to bring Mama Kaynn's gang in before but they had all gone about it the wrong way. Nathan Creed smiled to himself, lit another cheroot and waited.

* * *

THE MUTANT SLIPPED along the oily waterways as if he had been born to it, which indeed he had. Viper-toads plopped into the black pools at his approach and fen snakes darted away from the ripples created in his wake. It could have only been natural instinct that told them to avoid the reptilian creature, in case they end up as a snack, but instinct was right. However, on this occasion Tuntan Kaynn was hunting other prey.

With only his limpid, ophidian eyes and the top of his grey scaly head visible above the surface of the water, the mutant glided along the maze of flooded channels, propelled by infrequent flicks of his salamander tail. Nitro beetles sung in the green gloom while rust mites skittered over the red-flecked stump of a corroded pipe protruding from a clump of purple-blue fronds. A chorus of croaks and strange chittering cries rose from the swamp as the creature passed.

Tuntan paused and blinked slowly. In the distance ahead through the reeds, he could see the lights of Sulphur Creek flickering like marsh-lights over the stagnant pools of the Sumpscum. The mutant hissed angrily. That was where the cursed bounty hunter held his 'brother' captive like a caged rat, or so the old trader had told them. He'd had no reason to doubt the man: what was the point in lying when half your intestines lay on the ground in front of you?

The glow-globes dotted across the roof of the dome had faded as Hive Primus entered its night-cycle. It made no difference to Tuntan: the Acid Marshes lay under a permanent pall of darkness that varied between an all-pervading gloom to a total absence of any light at all, other than the tiny glowing tail-tips of the phosphorflies.

The half-scaly crossbreed pulled itself out onto the bank of the rivulet and on webbed feet padded almost silently towards the shantytown. With the proportions of a man and the added bulk and rough hide of the Necromundan sub-species known as scaly, Tuntan Kaynn made an

imposing figure as he crept through the night, but there was no one to see him. The inhabitants of Sulphur Creek knew better than to leave the safety of their homes during the hours of darkness.

Nearing the houses he reached for the axe, strapped to his ridged back with ripperjack leather bands, with his right hand. A boneless tentacle writhed in place of a left arm. This in no way debilitated the mutant though. With the sinuous tentacle alone he could squeeze the life from a man.

Rounding a corner the mutant froze, his breathing almost imperceptible as he surveyed the scene at the end of the alleyway. The street rose towards the square on top of the rise in the middle of the settlement. At its edge stood the small white building of the town lock-up. The door stood open and through the gloom Tuntan could make out a long-coated figure sitting on a chair in the opening. The man wore a wide-brimmed hat that hid his face. The angle of the hat suggested to Tuntan that the man was asleep, his chin resting on his chest.

Cold blood boiled at the thought of his little brother, Django, languishing inside the lock-up for the last five days. But Tuntan didn't let his anger overwhelm his natural cunning. His swamp-dweller appearance belied a malign intelligence: Tuntan was no brainless plague zombie. Even if the bounty hunter was asleep at his post, and even if he could cover the ground between them as quietly as a shreel-shrew, he didn't want to risk giving the hired gun any warning of his approach. After all, he must have been good to bring in Django the cannibal in the first place.

Stealthily the mutant made his way between the buildings of the settlement until he could approach the bounty hunter's sentry post from behind. Pressed against the back wall of the jail he couldn't hear a sound coming from inside, either from his brother or his captor. Slipping around the side of the lock-up, in the same fluid motion Tuntan hurled the throwing axe through the open doorway. With a splintering crack the axe struck the back of the chair. In a moment of dreadful realisation the mutant clearly saw the long leather coat draped over the back of the chair, the folds of its tails positioned in front of the chair legs and the empty, knee-length boots behind. The hat, balanced on top, completed the illusion.

And in the gloom at the back of the jailhouse, in a sleeveless undershirt and tanned britches, his stubble almost as long as the close-cropped

greying hair on his head, crouched the bounty hunter. Standing stock-still in the open . and unarmed, with unblinking eyes Tuntan Kaynn looked into the barrels of two primed stub guns.

The tentacled mutant took the first two rounds in the chest and staggered back at their impact. A normal man would have been killed outright by such a shot but Tuntan's scaly heritage served him well. However, the bounty hunter had started with two fully loaded weapons and didn't intend to stop there. The third bullet hit him in the shoulder, spinning him round, as a fourth blasted a hole in his side.

The bounty hunter rose from his crouched position and, kicking the chair aside, strode out of the lock-up, muscles tensed against the explosive recoil of the handguns, as he fired round after round into the scavvy ganger.

Tuntan collapsed against the onslaught. Sprawled in the dust, the ground turning green with his blood, the mutant fixed the square-jawed bounty hunter with his yellow, snake-like eyes. His mouth opened and a forked tongue flicked between the thin, grey lips. He tried to speak. He wanted to tell his killer that he too was a dead man, that it was only a matter of time before the rest of the Kaynn Clan caught up with him, but all that came with his final breath was a dying hiss.

The creature's saucer eyes glazed over and his sluggish, cold blood came to a standstill in his veins. Tuntan Kaynn was dead.

* * *

NATHAN CREED MARCHED back in to the jailhouse and grinned at the gagged and bound form of Django Kaynn, cowering in the corner of his cell.

'It's amazing how long you can stay awake for with regular doses of a little Spur,' he said.

Righting the chair the bounty hunter lifted his coat from it and put it on. Picking up his hat he gave it a quick dusting down before placing it firmly back on his head.

'It seems you were right,' he said, addressing Django again. 'The invitation has been sent out, we know they're coming, so now the party

can really begin. Eh, girls?' he added with a nod to the smoking stubbers holstered at his waist.

* * *

THE FUNGUS-WOOD raft came to rest against an outcrop of firmer ground at the easternmost edge of the swamp and the motley party disembarked. Swathed in mouldering rags, caked with filth and carrying primitive weapons, it was immediately apparent to an observer that these were scavvies. The devolved dregs of humanity that had become so mutated by the toxic environments they lived in, far from the settlements of the rest of the populace of Necromunda's Underhive, that the term 'human' no longer applied to them.

There were four of them altogether. A large brute of a man, for want of a better description, led the way towards the cluster of buildings huddled together where the ground rose steeply domewards. A collection of rotting, rickety jetties formed a wharf around the sulphurous yellow channel that gave the settlement its name.

The large man stopped and the mangy dog at his heels growled from one of its throats, the other head sniffing the air. Such genetic aberrations were not uncommon in the really badly contaminated domes this close to Hive Bottom. Behind the scavvy the others came to a halt: a stalking figure shrouded in a flea-ridden rat's skin; a short creature whose rags covered him completely, apart from his withered, boil-covered hands; a wild-haired, semi-naked man with a cord threaded with finger bones rattling around his neck.

A large, rainbow-winged phosphorfly hummed over their heads. The short, robed scavvy watched the insect with glowing coal eyes from inside its cowl for a moment. A long, sticky tongue suddenly darted out of the hood, snaring the phosphorfly on its tip before being retracted inside the cowl. A wet crunching sound followed.

'Don't spoil yer appetite, Buboe,' the leader of the party said, his speech slurred by the twisted lips of his malformed mouth. 'Mama's gonna be cooking up a feast tonight.'

'When's Gator gonna get 'ere?' asked the Ratskin.

‘Big brother’s on ‘is way,’ the large brute answered. ‘Don’t you worry.’

‘But he’s gonna miss all the fun,’ said the wild-haired scavvy, hopping from one foot to the other.

‘Why’s that then?’ asked Buboe, picking a piece of phosphorfly wing from between its teeth.

“Cos we’re gonna get that sumpsucker first and make broth from his brains. Oh yes we are!’

‘Okay, split up,’ their leader commanded. ‘First one ta get ‘im gets first pick of the juicy bits.’

The scavvy band broke up but all eventually heading for the settlement from different directions. The two-headed mutant hound remained where it was, scratching in the dirt for some buried morsel that only it could smell. Its master turned back and snorted barked angrily in annoyance: ‘Ripper! Heel!’

CREEPING SPIDER MADE his way silently along the back street, a blunderbuss clutched in his hands. He could move with the stealth of his hive-born arachnid namesake. He knew how to walk through a giant spider’s web without triggering the vibration sensitive trigger thread. There wasn’t a better scout or tracker this side of Fester Hole. ‘Half-ratskin but all stealth,’ was how he liked to describe himself.

Creeping Spider froze, feeling the hard muzzle pressed against the small of his back.

‘You looking for me?’ came a slow drawl, little more than a whisper.

Sweat beaded on Creeping Spider’s forehead and trickled into his eyes. He blinked several times to clear the salty moisture from his vision. The ratskin was starting to panic.

‘Y-you wouldn’t shoot a man in the back, w-would you?’ he asked, and held his breath as he waited for a response.

‘Nope, that I wouldn’t,’ came the reply.

Creeping Spider let out the air in his lungs in a huge sigh of relief. If the game were up he’d rather spend the rest of his time in a Guilder jail than dying in the street filled with enough lead to drop a Scaly.

‘So turn around.’

‘Wha-?’ Creeping Spider felt a strong hand on his shoulder yank him backwards as a boot planted firmly on his backside pushed him forward. His body spun round.

He stumbled backwards, trying to keep his balance. Before he could bring his blunderbuss to bear Creeping Spider was dropped by a single gunshot to the forehead.

* * *

BUBOE KAYNN HALTED. The shot had come from somewhere over to his right. Cautiously he changed direction, making his way between the derelict warehouses around the wharf towards the centre of Sulphur Creek. The diesel stink of the swamp was strong here. An ammonia fog was rising from the Sumpscum Acid Marshes, the result of a chemical reaction that regularly occurred after a day’s fuel-extraction carried out by the townsfolk. Tendrils of toxic green mist snaked around the stilts of the wharf buildings and oozed along the streets. The chemical stench would mask his own somewhat pungent odour as he closed in on the bounty hunter.

Sulphur Creek was like a ghost town. The locals were all too well aware of the current situation and the whole heap of trouble the stranger had brought on himself. They knew the swamp-folk better than any outlands bounty hunter. They knew not to upset the Kaynn Clan and if the Kaynn Clan was on the warpath, they knew not to get in the way. At the first sign of trouble the entire populace had retreated to their hovels. The out-of-town bounty hunter and self-styled watchman could fight his own battles and in the ensuing fight they knew who their money was on. The town butcher, who doubled as the town undertaker, had already taken Creed’s measurements.

Hearing a crunch behind him Buboe Kaynn spun round in time to catch sight of a shadowy form disappear among the gantries and chemical reclamation tanks on the raised piers of the wharf. Reaching into a bag at his waist the diseased scavvy pulled out a small, taped up flask and tested its weight in his hand. He had collected the industrial waste for his latest batch of tox bombs from the outlet pipe of an old reactor whose core had

melted down years ago. The virulent poison had made even his weeping sores itch but the first test he had carried out on a giant hive rat had produced results better than he could have hoped for.

And then he saw his prey, or at least his shadow. Although the bounty hunter was hidden around the corner of a still shed, a glow globe somewhere behind him cast his tall, unmistakable shadow on the wall opposite. If Buboe fired his scatter gun now the shrapnel blast would be wasted so the tox bomb it was. He had a preference for their very unpleasant form of death-dealing anyway.

With a practised arm Buboe hurled the flask at the jetty.

The crude grenade bounced off the wall opposite him and smashed a few feet from where Creed was standing, splashing the planks of the pier with glowing radioactive gunk. The corrosive slime quickly ate its way through the wood, a thick cloud of noxious gas rising from the decking.

* * *

TOX BOMB! Creed thought and with lightning reactions pulled the compact respirator from a coat pocket, placing it over his mouth and nose. Flicking his photo-visor down from inside the brim of his hat he peered through the toxic smoke.

Thanks to the enhanced optics of the visor he was able to see the scavvy through the gas-cloud. He was shouldering a crude weapon made up of a number of short, tubular barrels bound to a ceramite stock. It was the scavvies' way to construct their firearms from whatever they could scavenge in the badzones, that and steal them from their victims.

What had originally been intended to hinder him Creed was now able to turn to his advantage. Under cover of the thick smoke he dropped off the pier and ducked under the jetty.

Now we'll see how you like it, Creed said to himself.

* * *

THE SCAVVY WAS in position by the time the deadly pollutant cloud began to dissipate, his scatter gun trained on the spot where the bounty

hunter should now be doubled up in a coughing fit, choked by the poisonous fumes of his tox bomb. But there was nobody there.

The report of a stubber rang out around the wharf. Buboe also heard the crack of shattering pottery. A split second later he felt the hot acid pain of his hip being eaten away. In stupefied silence he looked down at the bag hanging from his waist. Gas was already pouring from the bullet hole in the sacking and through the ragged hole where the corrosive contents of the shattered tox bombs had burnt it away. Where his right hip had been, a smoking hole in his ragged robes revealed a gaping wound that continued to expand as the concentrated toxic waste dissolved everything it came into contact with.

As the gas-cloud swallowed him the skin of his withered hands began to melt, yellow-white pustules bursting, open sores bubbling. The acrid smell of the acidic slime eating into his own body filled his nostrils. Then he found his voice.

Screaming, the flesh sloughing from his face and hands, the scavvy turned to see the bounty hunter standing in the shadows beneath the raised walkway, the smouldering tip of cheroot glowing in the dark. Enveloped in a yellow-green cloud, the last thing Buboe Kaynn saw before his bones dissolved was the white flash of a grin on the grimy, stubbled face of Nathan Creed.

* * *

THE BOUNTY HUNTER stepped into the side street, flicking the tails of his leather coat back over his holstered guns, his hands hovering over the butts, fingers itching to pull the triggers.

‘Dead end, swamp boy,’ Creed called out to the hunched brutish figure at the end of the closed off alleyway. And I mean dead!’

‘That you bounty-man?’ the figure sneered.

‘Well it’s not your mama, scuzzhead,’ Creed retorted. ‘Looks you’ve got the advantage. Now you must be-‘

‘Ezra Kaynn,’ the scavvy replied, his malformed mouth slurring the words.

A low, menacing growl came from behind Creed, close to the ground, and the bounty hunter felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Quick as a bolt of energy from a ruptured plasma feed, Creed went for his guns.

An' that's Ripper.'

Creed rotated on the spot, pulling both stubbers from his gun-belt, as the dog jumped. At the same moment the scavvy turned, with one sharp jerk of his arm lashing the cruelly spiked tip his barbed whip towards the bounty hunter. In turning his attention to the apparently more immediate threat Creed had opened himself up to attack from the whip-wielding scavvy!

The over-large jaws of one of the mutant hound's heads latched onto the gunman's raised stubber as the end of the whip knotted itself around his other wrist, cruel barbs digging into his skin. The dog's second head snapped at Creed, tearing open the sleeve of his coat and grazing the flesh beneath. The brutish scavvy gave the whip a tug and the spiked cord tightened around Creed's wrist, ripping open blood vessels and making him drop the gun he held in his left hand.

All this took only seconds and in the time it takes to draw breath, the bounty hunter recovered himself. Pushing the muzzle of his stub gun even further down the dog's throat he fired off a round. The animal's head exploded in a red spray of canine blood, brains and bone, just as the second head latched onto his arm with its fangs, its reeking breath making him gag momentarily. Its teeth sank into his arm, grating against the bone, making his fingers spring open and he dropped the stubber in his right hand. Wincing against the pain, Creed swung his arm round, smashing the dog's remaining head against the alley wall. The already dying creature released its grip and fell to the ground.

'Ripper!' the scavvy cried out in anguish.

Grabbing the whip with both hands, the needle points cutting through his glove, the bounty hunter gave the cord a sharp tug. Creed's wiry frame belied his brute strength. Ezra Kaynn found himself stumbling forward and the whip slipped from his grasp. Not bothering to free his wrist of the wound cord, the bounty hunter covered the ground between him and the scavvy while his opponent was still trying to recover his footing. Before the scavvy could defend himself Creed was behind him. Holding the other

end of the lash in his right hand he looped the barbed and knotted cord around Ezra Kaynn's head and pulled it tight.

The scavvy gave a strangled gasp as the barbs dug into his neck and the whip constricted his windpipe. Ezra's eyes bulged and his face turned purple, desperate fingers scrabbling at the constricting cord. With a gurgling groan the brutish degenerate gave up the fight. Creed felt the scavvy become a dead weight within the noose of the improvised garrotte and let the body fall face down in the dirt. Before recovering his guns, the bounty hunter set about removing the whip from his torn wrist.

A whooping yell, shrill as the scream of a face-eater, almost made him jump out of his skin and caused him to look round. Out of the corner of his eye he had the impression of the brickwork coming alive behind him as something detached itself from the wall of the alleyway.

But there was no one else here! Creed thought in a moment of shocked surprise.

Hands grabbed him around the neck as someone leapt onto his back. Hard heels kicked him viciously and repeatedly in the kidneys as bony fingers squeezed his windpipe closed. Now it was Creed's turn to gasp for air.

Creed threw himself backwards, trying to crush whoever was on his back against the wall behind him. He heard a gasp, as if his assailant had been winded, but this was then followed by a cackling laugh. The feet kicked again and the fingers dug even deeper into his throat. As grey shapes began to swim in front of his eyes Creed grabbed the thin arms of the scavvy on his back. Before he blacked out he bent double, at the same time pulling on the man's arms, using the momentum to help him throw his assailant over his head.

A small, wiry creature, naked except for a spider-hide loincloth and a necklace of finger bones, and with a shock of spiked hair landed in the dust on the ground in front of him. It seemed to Creed that the man's skin was mottled the same colour as the wall. Putting the thought from his mind he pulled his boot knife from its scabbard next to his leg and plunged it into the little man's chest. The chameleonic scavvy let out a baleful wail and reached for the blade sticking out of its sternum. With one twist of the knife Creed silenced the man's cries.

At once the mottling on the scavvy's skin began to fade, returning to a more 'natural' colour. Creed had heard rumours of wyrds having such powers, their psychic powers allowing them to camouflage themselves against any background they might choose. Whether it worked by the ward's skin actually changing colour and texture or whether the psyker simply clouded the minds of those around him to hide his presence, fooling their brains into thinking there was nothing there, mattered not. Loko 'Raving Insane' Kaynn was now dead too.

Five down, two to go, Creed thought to himself.

* * *

ROCKING ON THE back legs of the chair, with his booted feet resting on the table in front of him, Creed picked up the last piece of gun mechanism from the oil cloth spread out on the table top and eased it back into place. Holding the gleaming stub gun in one hand, marvelling at its blue-grey shine, with the other he spun the bullet chamber. 'Looking good,' he drawled.

'You done for now, bounty-man!' Django Kaynn shouted at him. He had chewed through his gag and Creed saw no point in replacing it now. Chances were the starving cannibal would want to bite off a few of his fingers if he even tried. He was still cuffed after all.

'That so?' the bounty hunter said, taking a drag on the stub of his cheroot.

'Big brother'll come for yous. Then yousa gonna be sorry! Gator's meaner that a sackful of starvin'ripperjacks.'

Creed laid the gun carefully on the table and flexed his right hand. Under the tear in his coat sleeve a bloodstained bandage was wound tightly round the dog bite. Gonna have to get myself a jab from old Doc Haze for that, he thought, making a mental note. He still owes me for that Fester Hole job.

'An' 'e never goes anywhere without 'is Scaly-friend Nuwt. Nuwt don't say much but 'e could crush every bone in yer body, an' 'e will!'

'I'm ready for them,' the bounty hunter said, adjusting the tourniquet wrapped around his left wrist, and nodded back over his shoulder.

In front of the lock-up a barricade of oil-drums, an overturned cart and other detritus formed a stockade almost right around the jailhouse. Unslinging an ammo belt Creed began to load his cleaned and oiled stub guns.

THE NITRATE GLOOM of dome-dusk had given way to the petroleum black of hive-night. In the distance, beyond the town, areas of the Sumpscum Marshes were illuminated by the uranium glow of the contaminant fields.

In a cascade of a dozen tiny incandescent explosions, a hail of bullets streaked out of the darkness and into the barricade. Crates splintered and pieces of debris were thrown into the air around the lock-up. A last shell impacted against the wall next to the open door in a cloud of plaster dust.

Whoever he is he's well-armed, Creed noted without any pleasure.

'Theys here! Theys here!' the imprisoned scavvy yelled excitedly.

'Bounty-man? I got yer attention?' the guttural shout came out of the night.

Cautiously Creed peered over the parapet of his barricade. In the intermittent flicker of a sparking electric lamp on the opposite side of the square he could make out two figures half in cover behind a jumble of plastic cargo crates. One was tall and, his outline suggested, heavily-muscled. The other was a giant outhouse of a shadow, almost as broad across its shoulders as its hunched form was tall. It was the first who had spoken.

'My name's Gator Kaynn and this here's my associate,' the tall figure gestured to the mass next to him. 'Say hello, Nuwt.' The mutant let out a deep, rumbling growl.

Stub guns roaring, Creed bombarded the two scavvy gangers with his own bullet-storm. Gator Kaynn returned fire. In the near-darkness Creed saw the scaly heft something into the air. He ducked a split second before the heavy, serrated metal disc hummed over his head and cut through the doorframe behind him. Both barrels blazing, the bounty hunter resumed the firefight.

Over the recoil roar of the two sides' guns Creed could hear Django screaming support for his 'brothers'. Gunshots threw up dust from the

rocky ground and pieces of both barricades disintegrated in the crossfire. It didn't take long before both of them had emptied every chamber. A hush fell over the town square as the scavvy and the bounty hunter hurriedly reloaded.

'You still there, bounty-man, or have you run back to your scummer hovel?' Gator shouted, trying to goad his quarry into unthinking action.

'I'm still here,' the bounty hunter railed, 'but I'm surprised you are, swamp boy. You realise this is the end of the Kaynn Clan? And the name's Creed.'

'Big words from a big mouth, scuzzhead!' the scavvy shouted back. 'You got the guts to back 'em up?'

The longer Creed kept the idiot scavvy talking the more time he had to reload both stubbers. The chambers of one fully replenished, he slipped the first bullet of a dozen into the second empty weapon. 'Your stinking sewer-filth bloodline stops here! I took down all your maniac brothers. What makes you think I can't bring you down too?'

'Him,' Gator said as Creed heard the reptile growl and the grating of scales on stone behind him.

The bounty hunter turned as the great, white sumpgator lashed its thick tail at him. It hit his right arm with a sickening crack and Creed felt lances of white hot agony shoot through his arm. The shock caused his legs to give way beneath him. Gritting his teeth against the excruciating pain Creed clutched at his broken limb, precious ammunition tumbling to the ground, while the loaded stubber fell from his hand.

'Helmawr's rump!' Creed cursed. The freaking lizard must've slipped in round the back! The cacophony of the shoot out had drowned out any sound made by the sumpgator as it had breached the barricade and waddled up to Creed from behind.

'Attaboy, croc!' Django shouted, his face pressed against the window grille. 'Rip 'is arms off!'

The albino reptile fixed the bounty hunter with a cold, yellow stare. Its crocodile jaws slowly opened and the monster growled again. Dragging its three-metre long bulk forward on splayed stumpy legs the sumpgator prepared to finish what it had already started.

With one gun practically empty and the other, for the moment, unreachable Creed had to think fast. He wasn't sure a dum-dum round

could penetrate the adamantium hard skull of a sumpgator, even at this close range. His predicament helping him suppress the screaming pain of his broken arm, Creed fumbled inside his coat with his left hand. After a frantic search he pulled out a fist-sized metal object. Flicking the pin from the grenade Creed armed the firing mechanism. Waiting until he could feel its moist foetid breath on his face, Creed tossed the grenade into the creature's mouth. The sumpgator gulped and swallowed the frag grenade.

Its scavvy master bounded over the unmanned barricade in time to see the sumpgator's stomach erupt in an explosive blast of blood and gristle, that tore the monster apart. Gator Kaynn landed almost on top of the bounty hunter, hatred burning in his maddened stare. Slamming the open breach of the stub gun still gripped in his left hand shut against his knee, Creed brought the trusted firearm, with its single, precious round to bear against the scavvy's head, and fired. The report of the weapon was deadened by the mass of grey tissue that now burst from the shattered skull. Gator Kaynn's corpse joined that of his pet on the ground before the disbelieving Django's horrified gaze.

Still one scavver standing, Creed thought as he staggered to his feet, his right arm hanging uselessly at his side.

The barricade exploded in a maelstrom of splintering wood and flying oil-drums as the massive bulk of the scaly burst through it. Creed turned the stub gun on the hulking mutant. Automatically, without thinking, he pulled the trigger. Its single cartridge spent, the only sound that came from the gun was the hollow click of an empty chamber. No more bullets and no time to reload.

Bellowing, the scaly charged. Pounding towards the bounty hunter at speed, the outcome seemed inevitable. But at the last possible moment Creed dodged. Twisting out of his path, Creed struck out with a leg, tripping the reptilian mutant as it hurtled past. Unable to halt the momentum of its stumbling charge, the scaly smashed into the lock-up, crashing through the wall in an avalanche of bricks and steel.

It was too much for the crumbling structure of the building, mortar and bolts corroded by years of exposure to the chemical mists that rolled in off the polluted marshlands. With a crash of collapsing masonry and the groan of buckling girders the jailhouse collapsed on top of the scaly. With a dull

crunch, a steel roof beam came down on the scaly's skull. Nuwt remained motionless among the rubble of the demolished lock-up.

Nathan Creed surveyed the devastation around him, the ruins of the barricade, the bodies of his foes, the pile of rubble that had been the settlement's lock-up. Wiping reptilian digestive juices and gristle from his face he was suddenly reminded of the agony of his broken arm.

Now, where are you, old girl? he wondered as he began overturning and upending pieces of debris in search of his missing, and loaded, stub gun.

In a shower of plaster dust the ugly head of Django Kaynn emerged from the rubble ruin of the lock-up. Somehow he had survived the destruction of the building where the scaly had not. His hands still secured behind his back he staggered out from among the wreckage and started to run.

Jailbreak! thought Creed. After everything that's happened. The murdering slimeball's determined, I'll give him that, hut this ends now!

He needed a gun and his were useless: one empty, the other buried beneath the wreckage. The dead Gator still clutched a looted autopistol in one hand. Prising it free of the scavvy's stiffened grip, Creed raised the weapon with his good hand. Gator had been kind enough to fit it with a fresh clip before he died. Sighting along the barrel he took aim at the fleeing prisoner. Two shots rung out across the town square. With a yelping cry Django dropped to the ground in the dust and dirt, both knees shot out.

The bounty hunter walked up to the whimpering, crippled scavvy. Hearing the tread of his footsteps Django opened watery eyes to see what Creed was going to do to him next. 'I thought you wanted me alive,' he sobbed.

Creed pulled the scavvy's head up sharply by his hair and held a grubby piece of parchment in front of his face. On it were crude pen and ink sketches of the members of the Kaynn Clan Gang. It was obvious that the artist's impressions had been drawn by someone who had been told what the mutant mob looked like but who had never seen them in the flesh. Gothic script accompanied the pictures but this meant nothing to the illiterate cannibal.

'Can you see what that says,' the bounty hunter asked in his husky drawl, 'or shall I read it for you? "The Kaynn Clan Gang, wanted dead!"'

Slowly it began to dawn on Django what Creed's plan had been all along. He swallowed hard as his own fate became clear.

'Who'd be mad enough to want a murdering bunch of cannibals brought in alive?' Creed said, the butt of a cheroot still clenched between his teeth.

'Then why dincha come inta the Sumpscum after us, ya yellow-bellied bastard?'

'What, enter that sludge jelly-infested death-trap when I could get the whole, brainless family to come to me?' The bounty hunter's face was an inscrutable mask as he pressed the muzzle of the autopistol against the scavvy's head.

'You're dead, bounty-man! Mama's gonna be mighty mad when she hears 'bout this. And she will. She'll hunt you down like a scavvy hound! She will! She'll come for you!' Django spat, pain and fear becoming defiant fury.

Wincing, Creed withdrew a second bounty poster from the depths of his coat and shook it open in front of the scavvy's face. Django Kaynn stared at it, eyes wide open in shocked surprise. The image of a hideous, hairy, toothless crone scowled back at him.

The bounty hunter smiled coldly: 'I'm counting on it.'

BOYZ IN THE HIVE

IT WAS COLD and desolate out here in the millennia old post-industrial wasteland, beyond the furthest human settlement. Concrete and steel ruins of buildings stood all around but not a single one was wholly intact. The ground here was of a cracked and grey soil, almost nutrient-free and deposited hundreds of centuries ago by ancient industrial processes now only half-understood by the factory workers and their tech-adept overseers. The distant thrum of the factories drifted down from above, just audible over the fan-winds that swept through this part of the Underhive, bringing with them the acrid stink of petrochemical pollution. All that lived out here were ripperjacks, the ever-pernicious wireweed and the occasional sump-spawned monstrosity. But then that was why they called such places the Badzones.

A man stood at the foot of a slag heap looking at the broken and discarded cargo container resting at an angle on the summit. Half of the dome of the man's head was made up of a shiny metal plate, connected to the skin covering the rest of his skull by tarnished rivets. Below the level of the half-balding, half-metallic pate long, straggly white hair hung down to the man's shoulders. He was dressed in something that might once have resembled a long, white lab coat, although now the garment was covered with the greasy smears of machine oil and the rust-brown stains of dried blood. The coat was buttoned tightly to the neck to help keep out the chill, biting wind. He was a scientist, a surgeon and, like all who lived as long as he had in the urban dereliction of the Underhive, a survivor.

It was hard to tell how old he was but judging by facial appearance alone he had the semblance of a man in his forties. Bionic implants had a habit of preserving the organic parts of a body, granting the owner some measure of longevity, as long as they didn't die of unnatural causes first. But in the lawless Badzones of the Underhive, death by gunshot wounds or

an early demise at the hands of a cannibal scavvy gang seemed almost more natural than heart failure and old age.

A gust of wind blew the scientist's lank hair into his face. It was at moments like these that the man felt reassured. It reminded him that whatever else seemed to happen in the shadows of the Underhive ancient systems continued to perform their regular cycles, recycling channelling air and water - the most basic essentials for life - around Hive Primus. It was these same cycles which added credence to the scientist's belief that Hive Primus was in fact a living thing and the people and other degenerate species that dwelt within it merely parasites.

Working glowglobes were few and far between in the derelict dome and those that blazed overhead cast long shadows over some stretches of the wasteland while leaving other areas in a permanent twilight. The scientist looked up towards the cracked dome roof fifty metres above his head. The concave surface was covered in a riot of piping and cable bundles, and was riddled with holes. Some were mesh-covered vents, others were all that was left of lift shafts. All of them dark recesses within which all manner of things lurked, from rabid rats and vicious face-eaters to secrets not even the Inquisition knew about.

Struts of an elevator gantry still descended ten metres from a square hole, larger than the rest, directly above him. That was where the container must have been dropped from. Its crumpled base and the fractures running up its sides attested to that. But such cargo containers were built to last: they could survive a turbulent journey through the Warp in the bellies of space-faring freighters. The container must have originally been almost four metres tall. The once white plasteel casing had ruptured, exposing tubing and wires that spilled from the rent like the intestines of some cyborganic beast.

'Wait here, One-Eight-Seven,' the man addressed the servitor standing motionless next to him. The slave machine said nothing; its infra-sensor implant and human right eye both unblinking. As much metal as living flesh, it towered over the tall scientist. In place of a left arm it had a huge mechanical construct of wire bundles and hydraulic pistons that ended in a vice-like steel claw. Other cables were connected along the length of its spine, via vertebra connector ports, culminating at the base of its hairless

skull. A scratched and acid-scoured brass plaque hung around its neck, engraved with now barely legible runes.

Pulling a battered motion detector from a pocket in his lab coat, the scientist turned a knurled brass knob next to a small display panel and, after a second or two, a grid of fine green lines appeared on the screen. Holding the detector in front of him, the man scanned the slag heap. Nothing. Cautiously the scientist began to climb the slate grey hillock. Nearing the top, and the container, the man suddenly froze as the motion detector began to emit a rapid bleeping and a white dot of light winked on and off on the display screen. Something was moving in his direction.

With his eyes fixed on the cable-spilling rent, and his heart pounding, he began to back away slowly down the slope. As he watched, a creature - no longer than a man's arm - emerged from the broken cargo container on a myriad of legs. The scientist chuckled to himself as the hive-born vermin, looking like a cross between an elongated crab and a long-tailed chameleon, scuttled away over the top of the slag heap and down into the shadows on the other side. The sensor in his hand became silent again andquietened as the white dot faded.

Reaching the container, he peered cautiously inside. From his long years of experience the scientist could see quite clearly that the interior of the vessel had been modified to carry live cargo in a state of suspended animation. It was just as he had suspected; the saloon-bar rumours had been right for once. His source had done well and would be rewarded accordingly, the next time he needed patching up after a gang-squabble over disputed territory. There was only one problem: the cryo-suspension chamber was empty. As a result of the fall from Uphive and the container breaking open the cargo's cryo-sleep had been broken. The impact of the fall from Uphive had broken the container open. The creature was gone.

Turning around, the scientist descended the slag heap towards the still unmoving servitor. 'Well, One-Eight-Seven, it would appear that our guest has gone,' he said, addressing his cyborg slave once more. 'I think we're going to need some help with this one.'

* * *

CHAOS REIGNED at the fungus farm of White Spore Stoop. Figures ran through the gloom; women and children were screaming in fear and confusion as the men-folk armed themselves with whatever lay to hand. Picking up a trenching tool, Silas Pendrell sprinted back to the fungus fields, the beam of his cap-mounted lamp lurching violently in all directions, catching terrified faces momentarily in its halogen light. Hurdling a wooden fence, he dashed over the raised soil ridges, crushing the soft flesh of sump mushrooms underfoot as he ran, sending clouds of spores into the air around him. With his scarf in place over his mouth and nose to protect him Silas ignored the spore-bursts as he raced through the choking clouds panting heavily, his heart straining inside his chest. Then he saw it. The beast had appeared as if from nowhere. One minute the farmers had been tending to their crop of bulbous, thick-stemmed, white mushrooms, the next the monster emerged from the gloom, roaring its rage, and knocked Gil Yarrow flat with one swipe of its massive fist. Gil hadn't got up again. Before the others knew what was going on the beast had lifted Tem Slemor into the air yelling only to bring him down again and slammed him down across its knee. Tern's body, his back broken, crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

Silas looked at the hulking creature and knew what fear was. The beast held Gil's adolescent son, Porl, in one huge hand and the poor boy's right arm in the other. Porl was desperately scrabbling at the rough skin of the creature's arm. With a careless tug the arm came free at the shoulder as if it were nothing more than a rotten toadstool stalk. Porl's screaming was quickly silenced as the monster tossed the arm aside and used its now free hand to crush the boy's skull.

For a moment there was a pause in the fighting as the men recovered their breath and hardened their resolve. The beast stood unmoved, turning its head slowly to take in the cowering men around it. Veins bulged on its thick neck while it flexed its huge fingers, ready for the next challenge.

Silas looked up at the vicious creature. It seemed well over two metres tall. Humanoid in form, its body was a robust mass of muscle but its head spoke more of man's supposed primitive ancestry. Its forehead receded while its lower jaw jutted out beyond its upper lip, its mouth full of blunt yellow tusks. In all his years scraping a living as fungus farmer in Hive Bottom he had never heard of anything like this violent beast before. In

some ways it was almost like the reptilian scalies that made allegiances with the devolved scavvies but its skin, although rough, wasn't scaly, it didn't have a tail and it wore a pair of crude britches.

The farmer suddenly realised that the monster was looking directly at him. The thing bellowed. In response Silas gave a shout and hurled himself at the beast, the trenching tool raised above his head. Before he could bring it down on the creature, he felt his improvised weapon clasped in an inflexible grip. As the monster lifted Silas into the air by the blade of the trenching tool, the desperate farmer saw muscles bulge in its arm. With a roar, the beast hurled Silas bodily across the field. He hit a fence post, which splintered under the impact, and slumped stunned among the broken mushrooms. He watched as the beast pounded towards the cluster of farm buildings. He tried to pick himself up but his back screamed out in pain, forcing Silas to slump to the ground again.

A shot rang out. At last, someone had found a gun. From where he lay, Silas could see into the heart of the homestead. Old Obadiah stood at the centre of the compound his ancient blunderbuss in his shaking hands. In his heightened emotional state Silas suddenly found himself laughing - this would beat even one of the old man's far-fetched fireside tales. Before Obadiah could let off a second shot, the monster was on top of him. The old man pulled the trigger as the beast swept him aside with a backhanded swipe, the shrapnel peppering the side of the holestead's fuel tank. Clear liquid spurted from a number of holes, spraying the floor of the compound with fuel.

The beast bellowed again. Its guttural roar was answered by the growl of a combustion engine. The wooden door of a barn burst apart as the tractor smashed through it, driven by Silas's brother, Jed. Hydraulics whirring, the prongs on the fork-lift at the front of the tractor rose up, coming into line with the beast's broad barrel chest. Jed put his foot to the floor and drove the machine straight at the monster. Snarling, the creature grabbed the nearest weapon to hand, tearing a plank from the compound fence, and held it ready like a club.

When the tractor was mere metres from it, the beast leapt aside with surprising agility and in the same motion brought the plank around, breaking it across the back of Jed's head. Silas could only watch in horror as his brother slumped unconscious across the tractor's controls, turning

the vehicle so that it was heading at speed, directly at the ruptured fuel tank. There was nothing anyone could do as the tractor ploughed into it. Metal scraped against metal, sending sparks raining down on the spreading pool of petrol. The flammable liquid ignited, flames leaping up around the tractor. The fuel tank erupted in a ball of orange fire and greasy black smoke as the rest of its contents ignited. Seconds later the tractor's fuel tank exploded, blowing the vehicle - and Silas's brother - apart.

Engine housings and sheared axles crashed down around the monster, which was making a curious barking noise. It was only as the beast turned its tusked head in his direction once more, and he saw the upturned corners of its malformed mouth that Silas realised that the monster was laughing.

The flames were spreading, the farm buildings closest to the fuel tank were already on fire, bathing the compound in unaccustomed illumination. The beast stood silhouetted against the backdrop of the burning holestead, the flicker of firelight playing over its green skin.

* * *

WITH A HISS of compressed gas, the polished metal doors slid open and the bounty hunter entered the laboratory. Nathan Creed took in his new spacious surroundings at a glance: the operating table, the gleaming trolley of tools next to it, the chrome shelves packed with coolant containers and the polished metal floor. The lab could almost be described as pristine. Here, in the unhygienic Underhive, it was positively immaculate. A converted cargo transport container, the lab's uniform rectangularity was broken only by the shelving units that filled half its space, like a suggestion of a labyrinth. What was on show here represented a fair few Guilder tokens. A doorway at the end of the lab led to a smaller unit containing the occupant's living quarters. Creed's eye was drawn to the motionless steel and flesh statue standing in the far corner of the laboratory.

'Creed,' the scientist sitting at a dissection unit addressed the bounty hunter, 'come in.' The tall, thin man put down the electronic implement he had been using to probe the robotic arm pinioned on the worktop in front of him.

The scientist seemed out of place in the immaculate lab: his coat was filth-stained and his personal appearance obviously wasn't of the same importance to him as the state of his working environment.

'Doc.' The bounty hunter adjusted his hat so that's its wide brim shielded his eyes from the harsh fluorescent light. The same light reflected off the scientist's gleaming chromium head plate.

Doc Haze grimaced. 'Do you mind not smoking that in here?'

'Sure thing.' Creed took the cheroot out of his mouth and dropped it on the polished floor, crushing it firmly under his booted heel. 'I see you've got yourself a new friend,' the bounty-hunter said in his familiar downhive drawl.

Ah yes. One-Eight-Seven. Well after that incident at Fester Hole I missed that fool Veral, degenerate half-breed though he might have been.'

Doc Haze stood up and walked over to the cyborg. He tapped the slave machine's massive mechanical arm with a spanner, suddenly produced from a pocket, making the metal joints ring.

'Ex-Mechanicus. Picked him up at auction last month. Proving to be quite useful around the place, aren't you, One-Eight-Seven?' The servitor said nothing. 'So how's the arm?'

'Good,' Creed replied flexing and turning the muscles and sinews of his healed right arm, remembering how it had been broken during his encounter with Gator Kaynn's pet albino sumpgator. 'But enough small talk. What can I do for you?'

'I've got a job for you.'

'I'd kinda guessed as much.' Unconsciously Creed took another cheroot from a crumpled packet and took out a lighter. The scientist coughed and shook his head sternly. Suddenly remembering himself Creed put the smoke and lighter back in a deep pocket in his long leather coat. 'What sort of a job is it?'

'Manhunt. Well, more of an alien hunt really,' Doc Haze explained.

'What do you mean?'

'Here let me show you.' The doctor picked up a data-slate from his worktop and, having flicked a switch on its side, handed it to the bounty hunter. After a few moments an image appeared on the screen, its resolution becoming crisper as the hand-held data-slate's circuits warmed up. A pair of axes had been displayed on the viewing panel, the y-axis

calibrated in metres. Standing on the x-axis were two ugly humanoid creatures, or rather two different elevations of one ugly creature. According to the measurements on the grid, the creature was two and a half metres tall. Its head was angular with a narrow forehead and wider jaw, from which protruded long tusks, and sat on a short neck between broad shoulders. Pointed ears jutted out bat-like and it had beady little eyes. If the scale was correct, the creature's head was over half a metre long. The rest of the creature's body was made up of muscle and more muscle, covered with rough green skin. It made a Goliath heavy look practically anorexic.

Creed looked up from the image on the data-slate at the Doc, his expression forming the query. 'Hardly little green men, is it?'

'It's an ork,' Doc Haze said, by way of explanation. 'It's an alien life form, not native to Necromunda, but found throughout the galaxy. In fact, some scholars believe orks are more widespread than mankind. It is also believed that orks are a genetically engineered warrior race. Fighting's what they were bred for, fighting's what they love and fighting's what they do best! And there's one loose in the Underhive.'

'What's it doing here?'

'Rumour has it was headed for the Spire, would you believe? For Lord Helmawr's private zoo. Story is it was brought in from off world by the Guilder Antrobus Vetch but the Arbites got wind of it. Some even say that Helmawr was being investigated by the Inquisition. Anyway, our mighty planetary governor wanted it got rid of fast and Vetch had to dump it. Where better than down here in the Underhive, out in the Badzones? He probably thought he could come back and pick it up later when the heat was off.'

'But trouble is it got free and now you want me to catch it?'

'That's why you're here. From what I've read, they really are fascinating creatures. It's no wonder Helmawr wanted one for his menagerie. They have a very interesting reproductive cycle, you know. Their DNA is bonded at a molecular level with a fungus, giving them the ability to reproduce themselves asexually. When an ork dies it releases spores, which if they find the right conditions to grow in will eventually produce a womb-like cocoon under the ground in which a new ork will grow. Certain scientists have speculated that orks even shed these spores on a more

regular basis, just as humans shed skin cells constantly. The possibilities are quite incredible when you think about it.'

'Okay, enough with the xeno-biology. Just tell me how to find and how to kill it.'

'Oh, I don't want you to kill it,' Doc Haze said, taken aback. 'Whatever gave you that idea? I can't let a scientific opportunity like this pass me by.'

'Excuse me? Did I miss something, Doc?'

'I'm sorry, did I not say? Orks are renowned for their regenerative abilities. They can survive wounds that would prove fatal to a human. It's got something to do with their algal/fungal DNA base. It means that if an ork loses a limb it can be grafted back on after lying on a battlefield for hours with little risk of tissue damage. Even more amazingly, it allows for the crudest bionic implants to be grafted directly onto bodies without the danger of tissue rejection or necrosis around the implant connecting point.'

'Obviously any research I could carry out on a live specimen would improve my medical skills and surgical procedures no end. If I could introduce such orkoid powers into your average hiver or be able to replace missing limbs for a patient so that he could be up and fighting again in a matter of hours rather than days or weeks, think how it would revolutionise gang warfare! Gangs would be queuing up to pay those extra credits for my unique surgical skills.'

'Money,' Creed sighed. There was no hint of a judgmental comment in his words however; after all, he himself was a bounty hunter. Credits and trader tokens were what kept Hive Primus living and breathing and they gave a purpose to the lives of the pitiful millions trapped within its plascrete and ceramite walls, and never more so than in the Underhive.

'Let me get this straight, you want me to bring this thing in alive?'

'That's right. Now it's not going to be easy, I know, but that's why I'm hiring you. You'll take the job, of course.'

'You know me, Doc. If the money's right…'

'Four hundred credits if you bring it in alive.'

Creed took a moment to ponder the deal. 'Done,' he said at last.

'You'll need this,' the doctor said, opening a drawer and taking out a large handgun with a barrel that tapered to a thick, syringe-like needle at

the tip.

‘Looks like a needle pistol,’ the experienced Underhive gunslinger commented.

‘It’s a tranq gun. Got enough adroxinil to drop a synth-ox on ‘slaught. Twenty doses to be exact. But you’ll have to get up close to use it.’

The doctor handed the tranquilliser gun to Creed. The bounty hunter weighed it in his hand and turned it, inspecting every detail on the barrel and every mark on the stock.

‘By my calculations four or five doses should be enough to knock out an ork,’ the scientist went on, ‘and I don’t expect you to literally bring it in. These things can weigh up to two hundred kilograms each. When you’ve taken it down call me on this.’ Doc Haze tossed a battered vox-set communicator over to the bounty hunter who caught it deftly in one callused hand.

‘It shouldn’t be hard to find. Start out at Ripperjack Reach, you’ll find a discarded cargo container there, and then follow the trail of destruction. Like I said, orks love a fight. Any questions?’

‘Just one,’ Creed said, grinning like a ripperjack. ‘Where exactly did you get your qualification, Doc?’

‘Same place you got yours,’ the doctor said, sitting down again. This was the eccentric scientist’s way of saying that the conversation was over, the deal done.

Secreting the tranq gun inside the folds of his long, leather coat, Creed strode towards the door. He could already feel his pulse rate starting to rise: the hunt was on.

* * *

THE DOC HAD been right: it hadn’t been hard to track the ork. Deep-set alien footprints in the grey soil led Creed from the slag heap into the depths of the Badzones and along a trail of mindless destruction. But it was nothing compared to what he found when he reached the fungus farm.

Before he even reached White Spore Stoop the smell of the burning fungus fields was carried to his nostrils by the fan-breezes. Entering the dome through a wide access tunnel, he saw at once the still smouldering

barns and other farm buildings. The survivors had managed to douse most of the blaze but burning debris had been carried into the fields by the thermals and, by the looks of things, an explosion, setting fire to the crop still in the soil. This year's harvest was ruined.

Creed entered the compound. Women and children were doing their best to put out the last of the fires but it seemed that not a single building had been left untouched. Some women were weeping while others tended to their men folk and their injuries. The burnt out wreckage of a tractor protruded from the remains of a fuel storage tank. The bounty hunter could see a number of bodies lying to one side of the compound, barely covered by a bloodstained tarpaulin.

'What happened here?' Creed asked a man, sitting with his back to a fence, an arm in a sling and his head wrapped in a bandage.

The farmer looked up at Creed and seemed to take a moment to focus on him. 'It came out of nowhere,' the man muttered. 'Have you two come to help us?'

Probably suffering from concussion, Creed decided. 'What did this?' he asked.

'Don't rightly know,' a woman piped up. 'Big and green it was, but it wasn't a scaly.'

'Let me guess: it was about this tall,' Creed drawled, raising his hand to an arm's length above his head, 'and it had tusks.'

'That's right. How did you know?'

Creed didn't answer but looked out into the gloom beyond the smouldering compound, in the opposite direction from which he had come. Putting a cheroot between his lips he picked up half-burnt plank and lit the cigar with the glowing embers at its tip.

How could one creature create such carnage, he wondered?

'Was it armed?'

'No, it didn't need to be.'

There were six dead here and at least another ten injured, not to mention a farm that had been razed to the ground. Instinctively Creed put his hands on his holstered stub guns. 'What are we dealing with here, girls?' he whispered under his breath.

'Stranger, help us,' the woman suddenly burst out pleading, tears streaking her soot-grimed cheeks.

‘Sorry, ma’am, I’m just passing through,’ he said. ‘Which way did it go?’

The woman sank to her knees sobbing. Slowly she raised her arm, pointing north.

‘Much obliged,’ the bounty hunter said and went on his way.

* * *

THE STACCATO drumming of gunfire rattled around the ruined factory sheds, echoing off corroded walls of corrugated iron. The ork’s lips curled in what might have been a smile. It sniffed the air, picking up the scent of cordite, gunpowder and energised plasma. The alien creature grunted to itself and stepped through a hole in a wall that took it closer to the heart of the abandoned factory complex and the battle raging within. Having crossed a polluted watercourse and finding itself at the edge of another ruined dome, it had been attracted to the carcasses of the construction sheds by the sound of weapons being discharged and the shouts of frenzied gangers. At last it could look forward to a decent fight.

The incident with the ferryman had done nothing to relieve any of its aggression, although it had provided the ork with a harpoon gun, usually used to hunt giant raft spiders. It hefted the sturdily made weapon in its great, green hands, eager to try it out. It had already acquired two other weapons on its rampage through the human settlements. There was an axe from the farm tucked into the belt of its britches and a well-worn heavy stubber, wrested from the hands of large mohican-haired man, was slung over its back. The ork had also taken the man’s studded harness - it liked the crudely-fashioned iron skull that was central to its design - and wore one of his hands on a chain around its neck, the urge to collect trophies another consequence of its genetic pre-programming. The ammo belts for the huge gun were slung across its chest.

The ork advanced with surprising stealth between the derelict crane gantries and dead power turbines. Rounding a still-standing bulkhead it saw the two groups of humans engaged in the shootout. To one side a gang of men in blue tunics and black leather facemasks were holed up behind the columns and ranged over the high walkways close to the factory wall.

Their opponents, all of them wild-haired females, only partially arrayed in pieces of tiger-striped or leopard-spotted cloth, sheltered behind conveyor belts and lifting machinery that had ground to a halt long ago. Both sides were doing their best to blow their opponents to kingdom come with an assortment of guns.

What they were fighting over didn't matter to the ork. All that mattered was that they were fighting. Adrenal glands kicked in, flooding the alien's system with stimulant chemicals and filling it with the urge to join the battle. The strong muscle of its heart pounding, unable to contain itself anymore, the ork let out a bellowing roar of battlelust and charged into the fray.

The harpoon flew from the spider-hunting gun and found its mark in the stomach of a hooded man high on an overhanging platform. As the man toppled from the platform towards the factory floor below the ork threw the discharged harpoon gun at another man and swung the heavy stubber round, pulling on the trigger handle as it did so. Before the falling ganger even hit the ground, three of his companions were gunned down in a hail of bullets as the stubber roared into life. Swinging the flame-scorched muzzle of the heavy weapon round the ork took out several of the women, as round after round shredded the tracks of the conveyor belts.

There was a moment of confused calm as the two gangs realised that the great green monster wasn't working for their enemies and stopped firing on each other. Almost as one the men and women brought their guns to bear on the creature and began firing again but by now the ork was moving. As it stomped through the wreckage of the construction shed it found its mark again and again with the huge gun that it held as if it was nothing more than a las-pistol, spent cartridges showering down around its feet.

A thickset woman rose from her hiding place, in front of the creature, and hefted a bulky heavy bolter onto her shoulder. As the ork brought its own massive gun to bear another woman flew at it from out of the shadows and fired off a volley of darts from a crossbow-like device attached to her arm. The stubber roared again and the thickset woman fell forward. It her death-spasm she fired the heavy bolter sending a chugging stream of explosive shells into the ground in front of the ork. The alien was unconcerned, ignoring the darts sticking out of its bulging bicep: it

was already concentrating on its next target. In one fluid movement it pulled the axe from its belt and hurled it at the woman with the crossbow. She was thrown off her feet as the axe cleaved into her skull.

The women were running now, screaming to each other as they fled from the ruined factory. But not so the masked men. From their elevated positions on the wrought-iron walkways the gangers caught the creature it their sights and fired. Calling down damnation upon the alien blasphemy as they let fly with their weapons, it soon became clear that their faith was surer than their aim. A ball of super-heated, blazing green fire streaked past the creature's head. Then a stray bullet clipped the ork's side and the hulking brute replied with its own bellowing war cry: 'Waaaaaaggghhh!'

This time the stubber found a heavy-set man, wearing an iron faceplate, standing braced against an iron pillar and holding a large, but unfortunately for him a recharging, plasma weapon. Stub gunfire tore through his ribcage and into the energising chamber of the plasma gun. The weapon exploded like a miniature supernova, vaporising the faceplated man and melting through the metal column behind him. The ork raised one massive hand to protect its eyes from the searing blast and so only heard the walkways, strewn with masked gangers, come crashing to the floor of the factory as the main support pillar collapsed, having been melted through at its base. When the alien looked again all it could see amidst a cloud of dust and ash was a mass of twisted metal debris and mangled, skewered bodies.

One remaining ganger got unsteadily to his feet, looking around him in bewilderment as if he didn't know where he was. The ork took pleasure in unhurriedly fitting a new belt feed into the huge gun. It began to laugh, in its barking way, as it levelled the reloaded stubber.

* * *

AS THE LAST Cawdor fell, Creed realised that his moment had come. He had watched almost the whole battle from his vantage as he clambered around on the girders up near the factory roof. The ork had advanced right under his position as it had blown the ganger away. The bounty hunter wasn't going to get a better opportunity than this. Gripping the

tranquilliser gun firmly in his right hand, he left go of the rail he was holding with his left and dropped directly onto the ork.

Creed hit the alien's broad back and for a split second was stunned as the air was knocked out of him and also because the ork stayed exactly where it was. He had half expected the beast to be floored by the impact of him dropping onto it from a gantry six metres up. This thing's tougher than a scaly he thought.

Recovering himself, Creed flung his left arm around the ork's thick neck and held on tight as he rammed the tip of the tranq gun into a bulging vein. Four or five doses, the Doc said, he went over in his mind. Well better make it six, just to be sure. Pulling the trigger that operated the injection needle Creed pumped adroxinil into the monster. One, two, three -

A huge hand grabbed the bounty hunter's coat and, unable to do anything to prevent it, Creed felt himself being yanked from the ork's back. One moment he was delivering the tranq gun's payload of knockout narcotic and the next he was flying through the air, upside down, only to come crashing down on top of the body of a dead Escher. He knew instinctively that his moment was gone and that unless he got moving pretty fast he wasn't going to get another one!

Stubber rounds kicking up debris from the fallen walkways behind him Creed ran for cover. The three doses he had already given the ork didn't even seem to be slowing it down! As he ran, he pocketed the tranquilliser gun and unholstered his more familiar stub guns. They were an impressive pair of hand-cannons, his girls, and they had got him through a fair few scrapes. Ducking behind a sturdy bulkhead the bounty hunter counted to ten under his breath to calm himself and then came out guns blazing.

Nathan Creed was renowned from Toxic Sump to Fester Hole for being a crackshot with his two, point six-six calibre, solid-shot stub guns and plenty of once wanted men, dead or otherwise, had the gunshot wounds to prove it.

With his first two bullets he ripped open the ork's shoulder. The third blew a hole clean through its thigh while the fourth removed one of its fingers. The alien brute still hadn't had time to turn and face this new onslaught as Creed prepared to take a headshot. Then he remembered the conditions of the job; he didn't want to miss out on the bounty just because he'd bungled a perfectly simple contract.

‘The Doc wants you alive,’ he drawled as he adjusted his aim, ‘so I guess it’s your lucky day.’

The fifth shot ricocheted off the stubber’s chamber housing but the sixth found its mark at the point where the belt magazine entered the gun’s breach. There was the painful squeal of metal buckling and the stubber ceased firing. The weapon had jammed, its internal workings mangled as a result of Creed’s pinpoint bullet.

The ork grunted in surprise and, suddenly forgetting the bounty hunter, began thumping the stubber with a huge fist in the vain hope of unjamming the ruined weapon. Hearing the clatter of chains the enraged alien looked up in time to see the massive iron crane hook hurtling directly towards it.

The heavy hook slammed into the side of the ork’s head, tearing away half its face. The monster turned, leering at Creed. He could see its exposed cheekbone and molars, while the torn flap of flesh hung uselessly from its jaw. Then, slow as a toppling pylon, the ork crashed to the ground.

‘You sure are one ugly alien freak,’ Creed said, looking down at the stunned ork. ‘Lucky for you the Doc ordered plenty of beauty sleep.’ The bounty hunter knelt down next to the huge body and emptied the tranq gun’s entire contents into the alien’s bloodstream. The thing stank. ‘Sleep well,’ he said with a grin.

The ork grunted and half opened its eyes. Creed leapt back.

‘What the skav are you?’ he shouted at the beast, continuing to back away. ‘What the hell does it take to put you down?’

Drunkenly the ork got to its feet. It swayed unsteadily for a moment, adjusting its footing as if it was trying to get its balance on a sump raft, and seemed to be having trouble focusing. Then its gaze found Creed and an ominous growl rose from its throat. Raising the useless heavy stubber in its power glove-sized hands by the barrel, as if it were a club of some kind, the ork staggered towards Creed, ready to bludgeon the bounty hunter to death. It hadn’t gone more than five paces when its trunk-like legs gave way beneath it and it came crashing down again on the hard floor of the factory. As its chin struck an old gas pipe there was a loud crack and a discoloured, tusk-shaped lump of ivory rolled against the tip of Creed’s boot.

Taking the battered comm-link from inside his coat, Creed turned a knurled brass dial and spoke into the vox unit. ‘Doc? If you want your ork you’d better come and get it.’ The message delivered he flicked the communicator off again and dropped it into a pocket.

Looking down again at the prone body of the ork, Creed gave the beast one last vicious kick in the side of its head. ‘Sleep that one off, you big green bastard,’ he spat.

* * *

WITH WHEEZING, pistoning steps, the servitor marched back into the lab, servos protesting under the weight of the ork that it carried in its arms as if it was a baby. If it had been a strain for the slave machine to carry the two hundred kilogram mass of the alien over ten kilometres it didn’t show it. ‘One-Eight-Seven,’ the doctor said, ‘secure the patient.’

The servitor carried the comatose alien over to the solid stainless steel operating table at the back of the lab which, Creed noticed, had been modified by the addition of a number of thick kevlar straps. Whatever was tied down on that table wouldn’t be getting free in a hurry, even if it were able to move. One-Eight-Seven laid the ork down roughly on the gurney and began securing its legs.

‘Now, Doc, the matter of my fee,’ Creed said, getting back to business.

‘Ah, of course,’ Doc Haze replied, as if his failure to mention it already had been due to a lapse of memory rather than an intentional oversight. ‘Two hundred and fifty, wasn’t it?’

The bounty hunter smiled coldly. ‘Now come on, Doc. Don’t try that with me, not after the Fester Hole incident. Four hundred credits was the deal and I even brought back your tranq gun.’

‘But you damaged it,’ the doctor retorted, pointing at the ork. ‘Look, half its face is missing. I hope you haven’t hurt it too badly.’

‘What did you expect? It fought like a daemon!’ Creed hands dropped to his sides. ‘Now do you want to settle up or would you rather discuss the matter with my two, wide calibre associates?’

‘Four hundred then,’ Doc Haze said with none of his usual joviality. ‘If you’ll bear with me for a minute, I’ve got it here somewhere.’ The

scientist walked over to a gleaming white unit and started rummaging unnecessarily around in a drawer.

Some people will do anything to avoid paying up, Creed considered.

As he waited for the doctor to go through his charade of looking for the credits Creed looked around the lab once more. There seemed to be a large number of drums containing chemicals used in cryogenic freezing stored in the lab at present.

Doc Haze must be planning to use a fair bit in his new improved surgical techniques and this stuff isn't easy to get hold of, Creed thought. The Doc's obviously been stocking up for a while. I wonder how long he's known about the deal with the ork? And I wonder who dropped Antrobus Vetch in it with the Arbites?

A roar accompanied by the screeching of tearing metal made both men spin round. The ork was sitting up on the operating table holding a mechanical limb in one hand. The metal claw attached to it flexed spasmodically. Next to the gurney One-Eight-Seven stood stock still, confusion written on its half-human features as its onboard cogitator engine tried to process what had happened. Almost carelessly, the ork swung the arm at the servitor, smashing it across the side of the head and knocking it to the floor. The red lens of its bionic eye shattered. The cyborg twitched for a moment, coruscating bolts of electricity playing over its entire body, and then it was still.

Aghast the two men stared at the ork. The alien looked back at them with drug-glazed eyes and then shook its head as if trying to shake off its stupor. It started to pull at the straps buckled tightly around its legs.

'By Helmawr's rump!' Creed gasped in amazement.

Are you sure you gave it enough adroxinil?' Doc Haze asked, despite the desperate nature of the situation.

'I pumped enough tranq into that beast to make a scaly sleep for a week!' the bounty hunter exclaimed.

'Well it's not sleeping now.'

'I can see that, Doc!' Creed snapped back.

'So do something!'

'Don't worry, I intend to.'

Fast as quicksilver Creed had pulled both stub guns from their holsters and was pulling back the cocking hammers as the ork swung its legs off

the operating table. The bounty hunter shot off a couple of rounds as he ran across the lab at the brute, feeling the familiar recoil in his wrists, and chunks of flesh were blasted out of the alien's torso.

'Creed! Don't kill it!' Doc Haze screamed over the blasting of the stub guns.

Creed faltered in his charge, his last shot going wide and sending the table of scalpels, clamps and saws flying, the medical instruments rattling over the polished metal floor. 'For skav's sake!' Creed muttered half under his breath. His mind racing he tried to think of an alternative way to put the ork out of action.

He didn't hesitate for long but it was enough for the enraged, and rapidly recovering, ork. The servitor's still twitching robot arm connected with his midriff and the bounty hunter was swept aside by the blow. Creed slid across the lab and lay where he came to rest, amid the scattered surgical tools, gasping for air and wincing in pain as he did so; he was sure the blow had broken a few ribs.

The bounty hunter now out of range of the ork's anger the monster turned on the closer Doc Haze who had backed into a corner. The creature stomped towards the scientist.

Doc Haze looked up into the face of his killer: the beady yellow eyes; the flaring nostrils; the exposed bone of its jaw; the tusked split of its misshapen mouth dripping with saliva. The stink of the thing washed over him. Panicking he pushed himself even further back into the corner, clutching behind him in desperation for anything that might help him. A sweaty palm closed on a cylindrical plastic handle and as he pulled it round in front of him he felt the electrical flex attached to it uncoil. In his hand, he held a bone-saw. The business end of the gruesome-looking surgical implement was a long serrated blade. The doctor flicked a switch on its side and with a high-pitched whine, like a phosphorfly trapped in a specimen jar, the toothed edge of the blade began to whiz around the knife like a tiny chainsword.

The ork brought a hand down towards the doctor's head, as if it was intent on seeing what was inside his chrome dome! In response, Doc Haze brought the buzzing bone-saw up and with both hands gripping the handle forced it into the alien's arm below the elbow. Before the ork knew what was going on the blade had sliced cleanly through flesh and bone alike and

its right hand fell onto the floor. Hot crimson blood pumped from the wound over the doctor's already filthy lab coat.

Seemingly unconcerned, the ork glanced down at its own hand lying at its feet. Then pain and anger took effect. The alien lunged at the scientist, clutching at the man as if it still had both hands, giving Doc Haze the chance to dodge free of its grasp. The crazed scientist ran to Creed's side and helped the bounty hunter who was getting painfully to his feet. The ork started to advance towards them.

'You still want it alive, Doc?' Creed asked, grimacing as pain flared in his chest.

'No, you fool!' Doc Haze screamed at him. 'Kill it! Kill it now!'

'Now you're starting to make some sense at last,' Creed said and managed a grin. 'Come on girls, it's time to dance.'

Both index fingers compressed triggers and the stub guns belched their leaden cargo in the ork's direction. Round after round slammed into the thick muscle of the monster's arms, legs and body but still the greenskin came at them. It just seemed to soak up the bullets, which now appeared unlikely to even slow it down let alone kill the beast!

'Are you too stupid to even know when you're dead?' Creed bellowed at the alien.

Taking careful aim with both guns, he fired two rounds at the monster's head. The ork's face exploded in a scarlet eruption. Smoke and blood obscuring his vision, Creed wiped his eyes clear with a sleeve of his coat. When he looked back at the alien, he could hardly believe what he saw.

The creature continued to advance, fixing him with one blazing yellow eye -but then it only had one eye left as half its skull was missing. What Creed took to be the creature's brain was visible through a mess of bone and skin. It was as if a milliasaur had taken a bite out of the ork's head. The monster tried to open its mouth but its jaw was broken and, besides, most of its tongue was missing too. Despite bullet holes riddling its torso and half its head gone the creature charged.

The ork half ran and half fell at Creed. The fist powering towards his stomach, however, was definitely not carried by momentum alone. Creed twisted his spine around in an attempt to avoid the blow and felt his broken ribs send knives of white-hot pain stabbing through his body. The punch landed, lifting him bodily off the ground, and breaking yet more

ribs, sending new daggers of agony lancing through his torso. For the moment in which he still knew what was going on he thought he was going to be sick. Then he smashed into the regimented lines of shelves, rocking the units so that the chemical tubs stacked on them came tumbling down around him. He could taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth.

Through a haze of concussion, Creed was just able to make out the blurred shape of the ork stumbling towards him. A white plastic drum landed in his lap, knocking what little air was left in his lungs out of him, and making him look at it. Around the side of the container in black stencilled runes were the words, 'Warning! Liquid Nitrogen.'

The ork came a step closer the smashed glass of a phial crunching under its foot and demanding Creed's attention again. His vision obscured by grey patches in front of his eyes now it was the bounty hunter's turn to try to shake awareness back into his brain.

He could see more shelves behind the ork stacked high with drums stencilled with the same warning, 'Liquid Nitrogen'. The creature was getting closer by the second. If he didn't do something soon Creed doubted he would ever do anything again. Doing his best to ignore the concussion and focus on the imminent danger of sudden, violent death, Creed took aim and fired. On the third shot, he hit his target. The large coolant drum fractured and the ork was suddenly bathed in a shower of freezing liquid which steamed as it came into contact with the air, a great white fog obscuring it from Creed's view.

Slowly the chemical mist cleared as the last of the liquid nitrogen evaporated into the surrounding atmosphere. Before the bounty hunter stood a glittering, yet hideous, statue. White frost covered the ork's quick-frozen ravaged body. Creed took aim one last time and fired. The dumdum bullet hit the frozen ork, high velocity converting into devastating force in an instant as the round impacted against the alien's brittle flesh. The shockwave from the impact rippled through the frozen form and the ork's body shattered, shards of icy green flesh tinkling down on the laboratory floor like a thousand splintered icicles. What was left of the creature's headed rolled against Creed's leg, the only part of the creature that was still recognisably ork.

The bounty hunter slumped back against the tubular metal shelves and prepared to give himself up to unconsciousness. Closing his eyes against

the harsh neon glow of the florescent lights, he listened to the fizzing and cracking of the pooling liquid nitrogen as it froze mere centimetres from his feet.

The crunch of footsteps breaking the thin film of ice on the floor made Creed unwillingly open his eyes again. Doc Haze stood over him, the now silent surgical tool gripped in his hand.

'So that'll be two hundred credits then,' the scientist said, smiling weakly.

'What?' said a dazed Creed in reply.

'Half bounty for delivering the ork dead rather than alive.'

'But when you brought the brute in it was still alive,' Creed explained, pain and exhaustion the only things keeping his growing anger in check.

'Then there's the damage done to the lab,' the doctor went on.

Ignoring him the bounty hunter took a cheroot from a crumpled packet and put it to his lips.

'And liquid nitrogen isn't easy to get hold of down here. You have to pay premium rate.'

Creed took the lighter from his pocket and flicked the burner aflame.

'So at the end of the day I calculate that you owe me one hundred credits. And do you mind not smoking in my lab?'

Creed lit the cheroot and took a long drag on the smouldering cigar. He exhaled loudly, blowing the smoke at the increasingly edgy scientist.

'Look, Doc,' he said, gesturing with a loaded stub gun, 'do you want to discuss this with my associates?'

* * *

THE FAN-WINDS were cold out here, at the edge of the Badzones. Pulling his long coat tighter about him thin frame the tall figure crouched down behind the battered carcass of the cryogenic cargo container and began his examination of the area. The distant light of irregularly positioned glowglobes reflected off the shiny metal plate that made up half the dome of the man's head. Below the half-chromium pate wisps of dirty, long white hair twisted in the breeze.

Not far away the repaired servitor stood waiting for its master to finish his work, scanning the doctor's work on the slag heap with a cracked red-glass eye. Its reattached mechanical limb twitched from time to time: the damage done to its circuits by the ork would have some lasting effects.

Doc Haze stood suddenly upright and gave a whoop of joy: 'I've found it! I knew it! I knew it would be here, One-Eight-Seven!'

Removing a glass specimen jar from a pocket of his lab coat the scientist bent down again. Carefully he lifted a piece of rubbish away from the corner of the crumpled container, revealing the curious, pointed green toadstools that were poking up through the grey-black soil underneath. Chuckling to himself, he began gently brushing spores from the gills of the fungi with a fine-haired brush into the jar.

FIRESTARTER

‘WELL, SOMEONE KNOWS who it was!’ Antrobus Vetch yelled at the cowering Gravalax Mune, his reedy voice becoming even more high-pitched as he berated his underling. ‘Someone informed the Arbites that the cargo had been brought into Hive Primus. We’ve already established it was those whispering Delaque snakes from the Network who first found out about it, but it wasn’t them who told the authorities, was it, hmm?’

‘No, my lord,’ Mune replied, ‘we are certain of that. The Network are information-brokers. They sold the information about the deal on to a third party. Your spies have confirmed that much.’

‘Yes, my agents are very thorough,’ Vetch said, suddenly quietly conspiratorial. He fixed his servant with his beady, black pinpricks of eyes. ‘Well some of them are,’ he added, ‘but that doesn’t change the fact that someone else informed the Adeptus Arbites, does it, hmm?’

‘No, my lord,’ Mune responded weakly.

‘Well how do you suggest we find out who did, hmm?’ Vetch screeched, flecks of spittle flying from his thin lips.

Gravalax Mune averted his gaze from the enraged Guilder, unable to bear his piercing gaze. His heart pounding, Mune desperately tried to think of a solution to Vetch’s problem but his mind with fogged with panic. All he could think of was what his master might do to him if he didn’t come up with a decent suggestion, or rather what the Guilder would get his servitor slaves to do to him.

Antrobus Vetch wasn’t an imposing man physically. He was tiny, well under two metres tall, with spindly limbs and a head that seemed slightly overlarge in proportion to the rest of his body. The overall effect made Vetch seem like an overgrown infant. The long, jade green robe that he wore did nothing to detract from this appearance: when he stood up it covered his feet and dragged along the ground behind him.

But it was the power he wielded that was terrifying. He controlled practically all the trade in the sector, from Tunnel Town and Steel Canyon as far as Toxic Sump and Mercury Falls. Several gangs, including the notorious Orlock Dangar's Dogs, were in his pay. He ran a mining operation at Downer's Deep and effectively owned the populace of Piston Broke. At his word previously prosperous gangs had been declared outlaw, whole mutant settlements had been razed to the ground and half the local Ratskin tribes paid him fealty. It seemed that there wasn't anyone in the sector who didn't either owe Vetch a favour or have good reason to want the Guilder dead, and in a fair number of cases both. But Vetch was rich and riches bought good protection.

But wealth wasn't enough for Antrobus Vetch. What he wanted was acceptance from those he saw as his equals in the Spire. He wanted out of the Underhive and the ork had been his ticket uphive, until person or persons, as yet unknown, had sabotaged the smuggling operation! The ork had been destined for the private zoo of the planetary governor, Lord Helmawr himself. Vetch had wasted thousands on bribing off-world contacts, not a credit of which he would ever see again, thanks to the interference of the Network's client. And now Gravalax Mune was facing the wrath of the thwarted Guilder.

His mind racing, trying to think of a way out of the apparent impasse they had reached in trying to uncover Vetch's betrayers, Mune took in the chamber around him, as if looking for inspiration from anywhere at all.

Vetch's lair was sumptuously decorated as befitted a Guilder of his power and influence. Turquoise velvet drapes jostled with colourful, spider-silk wall hangings for the eye's attention. The glittering, stained glass dome of the chamber - depicting the skull and portcullis badge of the Merchant Guild - was supported at regular intervals by Malvolion jade-marble pillars. To these were chained Vetch's veiled and voluptuous concubines, none of whom wore any item of apparel that might detract from the beauty of their physical form.

The small man leaned forward in his throne, knuckles whitening as his talon-like fingers gripped the arms. 'Well if we were waiting for you to think of a plan we'd be here 'til the feast of the Emperor's Ascension,' Vetch ranted. 'So it's a good thing that I already have one, isn't it, hmm?'

Mune breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Please would you enlighten your humble servant, my lord?’

‘We already know of someone who knows the identity of our informer,’ Vetch said, a thin smile spreading across his pale lips.

‘We do?’ Mune said, a glimmer of hope entering his consciousness. Maybe he wasn’t bound for Vetch’s prison mine after all. Concentrating, he tried to marshal his thoughts. Then it came to him and he was filled with a renewed sense of foreboding: ‘You don’t mean அ’

‘The Network! Of course I do!’

Mune looked anxiously from one servitor to the next and found himself wondering how he’d look with a rock drill in place of an arm. ‘But the Network have been declared outlaws. You did it yourself for their part in ruining the deal. There’s a bounty on all their heads. Every two-bit gang from here to the Effluous will be on their tail, hoping to get even a fraction of the reward you’re offering.’

‘Which is why you have to find them first,’ Vetch snapped, the smile gone from his face, ‘or to be more precise, their leader. What’s his name? Sisken, isn’t it, hmm?’

‘I believe so, my lord.’

‘Well then, what are you waiting for?’ Vetch sank back into his throne. ‘Hire someone to capture Sisken if you have to and then do whatever’s necessary to extract the information we require.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Mune replied without any sense of optimism.

Mune bowed, turned and walked sullenly towards the bulkhead doors at the end of the chamber, two servitors dropping into line behind him.

‘Oh and Mune?’

Mune turned back to his spiteful employer: ‘My lord?’

‘No mistakes. It can get very cold at the bottom of Deep Three in Stalag Slag Hole, you know, hmm?’

* * *

WITH RATTLING THUDS three cylindrical metal objects landed in the centre of the compound of an old water treatment plant. The anxious Delaque gangers stationed around the compound turned to see what had

made the noise. In a series of small explosions the photon flash flare grenades detonated. The effect was that of three small suns going supernova in the centre of the compound, bathing the treatment plant and the Delaques in blinding white light.

Photo-visor in place, Nathan Creed - downhive desperado, hired gun and sharp-shooting bounty hunter - grabbed the chain links of the fence in front of him and started to climb. In four heartbeats he was over the razor wire-topped fence. In another three he had crossed the compound. It took only one to drop the screaming, disorientated leader with a tensed, flat-handed chop to the back of the man's neck. Creed caught the unconscious man as he slumped forwards and hefted the Delaque's dead weight over his shoulder. Without even breaking a sweat he covered the twenty metres to the gate.

A wide-muzzled stub gun, held in one hand, barked twice and the stumbling gate sentries fell. A third shot shattered the padlock holding the gates shut. Kicking them open with a booted foot the bounty hunter was through and out into the wastes of the badzones.

From the moment the grenades had detonated the whole operation had all taken less than a minute.

By the time any of the gangers recovered, their blurred vision slowly returning, Sisken, their leader, and the bounty hunter were long gone.

* * *

'HERE HE IS, boss,' the hairy scummer said, pushing the doctor roughly before Gravalax Mune.

The Guilder agent looked the scientist up and down, taking in the long lab coat buttoned to the neck, smeared with blood and engine oil. A shiny metal plate made up half the dome of the scientist's head, and long, straggly white hair hung down to his shoulders below it.

'Doctor Isaiah Haze, I presume,' the man said with a snide grin.

'That's right,' Haze said, wringing his bony hands nervously, 'but most people call me Doc.'

Haze in turn studied the gangling figure in front of him. He was as thin as a lashworm and, from the grim set of his features, Haze could easily

believe he had the temperament to match. The man wore voluminous purple robes that billowed around his scarecrow-like form when he moved, like a face-eater caught in a vent-gale. Hung around his neck on a heavy chain was the skull badge of the Merchant Guild. But what stood out more than any of this was the crest of his employer, an entwined gothic A and V, tattooed onto his forehead, his slicked-back hair making it stand out even more. Two imposing servitors - each bearing powerful-looking robotic limbs with cruelly sharp claws and crushing vices in place of hands - flanked the Guilder agent.

'And you are?' Haze asked, turning his attention back to the scarecrow.

'Mune. Gravalax Mune. Bond-servant of Guilder Antrobus Vetch.'

Doc Haze felt decidedly uncomfortable. He had been removed from his lab by two Underhive scum, who he had taken for gangers in need of his considerable surgical skills and had then dragged him into the badzones to this place - the ruined shell of an Ecclesiarchy chapel - to bring him before an agent of one of the most feared and powerful men in the Underhive.

The doctor looked around him. Fractured pieces of soot-blackened stained glass windows still clung to the leaded rims of gothic window arches. A granite pulpit, the faces of the figures carved around its sides defaced by heretics long ago, stood before the broken plinth of an altar. Ten metres above it hung a dusty black marble Imperial eagle, its wings outstretched over the end of the nave, its two heads surveying the scene below with cold stone eyes. The place must have been abandoned centuries ago as the city-mountain of Hive Primus grew ever upwards, taking the righteous with it, leaving only the wretched, the dispossessed and vermin to worship at this shrine to the Emperor of humanity.

'What can I do for you, Mune?

'I want you to perform an operation for me. A very delicate operation.'

'And why couldn't it have been performed in my lab?'

'How shall I put this?' Mune mused. 'It is a sensitive matter. You will be handsomely rewarded, of course.' There was never any suggestion that Haze would refuse and the doctor knew better than to even try.

'Well, where am I supposed to work? Where are the tools I'll need? And where's the patient?' Haze asked irritably, continuing to wring his hands in anxiety.

‘This way,’ Mune said turning and walking towards an archway in one wall. His hulking cyborg bodyguards followed. Feeling the muzzle of an autopistol pressed against his back, reluctantly Haze followed, accompanied by his own foul-smelling, unshaven ”bodyguards”, their feet crunching on the broken tesserae of the ancient mosaic floor.

Mune led the way down a flight of wide, shallow steps into a vaulted crypt. And then Doc Haze saw something which made his heart leap.

Standing in the centre of the chamber was a reclining chair of gleaming steel sections and brass attachments. Numerous telescoping arms emerged from the upper part of the chair, ending in magnifying lenses, cutting blades and syringes. The gothic piece of antiquated machinery was supported by a brass pedestal, which had yet more pedals and levers sprouting from it. Iron clamps at strategic places completed the ensemble. It looked as if the device had been designed with maximum discomfort in mind.

‘I know it’s not what you’re used to,’ Mune said, taking in the crypt with a wave of an arm.

‘Amazing,’ the Underhive surgeon gasped. ‘It’s beautiful. A work of art.’

‘Sorry?’ Mune looked at the doctor, his brow furrowing. ‘Oh, I see. The chair. Yes, I suppose it is.’

‘What I wouldn’t give for one of these.’

‘Doctor?’

‘Huh?’ Haze looked up, Mune’s enquiry shaking him from his reverie. ‘Um, what procedure was it you wanted me to perform, exactly?’

‘A cerebral fluid extraction,’ Mune stated. ‘I believe that it’s colloquially known as a ”brain drain”.’

Doc Haze looked at the stick-thin man in amazement.

‘You have performed one before, haven’t you?’ Mune asked, a hint of concern creeping into his voice.

‘Of course,’ Haze lied, excited at the prospect of being able to use the arcane surgical device. He had never performed such an operation in all his long years in the Underhive, but he knew the principles of it.

The procedure had a near legendary status among the medical practitioners of the Underhive. The process was complicated but basically involved extracting, and then purifying, fluid from the brain of a subject.

The resulting extract, once mixed with a cocktail of stims, could then be injected into the brain of another, giving the receiver the original subject's memories. It was rumoured that some uphive nobles utilised the process to relive the thrill of exciting, dangerous or even life-threatening experiences without ever leaving the safety of the Spire. Assuming that the operation was successful, the only side-effect of a brain drain for the subject was that it left them with large gaps in their memory. Those who injected the cerebral fluid of others into their own brains faced the prospect of a crippling addiction, culminating in a total lose of their own identity as the memories of others fractured their minds into a myriad split personalities.

'I'll need to test the equipment, of course,' Doc Haze said slyly, running a hand over the cold metal of the chair.

'No time for that,' replied Mune. 'Our "patient" will be here anytime now.'

As if on cue there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs and Doc Haze looked round. Pushing a bald, manacled ganger before him, a tall man, swathed in a long leather coat and wearing a wide-brimmed hat that hid his face in shadow, entered the crypt. At his hips were holstered two large stub guns and as the man moved Haze caught glimpses of the skull and crossbones bounty seals attached to the long tails of his coat.

'Creed,' he stated coldly.

'Hello again, Doc,' the bounty hunter replied in a downhive drawl, seeming just as pleased to see the Underhive surgeon as Haze was to see him. Grabbing hold of his manacled prisoner with a strong hand, Creed pushed the ganger to his knees in front of the Guilder agent. 'Here's your man, Mune.'

As the ganger looked up at Mune, Haze felt suddenly sick. He already knew this man and now he knew what Antrobus Vetch was after. Haze wanted to vomit.

'Ah, Sisken,' Mune addressed the ganger. 'How the mighty are fallen, the leader of the Network brought low before Gravalax Mune.'

Although his eyes were hidden by dark-tinted goggles it was obvious the ganger was glaring at Mune. 'I know what you want,' Sisken hissed, 'but I'll never tell you! You'll never get it out of me!'

'Never tell me?' Mune pondered. 'I'm quite sure of that but never get it out of you?' He turned his gaze towards the gothic contraption and the

filthy scientist standing next to it. ‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that.’ Sisken’s face fell as he followed Mune’s gaze and his already sallow complexion turned almost completely white.

‘Strap him in.’

As the Delaque gang leader struggled and protested futilely, the two scummers removed Sisken’s manacles and the servitor bodyguards forced him into the operating chair. Doc Haze secured the last restraint around the ganger’s head.

‘Work quickly, doctor,’ Mune instructed Haze. ‘But remember - no mistakes!’

Muttering something unintelligible to himself under his breath, the surgeon set to work.

The bounty hunter looked on, his face an emotionless mask. As the doctor positioned the syringe at the base of his prisoner’s head Creed took a crumpled packet of smokes from a pocket. Putting a cheroot to his lips he began looking his lighter.

Haze looked up. ‘You know I don’t like people smoking when I’m operating.’

The bounty hunter shot him a dark look and, producing a gleaming lighter from another pocket, lit the cheroot.

‘Just get on with it!’ Mune snapped and the whirring of servos from one of the servitor’s prosthetic claws encouraged Haze to put aside all thoughts of hygiene and proceed without further complaint.

But all the while his mind was racing. He knew Sisken, leader of the Delaque gang of information-brokers called the Network. It was they who had sold him the information about Antrobus Vetch’s operation to bring an ork into Hive Primus for Lord Helmawr’s private zoo. And it had been Haze who had leaked the same information to the authorities, forcing Vetch to dump the illegal alien in the Underhive. Haze had planned to study the ork’s regenerative abilities so that he might apply them to his own surgical skills, making his services invaluable to any Underhive gang. And what could Antrobus Vetch want with the leader of the Network other than to find out who sold him out? Once Haze had carried out the brain drain on Sisken anyone injecting the man’s cerebral fluid would discover Doc Haze was the culprit Vetch was after and he would be as good as dead!

But how could he get out of the inevitable? If he botched the brain drain on purpose Mune would have him killed on the spot! And even if he could somehow dispose of Mune and all his bodyguards - not to mention Creed - Vetch would only send others to find out what happened. Whichever way he looked at it he was doomed! If only he had more time maybe he could tamper with the evidence but time was one thing he didn't have. Then he noticed the small phial of lubricant sitting on the tray next to the reclining chair and a smile spread across his lips as he began to formulate a plan.

There was the sudden roar of gunfire and shattering glass from the chapel above. Haze jumped, almost stabbing his patient with the syringe.

'We're under attack!' Mune squealed.

Unholstering his two wide-calibre stub guns, Creed ran up and out of the crypt, taking the steps two at a time.

'Now you'll be sorry,' Sisken hissed in a voice barely more than a sibilant whisper.

'Go!' Mune yelled at the two scummers who were now looking first at the Guilder agent and then at each other in agitated confusion. 'The operation must be completed!'

At a nod from Mune one of the hulking servitors herded the reluctant scummers out of the crypt.

* * *

CREED SPRINTED ACROSS the broken floor of the chapel as bullets and las-rounds impacted in the crumbling wall behind him. Ducking down beneath the glassless arch of one of the ruined chapel's windows he took a deep breath, letting it out in a long, controlled exhalation as he readied himself. 'Let's go, girls,' he muttered under his breath and then rose into a half-crouch, pointing his guns over the sill of the window.

Peering across the rubble-strewn plaza in front of the chapel, at first glance Creed picked out eight pale-skinned, bald-headed figures positioned behind the ruins of concrete walls thirty paces from him, although he suspected there were probably as many more hidden out of sight. Each of them wore a pale-brown leather coat, not unlike his own apart from the emblem of a sump snake on the lapels - the badge of House

Delaque - and their eyes were protected by black-tinted goggles or implanted filter screens. They were armed with an assortment of autoguns, bolt pistols and las-weapons.

Another round of fire peppered Creed's position but this time he replied with two shots of his own, fired off in quick succession. A large Delaque wielding an autogun, exposed in a breach in the barricade, fell backwards, blood already oozing from two bullet wounds in his chest. Easy target, Creed thought.

There was the chatter of autogun fire as the ganger's trigger finger spasmed in his death-throes, cries of anger from the Delaques and a yelp of pain. Creed grinned to himself.

'Come on, fellas,' he muttered under his breath, 'it's no fun when you do it to yourselves!'

Then the bounty hunter was aware of the crunching of mosaic tiles under booted feet behind him and the scummers dashed into cover in the chapel, the threatening form of Mune's servitor bodyguard behind them.

Another fusillade of shots smacked into the crumbling chapel. Creed rose onto his haunches, fired off another couple of dumdum rounds and another Delaque dropped, blood dribbling from a hole in his filter screen. The bounty hunter ducked back into cover as the rest of the besieging gangers replied to his attack with more las-blasts and bolter rounds.

The two scummers looked at him in awed amazement and Creed heard one of them gasp, 'He's good!'

He glowered at them as a searing las-round gouged its way through the sill of the window. 'When you ladies are quite ready,' he drawled, 'maybe you'd like to earn the right to keep your stinking hides?'

In embarrassment the hired scum fumbled the safeties off their autopistols and aimed haphazard fire at the Delaque gang, hitting almost everything but the gangers. Creed made up for their waste of ammunition, making each one of his shots count. One dumdum round clipped a man's shoulder, sending the Delaque's own raking auto-fire streaking towards the roof of the dome. A second round took out another ganger's kneecap, the screaming man dropping his pistol as he clamped his hands over the ragged wound and his leg gave way under him. A third hit the lasgun gripped by a snarling Delaque, his face a mess of scar tissue, ruining its firing mechanism and sending the weapon flying into the ruins.

The explosive bark of Creed's point six-six calibre stub guns and the wild rattling chatter of the scummers autopistols was joined by a chugging roar as the servitor, its metal feet planted squarely on the ground, opened fire with an autocannon attachment mounted on its grotesquely overlarge robotic right arm.

Under the watchful eyes of the Imperial eagle, the chapel's defenders did their best to repel the Delaques.

* * *

THE CONCUSSIVE FORCE of an explosion rocked the crypt. Doc Haze's sweat-slicked hand slipped on the handle of a control lever. 'No mistakes, remember?' his Guilder overseer screeched as he almost rammed the syringe needle deeper into the Delaque leader's brain, rather than removing it.

'I'm doing my best,' Haze snapped back, 'considering the circumstances!'

Gravalax Mune said nothing else, merely indicating the monstrous slave-machine standing next to him, with a flick of his head. Cursing under his breath, the doctor withdrew the syringe from the silent, semi-lobotomised Sisken and disconnected the phial containing the sample of cerebral fluid. Haze gripped the phial tightly in his hand, lest it slip from his sweaty palms. He wasn't only sweating because he was working in a war-zone - more than anything it was due to his increasing sense of anxiety at how he was going to avoid giving Antrobus Vetch's agent the evidence that it was he who had scuppered his master's plans!

For a moment he actually considered dropping the glass container - he could make out it slipped from his grasp when the next explosion came from the chapel above - but he realised just as quickly that it would be futile. Mune would have him killed there and then, and ask questions later. He would have to think of another way out of this. And then it came to him.

'I just have to purify the sample,' Haze explained to the Guilder agent, 'then we'll be done.'

Placing his own body between Mune and the centrifuge device fixed to the back of the operating chair Haze eruptied Sisken's brain sample into the purification chamber with one hand while he rummaged in the pocket of his grimy lab coat with the other.

* * *

WITH A WHOOSH of super-heated air a second fireball streaked through the chapel window and impacted against the huge Imperial eagle. 'Helmawr's rump!' Creed cursed as he felt the heat-wash on his skin. Someone's using a flamer, he thought. Looks like things could get a little hot!

For the first time in a long time Creed felt outgunned. His initial assault on the Network had used up the last of his grenades. All he had left now were his two stub guns, with a couple of dozen rounds in total, and as a last resort his bootknife. Time I paid a long overdue visit to Hackbut's Arms House, he considered, if I make it through this.

There were only three of them left defending the chapel. The taller of the two scum had stupidly stuck his head around the side of a pillar to assess the situation only to have it blown off by a bolter shell. The fat scummer had gone to pieces after that, being possessed by a palsy that made his poor aim even worse.

The Delaques seemed to have called up some reinforcements. Through the smoke Creed caught glimpses of a man with a shock of orange hair moving among the bald gangers. Hired gun, the bounty hunter mused. Probably the one with the flamer.

At that moment a third ball of fire hurtled through the open archway like a comet and slammed into the servitor. The blast threw the hulking slave-machine backwards into the chapel's altar. The heat of the fireball melted cable-bundles and ignited the ammunition packed into the breach of its autocannon attachment. The resulting explosion shredded the organic parts of the servitor and tore apart its bionic implants.

Creed looked across at the remaining scummer to see the fat man lying in a puddle of his own pooling blood. Several shells from the servitor's

exploding arm had hit him from behind. ‘Friendly fire,’ the bounty hunter muttered grimly to himself.

Two more shots took out two more gangers and emptied both stub guns. Ducking down again and pressing his back against the wall Creed reloaded both weapons with practised ease. He would have to make every round count: after this there weren’t enough for another reload.

Taking a deep breath he flung himself sideways, rolling past the open doorway and taking out two Delaque juves who had been advancing while he reloaded. Back in cover he peered around the doorjamb and did a swift headcount.

‘Well, girls,’ he said, addressing his smoking guns. ‘Three down and one to go in here. At least five of them still out there, along with the new hothead. My kind of odds!’

Creed brought down one Delaque after another while - compared to the crackshot gunslinger - all they seemed capable of was peppering the chapel walls with bolter shell impact craters.

And then Creed was suddenly aware of something else. The incessant gunfire had stopped. All he could hear was the crackling of the flames around him, the pinging of his own cooling stub guns and the sound of feet running away over the broken plaza. Cautiously the bounty hunter looked around the doorjamb to see the flapping coat tails of half a dozen Delaque gangers fleeing into the gloom of the wastezones beyond. But on the other side of the plaza the orange-haired man still moved between the fractured concrete walls, ignoring the fleeing gangers.

‘Well, girls,’ Creed said. ‘One to go.’

With a scream like a discharging plasma cannon three fiery missiles crashed into the chapel. Creed was thrown to the ground by the force of the blasts and covered his head as he was showered with splinters of glass and burning shards of masonry.

‘Looks like it’s time for a change of plan,’ the bounty hunter muttered, as the Imperial eagle burned.

* * *

DOC HAZE POURED the last drop of the scummer's brain drain sample into the centrifuge and with the practised sleight of hand of a sideshow con artist, slipped both phials into his pocket. At the flick of a switch the device started spinning. Yet another explosion shook the chamber, dust showering from cracks in the vaulted ceiling. 'How long?' Mune snapped.

'A couple of minutes,' Haze hazarded.

'That's about two minutes longer than you've got.'

Both the scientist and Guilder agent spun round on hearing Creed's distinctive drawl behind them.

'What do you mean?' Mune demanded.

'Work it out yourself,' the bounty hunter snarled, pointing at the unconscious Sisken. 'Your guest's friends have come to rescue him back and they've got some help. It's time we were out of here!'

'But how?' Doc Haze panicked, wringing his hands. 'The only way out of here is the way you just came in!'

'Oh, I don't think so,' Creed said, turning his piercing gaze on Mune. 'I doubt Antrobus Vetch's trained lashworm would have set all this up without including more than one escape route. Where is it?' Creed said, spinning round and pointing a stub gun at the tattoo on Mune's forehead.

Mune glanced towards his remaining bodyguard.

'Don't even think about it,' Creed hissed. 'I'll put a bullet between your eyes if you so much as blink.'

Yet another explosion from above rocked the crypt and the roof shook as something heavy crashed down onto the floor of the chapel above.

'First give me the sample,' Mune said, reaching out a hand.

Doc Haze looked to the bounty hunter. 'Do it,' Creed said.

The surgeon halted the spinning centrifuge and removed the phial containing the partially "purified" extract. He tossed it to the Guilder who caught it with a grimace of annoyance.

'Now we go,' Creed stated, pulling back the hammer of the stub gun.

Saying nothing, Mune turned and moved swiftly towards a shadowy archway, previously hidden in the shadows of the far corner of the crypt. In a moment he was through it and gone, followed by the stomping servitor. The bounty hunter and the scientist crossed the crypt quickly towards the exit. When they were only metres away from the archway a ball of white-hot flame streaked over their heads, scorching the hairs on the back of

Creed's neck. The fireball smashed into the roof above the archway, sending lumps of smoking rubble crashing down in front of it.

Creed spun round. Standing at the foot of the steps was the orange-haired man he had seen with the besieging gangers. Creed saw that as well as a shock of orange hair, the man had a nasty scar running along the side of his head, from his right temple down to behind his ear under the hairline. He was wearing a pair of black leather boots that covered his legs up to the knees. As well as a grubby pair of rat-hide britches and an unwashed, sleeveless undershirt the man wore a black sleeveless jacket, that looked like it could have been crudely stitched together from spider-skin and that left his muscular arms bare. His features were set in an expression of fury or pain - Creed couldn't tell which - and he advanced with his hands open without a weapon in sight.

Questions crowded Creed's mind. Why was a hired gun, who had previously been wielding a flamer to such devastating effect only moments before now standing in front of him unarmed? Why was the hired gun still here when those who had hired him had fled?

Creed felt a tug on his arm and looked round to see the crazed scientist quaking behind him, his expression imploring him to move.

'What are you so scared of?' Creed asked Haze angrily. 'He's one man and he's unarmed!'

'Because the good doctor recognises me,' the man said, a cruel smile playing over his grimacing features. 'You do recognise me, don't you, Doc?' the man stated. 'No, don't bother answering. I can tell from the look of ashen-faced panic that you do.'

'I don't believe I've had the pleasure,' Creed snarled, levelling both stubbers at the stranger.

'The name's Ignus Mander,' the man said and then winced. 'My quarrel's not with you, bounty hunter, but if you get in my way I will kill you.'

'And anyone who gets in the way of Nathan Creed has got a whole heap of trouble coming!' Creed retorted, starting to squeeze both triggers.

'Have it your way,' Mander replied coldly.

'Creed!' hissed Doc Haze who was still cowering behind the tall, imposing figure of the bounty hunter. 'Just shoot him and then we can get

out of here!' Despite his desperation to leave the doctor seemed rooted to the spot.

Creed increased the pressure from his trigger fingers. Suddenly he gave a yelp of pain and let go of both guns. Creed looked down at the palms of his hands. Both were covered in large red weals and blistering skin, which stung like a milliasaur bite. Inexplicably, in a matter of seconds the metal of the stubbers had become white-hot, as if they had been heated in a furnace. Creed hugged his hands to his sides in an attempt to dull the pain.

'Now we run!' Haze shouted, pulling sharply on Creed's arm.

The burning pain still overwhelming his senses, forgetting his precious guns the bounty hunter allowed himself to be dragged away by the desperate doctor, who now seemed to have found the motivation to flee.

The two of them stumbled through the archway and into the passageway beyond, following Mune's escape route. Vetch's agent and his heavy-duty bodyguard were gone and neither Creed nor the doc knew which ripperjack's nest the tunnel would lead them into next. All they knew was that it would lead them away from Ignus Mander and that was good enough for now.

As the two of them fled Creed heard Mander calling after them, 'You can run, Doc! You can run!' And run they did.

* * *

DOC HAZE WAS panting for air like a dying asthmatic, as he and Creed came to a halt behind a power relay station. The bounty hunter seemed to have recovered himself after the initial shock of Mander's attack but his hands were a mess of suppurating blisters. After gasping for air, doubled-up with his hands gripping his knees for a minute or two, he took a roll of bandage from a pocket and bound Creed's hands. 'How does it feel now?' Doc Haze asked.

'Like I washed my hands in a chem pool,' Creed grumbled, 'but I'll live. Look, we can't hang around here for long before this Mander catches up with us again, so when you're done let's get moving and maybe you can tell me exactly who you've skavved off this time!'

Doc Haze cast his mind back to the last time he had seen Ignus Mander and felt sick to the pit of his stomach.

'If I tell you the whole story, Creed, you must promise to protect me from him. The man's a lunatic! You must kill him! Help me now and I'll see you're well-rewarded.'

'Like last time?' the bounty hunter muttered sullenly.

'We came to an agreement.'

'Huh!' Creed grunted. 'It was the same after the Fester Hole incident.'

'I fixed your arm after your run-in with the Kaynn Clan Gang, didn't I?' the doc protested. 'This time I'll make it up to you. Any upgrade you want.' The doc faltered at these words as he considered what he was about to tell the bounty hunter. 'We'll think of something.'

Creed's face remained an inscrutable mask as he cast his eyes back over the area of wasteland they had crossed.

'All right, Doc,' he said at last. 'Although my better judgement tells me I'm a scawy's uncle for doing so, it looks like we're in this together now so it's in my best interests if I know as much about this scawer as possible if I've got to take him out.'

Quelling the sickening fear that gripped him, Doc Haze began to relate the whole sorry tale to his would-be protector. 'It was a couple of years ago. I tended to Mander after he was shot in a gunfight out at Steel Canyon. I pulled seven pieces of lead out of him but one remained: a bullet lodged in his brain. By rights it should have killed him, only it hadn't. I tried to remove it but something went wrong.'

Haze looked at Creed guiltily and saw at once that the bounty hunter's previously emotionless features were now contorted in a grimace of horror. 'How many times have you fixed me up, Doc?'

'It was a one-off. Honestly! To this day I still don't know what went wrong,' the doc gabbled. 'The more I picked at the bullet the further I ended up pushing it into his cerebellum. You know what some tech-biologis believe about that part of the brain?'

'No, Doc, but something tells me it's got something to do with how Mander made my girls give me the kiss-off.'

'It is popularly held in scientific circles that the cerebellum is the source of psychic powers.'

'Wyrds,' the bounty hunter said with a scowl.

‘Exactly,’ Haze confirmed. ‘Only in some people these powers lie dormant in their subconscious. In most cases these powers never reveal themselves, but then in others some catalyst awakens these latent powers - the onset of adolescence, a sharp blow to the head அ’

‘Having a bullet pushed into your brain by some lunatic surgeon!’

Haze looked away from Creed rubbing his hands together nervously.

‘And how do these powers manifest themselves?’ Creed pressed.

‘Some psykers can control others by willpower alone, others can move objects physically with their minds and some can manipulate the molecules in objects or even the air around them to heat them to boiling or melting point.’

‘So Mander’s a pyro.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘How come Mander’s never come after you before? I sure as hell would’ve done!’ Creed said darkly.

‘I was based down in Perdition back then. Once I’d patched Mander up as best I could and handed him back to his gang-friends heavily-sedated, Veral and I packed up and moved out. I suppose it was only a matter of time before he caught up with me.’ Haze looked thoughtful for a moment. ‘Thinking about it, once the Network got involved it was inevitable. Those information-junkies and their ”Father” don’t miss a trick, unfortunately! This way it looks like Mander got the chance to have his revenge and get paid for it at the same time.’

‘Whatever,’ the bounty hunter drawled. ‘Let’s face facts. Mander’s going to catch up with us sooner or later, I haven’t got my guns and that wasn’t a flamer he was using during the assault on the chapel at all.’

‘Sounds like a pretty concise summary of the situation.’ Grimacing, Ignus Mander stepped out from behind the transformer station, fists clenched in front of him.

‘How long have you been standing there?’ Haze squealed.

‘Long enough,’ Mander said and winced again. ‘I think the only bit you missed out, Doc, was the fact that the bullet you left inside my head means I live in a state of perpetual agony that even drugs can’t suppress!’

‘I know the perfect cure for a headache,’ Creed snarled. ‘It’s just a shame I haven’t got my pain-killers with me.’

‘I’ve already told you once, you’re not my enemy,’ Mander said, addressing the bounty hunter, ‘but if you keep on like this you soon will be.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ Doc Haze retorted, displaying a little more bravado now he knew that Creed was fighting for him. ‘You’ll rue the day you came after Doc H[illegible] aargghhh!’ the doc screamed, and doubled up in crippling, burning agony.

‘Doc?’ Creed half-whispered. ‘What are you doing to him?’ the bounty hunter demanded, turning back to Mander. The pyromaniac was staring intently at the doc and Creed was sure he could see wisps of flickering flame dancing around the psyker’s clenched fists. ‘Oh no you don’t,’ Creed hissed and charged at the wyrd.

Mander immediately turned his piercing gaze on the running bounty hunter. Creed was sure he could see distant fires, burning like cold stars within the pyro’s unblinking eyes. Creed faltered, feeling his whole body flush with heat, as if he had run five kilometres rather than five metres. He blinked as sweat ran into his eyes.

Putting a hand to the slick-wet skin of his forehead he wiped the sweat from above his eyes. His brow felt like it was burning up as his body temperature soared. It was as if he was suffering from the worst case of sewer-swamp fever ever recorded. He could feel his soaking undershirt clinging to his back. Then he realised that even his bandages were becoming damp as sweat ran down his arms. He began to feel dizzy as the unbearable heat threatened to overcome him.

Without his guns and in danger of becoming totally incapacitated as he was, Creed reacted instinctively. Turning, through sweat-blurred eyes Creed saw Doc Haze’s horrified face mere metres away. Forcing his legs to move, overheating muscles protesting bitterly, the bounty hunter staggered forward, bundling the panicking scientist in front of him. His head spinning, Creed saw the black ellipse of an open shaft ahead of them. As they closed the distance between themselves and the hole Creed heard the sound of running water growing ever louder over the pounding of his own heart. At the same moment the smell of scorched leather assaulted his nostrils.

Looking down at his coat as he ran, Creed could see smoke rising from the battered material. With a whoomph the flapping coat tails burst into

flame. Without a moment's hesitation the bounty hunter pulled the coat off and flung it aside, losing his hat at the same time. Then the black gulf was before them and, shoving the doc ahead of him, Creed half jumped and half fell in the cold, enveloping darkness.

He hit the fast-flowing stream next to the dazed doc and a cloud of steam rose from the water around him. At once Creed could feel his body temperature dropping to a more healthy level. He sat up and let out a long sigh. Doc Haze was sitting stunned in the middle of the watercourse, the effluent stream, which glowed with faint phosphorescence, swirling past him.

'I never want to feel like that again,' Creed said, running a wet hand through his close-cropped greying hair.

Doc Haze looked at him for a moment, his mouth open in amazement.

'How can you be so calm?' he managed at last. 'Mander just tried to make you spontaneously combust!'

'Come on, doc,' Creed said grimly, ignoring the scientist's question. 'We've got to keep moving. That bastard isn't going to stop now until both of us look like the main course at a scavvy barbeque.'

The pipe was almost large enough to stand upright in. Following the flow of the polluted water downstream, crouching slightly, the bounty hunter and the scientist jogged into the gloom.

* * *

GRAVALAX MUNE STOOD in front of the heavy bulkhead door, dusting off his robes and tapping his foot impatiently, waiting for security clearance. The servitor stood statue-still behind him, no concept of "being kept waiting" or "impatience" within its programmed brain.

There was a sudden click followed by an electronic whirr and a port opened within an eye-socket of the Guilder skull badge that formed an integral part of the steel door. An optical probe, looking like an iron and glass eyeball, emerged from the hole on a telescopic armature. It stopped centimetres from Mune's face. The Guilder agent glared at the probe. The probe whirred and clicked as its camera eye focused and then jerked back abruptly.

The artificial eye descended on its metal stalk so that it could scan the Guild badge hung around Mune's neck. After a few seconds there was an electronic chirrup and the probe retracted back into the port, which closed behind it. Hinges groaning, with a hiss of compressed air the bulkhead door swung slowly open.

'Access granted,' the tinny voice said in a metallic monotone. Taking a deep breath Mune stepped through the doorway into Antrobus Vetch's lair, the silent servitor clunking after him.

* * *

CAUTIOUSLY CREED PEERED over the edge of the pipe while the panting doc hung back. The pipe had twisted and turned, like so many other conduits between the domes of Hive Primus, until it came to an abrupt end in the side of another derelict dome. 'Well?' Haze shouted over the background roar. 'How far down is it?'

The phosphorescent liquid swirling around Creed's booted feet ran out of the end of the sluice pipe and fell several metres before joining the hundreds of gallons of muddy brown water pouring out of a much wider opening below them. The stench of hydrogen sulphide assailed Creed's nostrils as an endless stream of pollutants thundered into the effluent lake twenty metres below.

'Put it this way, doc, the fall won't kill you,' the bounty hunter said with no trace of humour in his voice. But whatever's in that lake might, he added to himself.

'Do you know where we are?'

'Yes. The local chem-prospectors call it the Bilgespill Drop, although you won't find many of them out here without gasmasks and protective suits because of the toxins constantly being pumped into the dome. The air-recyclers aren't that reliable down here.'

'So where do we go from here?'

Creed looked back along the shaft: 'Well, back that way is our friendly pyromaniac. So I guess our only real option is down.'

Clinging onto one side of the pipe's mouth, the bounty hunter leaned out over the end and scanned the surrounding area for another way down. A

ripperjack's-swing away was a rusted ladder that descended to a grilled walkway that was sprayed by the waterfall. Creed pulled himself back into the pipe and looked the scientist up and down. 'Doesn't look good,' he sighed.

'Could we lower ourselves down?' Haze asked, obviously not relishing the prospect of jumping.

'You got a rope?'

The doc edged closer to the bounty hunter and dared a glance over the edge of the pipe. 'By the Spire!' he gasped.

'Doc!' Creed yelled over the deafening roar of the water. 'Can you swim?'

The bounty hunter was suddenly aware that he was heating up again. Wishing that his worst fears would prove unfounded he turned around slowly. Standing in mid-stream ten metres away, his grimace of pain and anger illuminated by the phosphorescence in the water, was Ignus Mander. As his body temperature began to rise it seemed to Creed that Mander's orange hair was aflame at the tips.

Mander relaxed his hands, the wisps of flame dissipated and the bounty hunter was freed of the unbearable burning sensation that was gripping his body. 'Caught between a rock and a hard place,' the pyro taunted. 'Or should that be a drop and a hot place?'

Quickly, Creed weighed up the various options. He could try and take Mander now: he was sure he could beat him in a fistfight, despite the pyro's obvious upper body strength. But would he be able to reach Mander before he cooked him from the inside out?

'Do you know what it's like, Doc, living in constant pain?' Mander asked walking slowly towards them. 'A thousand white-hot needles lancing every nerve ending whenever you move?'

'It was an accident!'

'I suppose I should be grateful though,' Mander said, ignoring Haze's plea. 'If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be able to do this!'

The pyro's fists bunched. Creed and Doc Haze doubled up in agony as they were assaulted by a blast of pyro-kinetic energy.

Nothing else for it, the bounty hunter decided as his head began to swim. Gritting his teeth against the building pain Creed threw himself bodily out of the end of the pipe grabbing the doc by the collar of his lab coat as he

did so. Then there was nothing but air beneath them. Semi-conscious from Mander's assault the two men dropped like stones, only dimly aware of the rotten egg stink of the torrent of the effluent waterfall buffeting them until with a tremendous splash they hit the roiling surface of the lake below. Oily waters closed over them and they sank into the murky grey depths.

* * *

NATHAN CREED OPENED his eyes, which immediately started to sting in the polluted waters. Freed from the agony of his own body overheating by the enveloping waters of the lake Creed's natural survival instinct took over. From the light of glowglobes above permeating the turbid waters he could see the doc only a matter of metres away, dragging himself towards the surface of the lake with unpractised strokes. Not many inhabitants of the Underhive could swim at all - there weren't many bodies of water this close to Hive Bottom that were safe to swim in, for one reason or another - but from Creed's long years of experience in the badzones he would have drowned long ago if he hadn't been able to swim.

The two men clambered out of the stinking green pool and began the unpleasant task of cleaning themselves off. Doc Haze wiped a mass of sludgy suds from the metal dome of his head and then, grimacing, doubled up as he vomited polluted water from his protesting stomach.

'You don't want to swallow too much of that stuff, Doc,' Creed said, trying to remove glistening jelly-slime from his numbed right arm.

'I didn't intend to,' Haze coughed before retching again.

'We can't hang around here,' the bounty hunter said, matter-of-factly. 'Mander will find a way down sooner or later.'

Creed was suddenly overwhelmed by unfamiliar emotions. Here was an opponent who would not stop, driven by pain and hatred to exact his vengeance no matter what. Creed had never been in such a situation before and he didn't like it. For the first time in his life in the Underhive he felt utterly helpless.

The bounty hunter looked out across the broken landscape of the dome.

Or perhaps I'm not so helpless after all.

In the distance, glowing chlorine-green gas vented into the toxic atmosphere of the dome and amongst the others acrid smells assailing his nose Creed could pick out the distinctive reek of methane. They were standing at the edge of a gas-geyser field: pockets of flammable gas produced by various industrial processes and life-support systems elsewhere in the Hive collected here, issuing forth in blasts at regular intervals when the pressure became too great. Creed smiled. It was time to use this inhospitable terrain to his advantage.

Haze spat the last of the muck from his mouth: 'Where do we go from here?'

'That way,' Creed said, pointing with his left arm towards the cracked plain and the venting gas-geysers.

* * *

'WHERE ARE YOU going to run now, Mr bounty hunter?' Ignus Mander asked, his tone derisive. The bounty hunter stood only a metre away from the edge of a precipice that ran a hundred metres in either direction. Doc Haze was slumped against a rockrete boulder close by, coughing violently. It looked like the doc hadn't got long to go in this toxic environment. Mander had the two of them cornered at last. There was no more running for them now, not unless they wanted to save Mander the trouble of killing them - but where would be the satisfaction in that?

The bounty hunter looked a mess, his close-cropped greying hair wet with oily water, his undershirt stained brown by slime and effluent, his right arm hanging uselessly at his side, covered in angry red weals, and grubby bandages, oozing pus, wrapped around both hands. The doc had called him Creed, Mander considered.

'So, which one of you shall I kill first?' Despite the white-hot needles lancing his brain, Mander savoured the moment, looking first to Creed, then to the doc, then back to அ

The bounty hunter sprang forward, rapidly closing the distance between them. The pyro hit him with a bolt of energy but in his arrogant complacency he had given the man the time he needed.

Creed bowled into Mander, and sent them both sprawling in the carbon-black dust. Instinctively, Mander threw out his hands to break his fall and his psyker power was broken.

'Not so tough now, are you?' the bounty hunter spat, wrestling Mander to the ground by the shoulders.

'We'll see about that,' Mander retorted and brought his knee up into Creed's stomach. The bounty hunter doubled up, winded, and Mander pushed his opponent away. Faster than any ordinary man, the grizzled gunslinger was up and at him again, each punch he landed like the pounding of a sledgehammer. Mander retaliated, his muscles bunched.

The two men traded blows, marking each other hit for hit. Creed was determined to keep Mander occupied with his fists so that he wouldn't have the opportunity to use his pyro-kinetic powers. However, despite the bounty hunter's resilience, it was obvious that Creed had been weakened by the hunt.

Slowly but surely, Mander was winning. Finally, in a skilfully executed move, the pyro kicked Creed's legs out from under him and as his knees buckled, delivered a double-handed blow to his chin. The bounty hunter collapsed into the dirt, his sides heaving as he gasped for air in the polluted atmosphere.

Mander clenched his fists, ready to deliver a killing blast of pyro-kinetic energy. 'Well, do you have anything to say before I roast you like a spitted swine?'

'Yes,' Creed said, spitting a mouthful of ash from his bleeding mouth. 'Can a condemned man have one last smoke? You've won, Mander, so let me die with good, honest tobacco smoke tarring my lungs.'

Flushed with exhilaration, having won the fight, Mander felt the magnanimity of the victorious. He was even almost able to forget about the continual splitting headache he lived with every minute of his life. 'Why not?'

With his left hand Creed pulled a sodden, crumpled packet of cheroots from a pocket in his britches.

'They're a bit wet,' he said, almost apologetically.

'Not a problem,' Mander replied.

The pyro leant over the stricken man, bringing his hand close to the tip of the soaking cheroot Creed placed between his lips. With a flick of

Mander's fingers the end of the cheroot sizzled into glowing life, the tightly wrapped tobacco drying in seconds.

'Thanks,' Creed said, 'idiot!'

Complacency had been his enemy again. Mander hadn't seen Creed clasp the piece of broken pipe in his strengthening right hand. The improvised maul connected with the side of Mander's head with a crack. The blow sent him reeling. Suddenly unable to maintain his balance, or to use his legs properly, Mander collapsed heavily over of a small rent in the ground.

His head ached but, it slowly dawned on him, not with the lancing needle-pain of the bullet lodged in his brain. This was a dull throbbing ache at the side of his head that blurred his vision. My skull's probably fractured, he thought, almost happily, but the bullet's been dislodged, maybe only slightly, but no more constant agony!

In the same instant Mander realised - without having to test the fact - that his powers were gone along with the agonising pain.

His eyes swimming in and out of focus, the stunned Mander looked towards the figure of Creed advancing towards him. The bounty hunter still gripped the rusted iron pipe in one bandaged hand and the now-lit cheroot was held between the thumb and forefinger of the other. There was a hiss of gas escaping under pressure and Creed was silhouetted against a glowing green jetting cloud. Moving his head slightly Mander could see other cracks in the floor of the dome and, with his ear pressed to the ground, he could hear the rumble of erupting gas pockets.

Released of the pain he had lived with ever since Doc Haze botched the operation to remove the bullet from his brain, Mander was suddenly filled with a moment of clarity: Creed had lured him right into the midst of the gas geysers.

Mander was caught in a sudden blast of gas, with the force of a compressed-air hose, as the geyser he was sprawled across vented. Through the distortion in the air around him and his owned blurred vision he saw Creed flick the cheroot, saw it tumble end over end towards him and then there was nothing but an acetylene white flare and the heat of a smelting furnace swept over him.

* * *

ANTROBUS VETCH SAT perched as regally as he could manage on his throne-like chair and fixed Gravalax Mune with a hungry stare. ‘So, you have it,’ the Guilder acknowledged, looking to his agent’s open hand and the prepared syringe resting within it.

‘Yes, my lord,’ Mune simpered. ‘The sample has been purified and is ready for insertion.’

‘Excellent, excellent!’ Vetch was almost giggling in excited anticipation. ‘Well then, what are we waiting for, hmm? Give the syringe to Three-Six-Four.’ Mune placed the syringe within the proffered pallid hand of the waiting servitor. ‘Then close your eyes.’

Mune felt his erstwhile bodyguard’s metallic claw clamp down hard on his shoulder. ‘My lord?’

‘I’m told it’s easier to make sense of the newly-implanted memories if you block other sensory input.’

A cold chill passed down Mune’s spine and sweat beaded on his forehead.

‘There’s also a period of disorientation but that isn’t supposed to last for long.’

‘But, my lord!’ the panicking agent spluttered.

‘You didn’t think I’d inject the sample into myself, did you, hmm?’ Vetch snapped, cutting off Mune’s imminent protest. ‘There could be anything in that syringe! And anyway, have you not heard the expression, why have a pit slave and dig yourself? Now we’ll find out who was responsible for fouling up the biggest operation we’ve ever set-up!’

The excitedly leering Vetch nodded to the slave-machine holding Mune. The man felt a sudden stab of pain in the base of his skull that made him gasp and then the plunger was depressed.

Mune’s mind was suddenly filled with a torrent of images as the fluid from Sisken’s brain and the lubricant were injected directly into his brain. Mune’s retinas burned and he screwed his eyes tight shut in an attempt to stop the stinging sensation. One after another the memories poured through his cerebral cortex.

He was standing before an accident cogitator engine in a red lit chamber listening to the instructions of ”Father”. He was drinking in Snake Eye Sam’s gambling den. He was in the centre of a wire-fenced compound when suddenly everything went white. He was standing before himself, Gravalax Mune, and was listening to his own voice telling him to bring Doctor Isaiah Haze to him. He was half-conscious being carried over a man’s back - a man who wore a long leather coat.

The images continued. Gradually his scrambled consciousness began to make sense of the rush of memories. He ”remembered” being in Snake Eye Sam’s. He ”remembered” assisting in planning the operation that would bring an ork into Hive Primus for Lord Helmawr’s zoo. He ”remembered” speaking with Doc Haze

And at last Mune came to a terrible conclusion.

‘Well?’ he heard Antrobus Vetch’s reedy whine as if he were a long way away. ‘Who sabotaged the operation, hmm?’

Mune began to speak, neurotransmitters racing at the influx of serotonin, unable to censor what he was saying. ‘I□ I□ It was me,’ he spluttered, saliva dribbling from the corner of his mouth. ‘I betrayed you!’

* * *

‘GOING SOMEWHERE, DOC?’ Haze spun round, his heart pounding. Standing in the wrecked doorway of the scientist’s ransacked lab was Nathan Creed. He looked more like his old self compared to the last time Haze had seen him. He had recovered his hat and coat, although the later was rather singed around the edges, and the bounty hunter’s stub guns hung holstered at his waist. His undershirt, however, was still almost black with grime and he had acquired some gloves from somewhere to protect his scolded hands.

‘Much as I’d like to make idle chit-chat I have to pack!’ Haze growled, scooping the contents of an instrument drawer into a large bag. The doc’s servitor, One-Eight-Seven, was already holding two full packs.

‘Why?’ Creed drawled, taking a long drag on a smouldering cheroot.

‘Because, in case you hadn’t worked it out yet, Antrobus Vetch now knows that it was me who sabotaged his ork-smuggling operation, and any

minute now a whole host of pit slaves and hired scum are going to descend on this place so that that vindictive bastard-son-of-a-ripperjack can extract more than his pound of flesh! That's why!'

'Oh, I don't think that's very likely,' the bounty hunter said, still smiling. 'Not since Vetch thinks that it was actually Mune who betrayed him.'

'What?'

'Our mutual friend Gravalax Mune is at this moment being prepared for "reassignment" to Stalag Slag Hole.'

Doc Haze strode over to the bounty hunter and clasped his shoulders, giving him a friendly shake. 'Then I'm free! I don't need to leave! I owe you one, Creed. You saved my life from than maniac Mander and now I'm free to live it out in peace!'

'Until the next time,' Creed muttered, 'and you actually owe me two.'

'Two?' Haze let go of his saviour and took a step back, eyeing the downhive desperado suspiciously. 'What do you mean, two?'

'I know why Vetch thinks it was Mune who betrayed him. I saw you mix the brain fluid with the lubricant when I entered the crypt the second time. I'm sure Vetch would like you to explain it all to him, as well as who really sabotaged the ork smuggling operation. I always suspected it was you, doc.'

Haze felt the blood drain from his cheeks. 'So, what do you want in return, Creed?' he asked sourly.

The bounty hunter took another long drag on his cheroot and exhaled a great cloud of blue-grey smoke. 'I'll let you know,' he said and, tipping his hat to Haze, Nathan Creed turned and strode out of the lab.

And as the bounty hunter left, Haze was sure he could hear him laughing.

BAD MEDICINE

DR LUDVAN MARVO stood alone next to a seething chem pool, slow bubbles of gas emerging from the iridescent soup sloughing off their viscous skins of effluent film like ripperjack larvae shedding their birthing sacs. The methane emissions burned pink and green in the acid air. He clicked his heels nervously and cast anxious glances into the forest of scaffolding that grew from the detritus around the entrance to the forsaken cross-hive shuttle station.

Marvo was still dressed in his showman's attire: feathered top hat, crimson tails, mandlebrot-patterned spider-silk waistcoat, once white britches and genuine, knee-length ratskin jackboots. It paid to look good for the punters, people used to the muted, twilight colours of the Necromundan Underhive. It was amazing how a brightly coloured, gold-buttoned costume immediately won the respect of prospective customers. Of course Marvo wasn't his real name and nor was he a doctor of any description, but Dr Marvo was the name he went by: a stage name, as it were.

And he had no name for the pillar-tall, black ragged-robed stranger who emerged from the darkness of the derelict entrance in front of him, at least none that his master had ever deemed to tell him. For where no names are given, people will always create their own. And in the case of the looming, almost skeletal, figure towering over him now, the half-degenerate peoples of the deepest parts of the Underhive had created many. Deathbringer. Corpsemaker. Bonelord. Plagueking.

To the ratskins of the Broken Spar tribe the inhuman creature - for how could anything human smell like this? - was known as the Death Walker. To the scavvies of Carborundum Edge it was the Soul Taker. To the judges of Arbites Precinct Thirteen the name of the stranger was synonymous

with a number of unsolved cases. Even the primitive scalies had a name for it in their grunting, almost incomprehensible tongue.

Marvo looked up into the cowled hood of the towering figure - who, to his agitated mind, seemed to stand at least two metres tall - and two, red-rimmed, cataract-shrouded eyes stared back at him. Despite appearing to be two sightless, milky orbs, the figures pupil-less gaze bored into Marvo like an auger. He felt himself physically sag before the relentless, strangely piercing gaze…

And suddenly a feeling of calm overcame him - the calm of a man whose will is no longer his own. The figure spoke for the first time. Had he not been so entranced by the hypnotic cataract-stare Marvo might have thought that the voice reminded him of a broken fan-blade clicking in its cycling revolutions as it grated against a wire-meshed grille.

'You have done well,' the stranger said. 'Girder Bridge, Yakapo's Dome and Deliverance have all fallen to join the ranks of my loyal followers.' If it hadn't been for the stranger's sinister hold over Marvo maybe the charlatan doctor would have noticed that the voice coming from the recesses of the cowl was little more than a death rattle. He might also have been aware of the horrible hissing coming from somewhere behind the looming presence of the black-robed figure. 'When the time comes you will be well-rewarded for you obedience,' the stranger went on, 'but for now there is much still to be done.'

Scab-skinned talon-like hands emerged from the folds of the stranger's ragged robe, holding a stoppered glass flask, which in turn contained a clear, purple liquid. The image of a circle trisected by further curving arcs could just be made out on the remains of a faded, peeling label stuck to its side. The stranger placed the container and its innocuous-seeming contents into Marvo's open palms, cold fingers closing the doctor's hand around the glass.

For the first time since the black-cowled figure had spoken Marvo broke eye contact and looked down at the flask he now held in his hands. 'Just what the doctor ordered,' he said.

* * *

NATHAN CREED took a long, languid drag on the cheroot held between his finger and thumb, and eased himself back into the pillow, running the fingers of his other hand through his close-cropped grey hair. Lying on the bed in a sleeveless undershirt and his trousers, he closed his eyes and exhaled with a satisfied groan, finishing it off with a smoke ring. He breathed in deeply again, tensing every muscle in his body as he did so, until his scalp tingled. The room smelled of tobacco smoke, musty bed sheets, stale sweat, and cheap perfume - and he loved it.

Creed opened his eyes. At the foot of the bed his lady-friend, Maisy-Lou, was reattaching a fishnet stocking to her suspender belt. He followed the line of the girl's perfectly proportioned calf up to the smooth olive skin of her thigh and her pert, round backside. He took in the frilly undergarments, the petrol blue basque, her jutting bosom, the alluring cleavage, the swan-like curve of her neck, the cascade of purple hair with the plaits of violet and black, the delicate set of her features, her rosebud lips, the heavily-mascaraed lashes framing her endearing, warm brown eyes.

'Maisy,' he drawled, 'you're the best, baby. You're the best.'

'So when are you going to make an honest woman of me then, Creed?' she said, zipping herself into a tight, and extremely short, black skirt.

'What and take you away from all this?' Creed laughed, taking in the peeling paper, cracked ceiling plaster, bare floorboards and naked light bulb, of the upstairs room where Maisy-Lou entertained her gentlemen visitors, with a sweep of his hand.

Seated at the dressing table, the Ace of Hearts, favourite man-killer eased on a pair of thigh-length rat-fur boots with heels like stiletto daggers. 'In that case, you can get the hell out of here, you bastard,' she said calmly, pulling the bootlaces tight.

'Aw don't be like that, Maisy-Lou. You know you're the only girl for me.'

The saloon-girl stood up and threw a black feather boa around her neck. 'We can't all afford to spend our days lying around in bed.' Her outfit was completed by a top hat covered in dark green crushed velvet. 'Some of us have got work to do.'

Suddenly there were shouts outside and the whomph of a plasma weapon discharging. Someone screamed. The rattle of auto-fire followed. Another

plasma discharge. More cries and shouting.

‘What the skav was that?’ the bounty hunter cursed, startled. A concussive boom, like a fuel tank exploding, rocked the street outside and rattled the windowpanes of the room. Creed was on his feet in seconds. He threw up the grubby window and stuck his head out.

Despite its comparatively large size for an Underhive settlement, Tunnel Town really consisted of just one street that ran between the buildings lining the sides of a vast conduit that was semi-circular in cross-section. To the west the tunnel opened into the spoil hills and ash dunes of crumbling hab-domes. Guild trade routes wound their way through the wastes to the settlements of Ferro’s Gulch and Downer’s Deep, and further still on to Steel Canyon. To the east the tunnel branched, roads leading uphive, to the north, and on to the legendary cross-hive highway - and scavvy territory - of Thunder Road to the south.

Creed took in the scene at a glance. At the point where the runnel branched stood the corrugated iron and ceramite facade of Hackbut’s Arms House. The burning wreckage of a motorbike - it looked like Wendrell Prayne’s - lay in the middle of a scorched blast circle in front of the armourer’s. The street between Hackbut’s and the Ace of Hearts was littered with the bodies of at least half a dozen townsfolk. A sobbing woman was huddled on a veranda.

Almost directly below Creed the bushy-bearded and pony-tailed Wendrell Prayne was hunkered down behind a water butt outside the saloon. On the other side of the street another bounty hunter, Kaspar Van Greel, had taken cover behind a crate on which the ratskin was resting the barrel of his sniper rifle. Both of them had been enjoying the hospitality of the saloon downstairs only moments before.

Their target was in the open, striding down the street from Creed’s right: a mad-eyed half-breed wielding a plasma pistol. The man was in a frenzy. Creed watched as the lunatic let off a series of energised blasts. Firing haphazardly windows blew out, shop signs melted and water pipes ruptured…

Prayne opened fire with his sawn-off, pump-action shotgun. Sprays of red mist showed where the solid shot rounds had hit the lunatic but the man barely faltered. Two lucky shots fired in rapid succession from the plasma pistol seared towards Van Greel, the first obliterating his cover, the

second puncturing the Ratskin's neck. Prayne was fumbling to reload. With his weapon on its low energy setting, the murderous gunman was not so inconvenienced. An energised shell struck Prayne's arm and spun the man round, precious cartridges flying from his fingers.

All this had occurred in only a matter of seconds. Creed turned away, looking at Maisy-Lou grimly.

'Sorry, darling, gotta go!' Creed apologised, pulling on his long leather coat and grabbing his gun-belt from the back of the chair, and burst out of the room.

He took the stairs three at a time, buckling the gun-belt around his waist as he did so. The bar below was empty apart from a few of Maisy's fellow saloon-girls who were crowded in an anxious, scantily-clad huddle at a window. Madam L'Amour's hired help behind the bar wasn't going to win any awards for bravery either, cowering behind the solid plasteel unit.

Reaching the saloon's swing doors Creed slowed, in one fluid motion drawing his two stub guns and spinning the chambers open. Both were fully loaded with dum-dum rounds. A deft flick of the wrist closed them again. Outside the scream of random plasma fire and maniacal yelling continued. With a grin to Madam L'Amour's whimpering protegees and a husky, 'Ladies', Creed stepped into the street.

* * *

BLOOD RAN from a number of wounds on the lunatic's body, testimony to the accuracy of the bounty hunters' shots. But still he came on. Saying nothing Creed depressed the two triggers.

Four bullets spiralled through the air, covering the twenty metres between the gunslinger and the gunman in a split second. The first entered the gunman's body through his gut, tearing out the other side taking most of a kidney with it. The second hit his thigh, severing an artery and fracturing the femur. The third shattered a kneecap while the fourth impacted against his ribcage.

The man stumbled, his mad-eyes fixing on Creed. Three more shots followed, disarming the man, tearing open a shoulder and hitting his chest. The gunman slumped into the dirt, face first.

Creed strode forward, both guns trained on the lunatic. Wendrell Prayne got to his feet, following behind.

'Nice shooting, Creed,' he said as they both stood over the man's body. 'Bastard just didn't know when he was dead!'

With a snarl like a ravening beast the gunman jerked into life. Twisting his neck round he sank his teeth into Prayne's leg. As the big man cried out in startled pain, Creed calmly put a bullet between the lunatic's eyes.

'You were saying?'

* * *

IN THE AFTERMATH of the bloodbath, townsfolk had gathered at the scene like carrion bats round a scavvy kill. As is always the way after unprovoked acts of violence the shocked populace of Tunnel Town wanted to know why the gunman had gone on the rampage.

Snippets of information slowly began to emerge from the morass of gossip, rumour and counter-rumour. After some discussion by the various notaries and town worthies a fairly reliable picture was built up of the man and his movements over the last few weeks.

His name was Plaz Tyburn. He was a half-ratskin drifter and had done a stint bringing in the stinger mould harvest out at Ferro's Gulch. There was evidence of this on his blistered hands where a minor fungal disease known as red-rot, not uncommon among mould farmers, had taken hold.

Creed was at the heart of all these discussions and as the one who had brought Tyburn's rampage to an end the Tunnel Towners turned to him to follow the matter to its resolution - whatever that might be.

It soon became apparent to the bounty hunter that Tyburn's killing spree hadn't started in Tunnel Town either. Following the trail of carnage out into the spoil hills to the west - a thoughtlessly gunned down body here, a smouldering shack there - Creed finally came to the solitary tarpaulin tepee, pitched in the lee of a slag heap, the unfurled tent door flapping in the breeze of ancient air-recyclers.

Cautiously Creed flicked the tarpaulin back with a primed stub gun. The tent was free of occupants. The bounty hunter holstered his guns. There was the drifter's bedroll, the billycan containing the residue of his last

meal and a battered rucksack, no doubt containing Tyburn's few personal possessions. Creed nudged the bag open with a booted foot.

A glass bottle rolled out of the bag and rattled onto the floor of the tent. Dregs of a purple liquid sloshed inside it. With a gloved hand Creed picked it up.

A crudely printed label was pasted to the side of the bottle. On it, in lurid magenta ink and an overly-elaborate typeface were the words, 'Dr Marvo's Patent Panacea' and beneath the legend, in smaller print, 'For the Relief of all Aches, Pains, Maladies and Agues. To be taken as required.'

A cure-all, eh? Creed thought to himself. And looks to me like there's enough left for one more dose.

* * *

'WELL IT'S QUITE a concoction, I can tell you,' Doc Haze said, looking up from the hazy view-plate. The streams of green-lit runes scrolling up the screen reflected from the doc's glasses and the half-metallic dome of his head, giving him the appearance of some kind of datum-drone. 'You didn't get this from any Guilder trading post, I'll wager.'

'Go on,' the bounty hunter encouraged. The Underhive surgeon-cum-scientist had been reluctant to help at first but once Creed had reminded him that he owed him after the Ignus Mander incident and suggested the doc might like to talk it through with Creed's two associates, Isaiah Haze had changed his tune.

'Of course most of it's water, 78% to be precise, but the "body" of the elixir is made up of all sorts of stuff. The bulk of it's crude algal-based stimulants - nothing so refined as Spur or Slaught. But get this, there's evidence of the neurone plague virus in there too. Not a lot, it's been heavily diluted, but even a trace like this would be enough to trigger full neural breakdown within weeks, and with regular intake of the stuff maybe only days.'

'Zombie plague?' Creed exclaimed.

'The one and only.'

Creed had encountered victims of the brain-rotting disease before, in the abandoned tunnels under Toxic Sump. 'You're sure?' he asked.

‘No doubt about it,’ the scientist said, wiping his hands on the front of his grimy lab coat. ‘And if you needed any more proof, your friend over there was suffering from the early stages,’ he said, nodding over his shoulder at the dissected corpse lying on the gurney on the other side of the gleaming lab.

‘Guess that explains why he went on the rampage.’

‘The Tunnel Towners asked me to perform an autopsy just to be sure, but then of course they’re paying… Definite lesions in the frontal lobes. It’s obvious in spite of the mess your bullet made.’ Haze glowered at the bounty hunter. ‘Where was it this poor bastard had come from?’

‘Ferro’s Gulch.’

‘Dr Marvo’s Patent Panacea,’ Haze said, picking up the bottle in a bloodied rubber-gloved hand. ‘Never heard of him. I reckon if you want to find out any more about the source of this little problem Ferro’s Gulch is the place to go.’

‘That’s what I was thinking, and you’re coming with me,’ Creed ginned, evilly.

‘I am?’

‘You owe me two, remember. You wouldn’t want a certain Antrobus Vetch finding out about your double-dealings now would you, doc?’

* * *

CREED STOPPED in front of the bridge and looked across the ravine at the settlement of Ferro’s Gulch. The low buildings, tractor barns and mould vat sheds were clustered together at the edge of the precipice. Beyond was prime ground for growing stinger mould. Here the organic sewage of millions of hivers dwelling in the mountain-city kilometres above overflowed from an acre of waste processing plants in the noxious holestead of Fester Hole, only a dome’s height above, and washed over the uranium fields in a monthly inundation. In the heat generated by the resulting exothermic reaction the stinger mould thrived. An oasis in the no-man’s-land of the wastezones.

Behind the bounty hunter, Doc Haze had also come to a halt, puffing after the brisk walk from Tunnel Town. His hulking servitor One-Eight-

Seven was next to him, its generator idling. The slave-machine watched Creed impassively with one human eye and one, cracked red-lensed camera. Its monstrous mechanical left arm twitched from its shoulder mount.

'No sign of life,' Creed drawled. 'You'd think there'd be someone around.'

'I don't like it,' Haze stated, rubbing his hands together nervously.

'You owe me, remember?' Creed reminded him, a hand moving towards a holstered stub gun.

'But after this our debt's clear, right?'

'Have it your way, doc,' the bounty hunter replied, taking the cheroot from his mouth and flicking it at the ground. As he crushed the butt under his boot he saw the muddied piece of parchment trapped in the churned-up ruts created by the treads of some large transport. Creed pulled it free of the dirt.

In gaudy pinks, greens and yellows overly-fussy titles, similar to those on the label of the recovered panacea bottle, proclaimed to those who could read, 'Dr Marvo's Marvellous Medicine Show' and for those who couldn't the image of an enthusiastically smiling, top-hatted, white-bearded bespectacled character held out a stoppered medicine bottle while in the background bent old men danced jigs, their crutches discarded, and a beaming woman had one eye open and one closed.

The lame walk and the blind see, Creed considered. I think I should meet this miracle worker.

'You ever been to a marvellous medicine show, doc?' Creed asked, grinning like a dune shark.

'Er, no,' Haze replied uncertainly, 'although I did catch a freak show down in Perdition once. Men with eyes on stalks, a woman with pincers instead of hands, a thing with more tentacles than a sludge jelly orgy… Scavvies and mutants the lot of them. The Redemptionists thought all their Ascensions of the Emperor had come at once when they caught up with them outside Ratbone Gorge.'

Creed was already halfway across the bridge. 'Come on, doc, and bring your walking screwdriver with you.'

* * *

CREED'S FIRST suspicions had been right: Ferro's Gulch was deserted. Balls of tumbleweed bundled along the main street in the fan-wind. Glowglobes flickered fitfully on the concave surface of the dome roof far above. The sign outside the Slygo's Saloon creaked on rusted hinges like a worn-out augmetic. Opposite the drinking-hole a motorbike stood abandoned. However, there were also signs of a battle as clear to the gunslinger as the effluent stench wafting in from the mould fields.

But if there's been some trouble here, Creed pondered piecing the clues together, where are the bodies?

'If you were new in town,' the bounty hunter said, turning to his reluctant companion and taking in the main street with an expansive gesture, 'where would you go to meet the locals, doc?'

'Is this a trick question?' Doc Haze said, scratching at the inflamed skin where his scalp joined his metal skull-plate. Creed grinned at him, making the doc feel even more uncomfortable. 'The drinking hole, of course.'

'So we're in agreement once again. Great minds think alike eh?'

'And fools rarely differ,' Haze muttered under his breath as the bounty hunter strode towards the doors of Slygo's.

'Word to the wise, doc. Let's stick together,' Creed suggested grimly as he approached the saloon's swing doors, unholstering his stubbers, and added, 'Ready, girls?'

The interior of the bar was under a shadowy twilight. Rather than wait for his eyes to adjust to the gloom Creed simply flicked his photo-visor down from inside the brim of his hat. The scene was instantly picked out in lurid shades of green.

Tables and chairs lay overturned as after a bar-room brawl, broken glass crunching under his boots as he advanced into the otherwise silent saloon. Only it wasn't silent. There was an unsettling chomping sound and a slurping noise like something sucking the marrow from bones.

Creed scanned the bar, seeing everything in graduating shades from almost black through emerald and jade to brilliant viridian. Bodies littered the room, facedown on the floor, lying at unnatural angles over the few still-standing tables, bent backwards over the bar and upturned chairs,

slumped against the balustrade of the broad staircase. The whole place smelt of death. And there were things moving in the darkness.

Creed heard the clump of iron feet behind him indicating that Doc Haze and the servitor had entered the building. Something else had heard it too.

A sibilant hiss passed around the room as the plague zombies raised their heads and turned their jaundiced gaze at the intruders.

'By the Spire!' Haze gasped behind him.

The half-dead things abandoned the corpses they had been feasting on and, at the prospect of fresh meat, advanced on the trio.

'I hope you're prepared, doc, because now the killing begins.'

The muzzles of Creed's guns exploded in the darkness and a partially decomposed creature was hurled backwards by the impact of a dum-dum round. But that was only one. Dozens of shambling figures were loping towards, jaws snapping reflexively, ruined throats issuing forth bestial growls.

A half-dead thing, still wearing the torn remnants of a flouncy gown, lurched at Creed. Clumps of tangled blonde hair hung from its parchment-thin scalp and a smudge of lipstick was smeared across its pockmarked lips, which had drawn back from the rictus grin of its fleshless gums. The stub gun kicking in his palm, the bounty hunter put two bullets into the walking corpse, turning its head into an expanding mist of bone, blood and rotted brain tissue.

Beams of searing blue-white light cut through the advancing mass of zombies from behind Creed. Glancing round he saw Doc Haze aiming haphazardly into the pack with a battered laspistol. Close by the unknowingly altruistic cyborg snapped the neck of a zombie gripped in its vice-claw, crushing the spine of another under a metal hoof.

The bounty hunter quickly assessed the distance between his party and the doors that led to freedom. Ten metres at most but the space between was filled with yet more of the degenerated townsfolk.

On they came, broken teeth snapping relentlessly. Creed knew what could happen if those teeth sank into his flesh… Swinging the stubber in his left hand sideways he found the jaws of a mouldering harridan, gangrenous green blubber sagging horribly on a body gone to fat before becoming infected by the degenerating neurone plague. The brain-dead woman's teeth clamped around the muzzle of the weapon and splintered.

‘Eat this!’ Creed spat and blew out of the back of her skull.

* * *

CREED BUNDLED out of the through the saloon doors, bowling into the fleeing Haze. Using his tumbling momentum, Creed rolled onto his feet and bounded into a run, agile as a ratskin brave.

The bike stood propped up on its stand on the other side of the street. He leapt into the saddle and thumbed the ignition rune. The bike’s engine roared into life, growling like a branded synth-ox.

‘Get on!’ Creed yelled over the deep-throated petrochemical bellow of the beast. The doc didn’t need telling twice.

Zombies burst into the street, moaning horribly. There was a crash of splintering wood and One-Eight-Seven barged through the timber wall of the bar, half a revenant saloon-girl clinging to its pistoning legs, a slime-oozing spinal column still locked in its claw.

‘Now let’s get the hell out of here!’ Creed shouted over the bike’s diesel-guzzling roar.

The back wheel of the bike spinning wildly, the stink of scorched rubber overwhelming the stench of death in his nostrils, Creed slewed the vehicle round, throwing up a spray of gravel behind them. Then, with an over-revving scream the bike hurtled forwards, bombing along the main street, away from Slygo’s Saloon, towards the bridge out of Ferro’s Gulch. Creed was leant forwards over the handlebars, Doc Haze clinging on for dear life, One-Eight-Seven pounding after them on its augmented leg-chassis.

In no time they were crossing the bridge, already doing a breakneck speed, the plasteel sections clattering under the speeding bike’s wheels. As soon as they were on the other side, Creed pulled on the brakes. The vehicle skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust.

The bounty hunter pulled two grenades from the recesses of his coat, yanked their pins free with his thumbs and rolled them across the chasm-spanning construction. Two more followed.

‘Good thing I picked up a little extra at Hackbut’s,’ Creed said, thinking aloud. ‘Even if he does charge like an overloading fuel cell.’

‘What?’ the doc queried, intruding on Creed’s musings.

‘Highly,’ he replied.

The bridge joists juddered, this time under the heavy, piledriver footfalls of the chugging servitor. The grenades bounced as they rolled, one dropping between the girders. At the end of the main street the growing zombie pack continued after them. One-Eight-Seven reached the safety of the far side of the chasm.

The grenades detonated in a series of eardrum-battering bangs, accompanied by a blinding pyrotechnics display. The midsection of the bridge fell away immediately, dropping into the murky abyss below. With a groan of dying metal the rest of the structure buckled and twisted, cantilevering until, with a resounding clang that echoed from the dome roof high above the bulk of the bridge hit the wall of the chasm. The rogue grenade had exploded in a crevice, blowing the rusted stanchions free of the solid face of the ravine.

‘That’s them taken care of for now,’ Creed said, wiping his sweat-beaded brow with the back of a hand, ‘but this ain’t over yet.’

‘So what now?’ Haze asked, happy to let the bounty hunter continue to take the initiative, having not wanted to be involved from the start.

‘You get back to Tunnel Town, get in touch with your Arbites contacts - and don’t look like that, after the last couple of favours I’ve done for you I know you’ve got them! Get in touch with your contact and inform what pass for authorities down here about the outbreak in Ferro’s Gulch. I’m going to follow our only other lead. I’m going after this Dr Marvo.’

And how are you going to do that?’ Haze asked, rubbing his hands together in agitation.

‘By following those,’ Creed said, pointing at the jagged ruts of transport tracks that had churned up the surface of the road leading into and out of the townstead. ‘Now, off the bike.’

‘You mean I’ve got to walk?’

‘Get your pet monkey-wrench to carry you if you want but I’m out of here before this happens anywhere else,’ he stated firmly, jerking a thumb at the baying pack of rotting townsfolk trapped on the other side of the ravine.

Doc Haze dismounted. ‘Tell me, Creed, why are you doing this?’

Revving the huge bike’s engine, the bounty hunter turned to face the doc. ‘Always was a sucker for hard-luck cases,’ he pronounced loudly over the

growl of the machine. Unbidden an image of Maisy-Lou's pouting face swam into his head. And with that he sped off after the mysterious Dr Marvo.

* * *

OUTSIDE THE mining settlement of Downer's Deep, Dr Marvo's Marvellous Medicine Show was in full swing. 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, what you've all been waiting for,' the top-hatted, tinted-spectacled ringmaster-like Dr Marvo announced, displaying via exaggerated gestures that he had nothing in his hands or up his sleeves. 'Brewed from hive-fungi and distilled blindsnake venom, according to a secret recipe passed down by my dear old ratskin grandmother. Allowed to ferment in an actinide still of my own design,' the charlatan's voice was building to a crescendo as he reached the climax of his sales pitch. 'Bathed in the light of phosphor vents for a full cycle and brought to you today as Dr Marvo's Patent Panacea!'

With a dextrous flourish that proved that the hand is indeed faster than the eye, Dr Marvo extracted a corked bottle from out of thin air. The crowd gathered before the gaudily painted wagon with its fold-down makeshift stage gasped, awestruck. Simple sleight of hand, that's all it was, but it got them every time, the gullible fools. As Dr Marvo liked to say, although never within earshot of a paying customer, there were only three certainties in life in the Underhive: death, the Guild and the fact that Underhivers were gullible idiots, ready to part with their hard-earned credits at the drop of the good doctor's hat - or rather for a drop of the good doctor's 'cure-all'.

Marvo looked out over the crowd of expectant, slack-jawed faces, as a giant spider might inspect the hive-vermin caught in its web.

There was a moment's palpable silence. Then a cracked voice piped up from somewhere at the back of the throng: 'Looks like 'shine to me, sonny!'

'Hiveshine, sir? What, not even Second Best?' A few of the miners laughed at the jibe. Marvo fixed his gaze on the toothless, rat-whiskered little old-timer. He was supporting himself on a pair of crutches.

‘Well I wouldn’t waste my money on it,’ the old man retorted. ‘Been a cripple since that day in Number Six shaft seven years ago. No fancy doctoring’s ever put it right neither,’ he went on. ‘Only thing that would, would be a new pair of them cy-borg legs from Zircon’s mech-shop and I ain’t never gonna be able to afford them, now I can’t work what with being a cripple an’ all.’

‘Come forward, sir.’ Marvo beckoned to the old man, with the encouraging smile of a ripperjack. ‘That’s quite some story, sir, and I’d like to do you a favour.’

The old-timer hobbled towards the stage, the crowd parting to let him through. ‘What’s that then?’

‘Would you try some of my ‘shine?’

‘Go on then. I never likes to turn down a free drink.’ Propping the crutches under his arms the old man took the bottle and, with his back to Marvo’s audience, took a swig.

‘How’s it taste?’ Dr Marvo asked, a look of wide-eyed excitement on his face.

‘Disgusting!’ came the vehement reply.

‘But of course it tastes disgusting,’ laughed Marvo, sticking out his tongue and pulling a face, ‘because that’s how you know it’s doing you good! But how do you feel?’

There was a pause for dramatic tension during which time you could have cut the atmosphere with a chainsword.

‘Fantastic!’ shouted the cripple. ‘I feel fantastic!’ With that he dropped his crutches and began hopping up and down on the spot. ‘Why I’ll wager Lord Helmawr himself doesn’t feel better right this second!’ The old-timer grabbed Marvo’s hand and shook it vigorously. ‘Thank you, son. Thank you kindly. I’ll take a bottle!’

‘What’s your name, sir?’ Marvo asked the skipping guinea pig.

‘Abrams, Ichabod Abrams!’

‘Well, Mr Abrams, it’s on the house!’ Out of the corner of his eye Marvo could see the credulous miners digging deep for their credits. ‘All righty folks, who’s going to be the first to buy a bottle?’

A shot rang out across plaza. The crowd turned as one. Standing behind the mass of people was a tall, leather-coated figure, only the stubble on his chin visible under the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat. In one gloved

hand he held a wide-muzzled stub gun and in the other an empty glass bottle.

'You people,' the stranger shouted to Marvo's potential customers, 'get outta here!'

Nobody moved.

'Didn't you hear me?' the gunslinger shouted. 'Well maybe you'll hear this!'

He fired off a succession of shots. Screaming and yelling in confusion, the crowd fled. In a few moments the only ones remaining were Marvo, the plant and half a dozen ugly, overweight hired scum.

'I know what you're up to, Marvo!' the gunslinger called across the square. 'Thing is, I'm asking myself, who'd be sick enough to start spreading a neurone plague?'

'And you're not going to find out!' Marvo yelled back angrily. 'Well? What are you waiting for?' the showman screeched at his henchmen. 'Take him out!'

* * *

THIS REALLY ISN'T fair, Creed thought as he picked his targets, almost leisurely, there's six of them and only one of me. They really haven't got a hope, the poor sons-of-sumpsuckers!

Not only were the sort of scum Marvo could afford to hire overweight and out of shape but in his time as a bounty hunter in the Underhive Creed had taken on plague zombies, an alien ork, a pyromaniac wyrd and a whole gang of scavvies single-handedly - and won!

'Okay, ladies,' Creed called to the charging, gun-waving scum, 'shall we dance?'

* * *

'GET UP THERE and drive!' Marvo screamed at the now miraculously cured old-timer. Spluttering, Abrams clambered into the cab of the transport while Marvo hastily pulled up the fold-down stage, locking the side of the transport in place. Bullets spanged off the reinforced plasteel

hull, chipping the paint that spelt out the legend ‘Dr Marvo’s Marvellous Medicine Show’. As the engine roared into life, Marvo leapt into the caravan-cum-sales booth through the open back.

‘What did he mean, neurone plague?’ Abrams called back, over his shoulder, from the driver’s cab.

‘What?’ Marvo blustered.

‘I’ve nothing against conning a few dumb dirt-diggers out of their creds but I ain’t having anything to do with no neurone plague!’

‘Not now, you old fool! Just get us out of here!’ Marvo screamed as a gurgling cry signalled that at least one of the hired scum was dead. ‘Or do you actually want to taste some of the merchandise just for once?’

Oily-black smoke belching from its exhaust stack, the rig lurched forward. Marvo stumbled sideways as he tried to keep his balance and bumped into a drum lashed into the back of the transport. Inspiration hit with the first bump in the road. Tugging the rope free of the barrel, a hefty kick then jettisoned it from the back of the moving vehicle.

The full fuel-drum crashed onto the road, its lid spinning free and its contents splashing onto the cracked rockrete of the plaza. Clinging to a roll-bar Marvo watched the fuel wash around the feet of the betrayed scum and spread across the square towards the interfering stranger. A struck match would be all it would take…

* * *

CREED SAW THE danger before the slow-witted scum, the three that were left anyway. The rapidly expanding oil slick erupted in a burst of orange and vermilion flames two metres high. Creed sprinted for the bike he had left idling at the edge of the square, the burning rabble screaming as the fire engulfed them.

Gunning the throttle, Creed drove the bike free of the fire-slick. Steering it round the rubble-strewn edge of the plaza he took off after Marvo’s rig. Marvo had a head start on the bounty hunter but on a bike, over rough ground, Creed reckoned he had the advantage. Sure enough, only two clicks out of Downer’s Deep he caught up with the gas-guzzling caravan.

Don’t rate my girls’ chances against that monster, he thought, the wind whipping his coat tails out behind him and threatening to remove his hat. Besides, it takes all my strength to control this thing with both hands on the column. Only one way to do this and that’s up close.

Accelerating, Creed pulled level with the jerking rig as it bounced back through the hills towards Ferro’s Gulch. Before the driver realised what he was doing, still gripping the handlebars tightly Creed sprang up onto the bike’s padded seat.

Here goes nothing!

With an almighty leap Creed propelled himself upwards. He hit the side of the rocking transport and grabbed onto the edge of the roof. The bike swerved into a bank of compacted ash, crashing onto its side and the engine cutting out.

After a moment’s desperate scrambling he pulled himself onto the roof and lay there, spread-eagled, attempting to recover his breath.

The ghost town of Ferro’s Gulch loomed grey in the distance. In front of it, the deep black scar of the gulch itseif opened like a wound in the compacted ash and spoil.

As Creed lay there he could hear the angry Marvo cursing as he stumbled about inside the back of the rig. Guns aren’t going to be much good in this situation, Creed considered. He slipped his bootknife from its sheath against his calf and clenched it tightly between his teeth. With both hands free he grabbed the roll-bar at the back of roof and, somersaulting forwards, swung himself into the back of the transport.

He landed squarely in the back of the wagon. The charlatan doctor stood behind the driver’s cab surrounded by the periphery of his life and trade. In one hand he held a glass flask containing a clear, fizzing, purple liquid. In the other was a large syringe, which he was filling from the flask.

‘This is the neat stuff,’ Marvo chuckled, a manic gleam in his eye. ‘Symptoms like these need special treatment.’ The insane doctor lunged, the syringe clasped in his hand like a dagger, as if he intended to stab it through Creed’s heart. The ravine loomed larger through the front of the cab.

Then the knife was in his hand. Creed pulled back his arm. As he flung the knife, the transport bumped as a wheel went over a particularly large obstacle. The blade sailed past Marvo’s ear before hitting the back of the

driver's neck. Marvo's plant slumped lifelessly over the steering wheel. The momentum of the jolt sent Marvo stumbling into the unsteady bounty hunter. Wrong-footed Creed toppled backwards. Then, for a brief moment, there was air beneath them and the two men fell out of the back of the wagon into the dust and dirt of the road. With a squeal of tyres on twisted metal the rumbling rig hit the edge of the demolished bridge and went over the edge of the ravine.

Creed rolled in the dirt, the shrill scream of the transport's engine ringing in his ears until it was killed by a grating, axle-shearing crash which in turn was followed by a seismic detonation, as the rig hit the floor of the chasm. An expanding cloud of black smoke and roiling crimson flames rose above the rift.

In an instant the bounty hunter was on his feet, both stub guns in his hands and trained on the sprawled, facedown form of Dr Marvo. 'Up you get, you crazy son-of-a-bitch, nice and slow.'

Marvo flinched. Creed tightened his trigger fingers then stopped. He could hear an almost imperceptible fizzing sound. Marvo's body spasmed again. Stepping forwards cautiously Creed gave the doctor's body a sharp kick, flipping the charlatan onto his back. The bounty hunter gave an involuntary gasp and took a sudden step back.

Dr Marvo's face had begun to dissolve. His nose had melted into the nasal cavity as if eaten away by acid while his teeth rattled loosely in gums turned to bloody pulp. The man's eyes bulged, crying tears of bubbling fluid that in turn ate into his drawn cheeks. Then Creed realised that the same process was affecting the rest of the man's body. It was as if it was being eaten away by acid from the inside.

Sticking out of Marvo's waistcoat was the syringe, the hypodermic needle sunk deep into his chest, the plunger fully depressed. Marvo had landed on his own weapon. It didn't need Doc Haze to work out that such a large dose of undiluted neurone plague injected directly into his bloodstream was more than Marvo's body could cope with. The result: total cellular collapse.

'How's that for a taste of your own medicine?' Creed muttered as he holstered his stubbers and turned away. Scum like Marvo's always have a bounty on their heads, the bounty hunter decided, and I'm the man to collect.

He didn’t have far to walk to recover the bike. At last he managed to right it. Creed remounted, punched the ignition rune and, the engine purring like a contented feline, headed back towards Downer’s Deep.

I could get used to this, he said to himself as he rode off into the silver-white lithium haze of globe-set.

* * *

A DARK-ROBED figure, tall and thin and motionless as a stalagmite, watched the gunslinger leave. Behind it a group of hissing half-decomposing things sensed their master’s cold fury - despite being brainless beasts - and slunk back, deeper into the shadows of the conduit runnel. They snarled uneasily, instinctively reacting to their master’s abyss-black mood.

‘I know, my pets, I know,’ came a voice from within the fold of the figure’s cowl like talons scraping on slate. ‘I predict there will be a reckoning between us and the downhive desperado. In time.’

And then the tomb-dark figure was gone on the fan-winds, back into the shadows. Back to the deadzones. Back to the darkest places of the Underhive to continue his work. And to wait.

THE BATTLE FOR THE DOME 7-7-3

GUNFIRE RAKED THE grilled metal walkway, suspended high over the rutted and crater-pocked, slag-waste floor of the dome, on heavy-linked chains. Shotgun shells spanging off the metal gangway, last-bolts leaving molten pinholes in the handrails and flicking flakes of rust from the corroded metal pipe, the ganger, hunkered down to make himself as small a target as possible, scurried over the fragile, giddily swinging bridge to safety behind a sturdy pillar, several metres in diameter.

Back in cover, slamming another energy cell into his own laspistol, Vito Scald, leader of the Orlock gang known as Scald's Hotheads, darted a glance around the iron pillar he was sheltering behind and took in his gang's disposition around the dome in an instant. His men – juves, gangers, heavies, all – were scattered around and over the ruined structures of the derelict dome, as were their rivals for the territory, the muscle-bound, meatheadGoliaths of the Ironfist Gang.

Dome Seven-Seven-Three, also known as Kasto's Claim, was a ruin with nothing to offer an ambitious gang on the make, home now only to Ripperjacks and other hive vermin. But Dome Seven-Seven-Three was the prize nonetheless, for it was the gateway to the mineral and ore rich seams of the Fingel's Rift.

Scald's Hotheads were armed with a hotchpotch of weapons, from autoguns and serrated-edged knives to flamers and even the occasional heavy weapon. Life had been good to them of late and they had been able to get hold of the best armaments money could buy in Mercury Falls. And slowly but surely they were prevailing against the apparently more robust opponents. It was quite simply a case of brains over brawn, Vito considered.

Suddenly an Orlock braced against a twisted spar, jutting up from the broken ground twenty metres below, was enveloped in a ball of

incandescent fire. Screaming like a stuck face-eater, the burning young man fell writhing to the ground. Vito looked to where the fireball had originated and saw the hulking, steroid-boosted form of a renegade pit slave.

The cybernetically-enchanced monster still had Guild ownership studs implanted in his skull, just as he still sported the over-sized, piston-driven rock-hammer that replaced his right arm. In fact, he appeared to be more machine than man, much of his body supported by a crude exoskeleton. In his remaining hand the pit slave held a recharging plasma gun, its coils glowing blue with building energy. Vito recognised the outlaw pit slave, as one Crusher Harlon, from bounty flyers he had seen posted around the trading post of Fluke's Breach.

There was the rattling roar of a heavy stubber as Big Aldo located the pit slave in his sights. Sparks flew where stub gun shells impacted against the metal portions of the slave and blood sprayed where they hit what flesh remained. Such a hail of bullets would have killed any other ganger where he stood but it only caused the pit slave to stagger backwards as his unnaturally augmented body soaked up the barrage of bullets. But that in itself was enough.

As Harlon was forced back by Aldo's stubber assault, one iron-shod foot slid over the slime-slick lip of a steaming chem-pit. The top-heavy slave lost his balance and toppled backwards into the lurid, acid-yellow sludge with a gloopy splash. It seemed to Vito that the toxic soup began to boil and putrid, gaseous smoke rose in clouds from the chem-pit.

Suddenly an acid-blackened figure lurched out of the pit and fell to the ground, spasming fitfully. It took Vito a moment to realise that it was the pit slave's scorched exoskeleton and bionic attachments, all that was left of Crusher Harlon.

With the death of the pit slave the Ironfist gang really was in trouble and Vito could see, by his ugly grimacing expression, that the Goliaths' leader, Nastrol Skedge, knew it. Now was Vito's chance, to not only claim Kasto's Claim for himself but to bring down the mighty Nastrol 'The Executioner' Skedge, at the same time. Laspistol on rapid-auto Vito ran out from cover bellowing with one adrenalin-fuelled yell of joy and fighting frenzy.

A retina-searing bolt of energy streaked past him with a shrieking hiss as it burnt a path through the air, leaving behind it the tinny smell of

ozone. The las-bolt sliced cleanly through a link in one of the chains supporting the walkway twenty metres above the fragmented floor of the dome.

The grilled gangway listed badly. Robbed of one support, the extra strain placed on another corroded bolt finally became too much and the pin sheared.

Vito suddenly found the world dropping away before him and one end of the walkway swung downwards, and the rubble-strewn dome floor rushed up to meet him as he was thrown forward into empty space.

As he plummeted groundward, the Orlock caught sight of the leather coated, bald-headed figures that had entered the dome. The fight for Dome Seven-Seven-Three was far from over, but for Vito Scald it was.

PIT FIGHTS

WELCOME, FIGHT FANS, to the twenty-seventh All-Comers Fight Fest, here at the To-The-Death Arena. Boy, have we got a treat in store for you tonight? The pit fight to end all pit fights. We've got Piledriver. We've got Ramrod Rameses. We've got the Head-Harvester. We've got Ghyarotha, the Ratskin Savage. We've got monstrous mutant Milliasaurs, hungry Scalies and the biggest rat-beast you've seen this side of the Effluous. Who will leave as our Lord of the Spire and who will leave in a body bag? It's all here, fight fans! At the twenty-seventh All-Comers Fight Fest!

Nastrol Skedge opened his eyes and looked around him. Nothing had changed. It was the same nightmare situation he had awoken to after those slime-sucking snakes of Delaques had turned betrayer on the Ironfists. Unbelievably, his Goliath gang were being beaten by those snivelling dogs of Vito Scald's when the Network had turned up, emerging like mirror-eyed ghosts seemingly from nowhere.

At first Sisken and his Delaques had leant their firepower to help the Ironfists bring down Scald's Hotheads but as soon as that threat had been eliminated, they turned on the Goliaths. Skedge himself had been buried under a collapsing bulkhead and was taken alive, only to be sold to the notorious Guilder Phelonius Carbonyne to become one of his pit fighting slaves, fodder for the endless bouts of his bloodthirsty entertainments.

Skedge's head ached like someone had rammed an electrode into his brain, as indeed they had: several electrodes, in fact.

'Stop squirming,' the techno grumbled. 'If you want me to get this saw unclogged and working again before the next round you'd better sit still!'

Skedge looked up into the man's eyes, or rather eye – the other having been replaced by a red bionic implant – and scowled. The techno was bald and wiry, and reminded Skedge of the traitorous Delaques. The Goliath's shoulder and back ached from where the monstrous buzz-saw arm had

been grafted onto his body and bolted to his spinal column, his left arm having already been brutally removed. The flesh around his newly-implanted ownership studs was still red-raw too.

'Are you done over there yet, Lazlo?' asked one of the other pit slaves sitting waiting inside the plasteel-walled bunker. He had a grease-black topknot of hair, a Guild skull tattoo on his left shoulder and a huge hydraulic claw in place of his right arm.

'I will be if this muscle-head stops twitching worse than a Ratskin overdosing on Spook,' the techno complained.

'Don't talk about our potential associate like that, Lazlo,' the claw-armed pit slave chided, a broad grin on his face.

'By the black Abyss, what are you talking about?' Skedge growled, speaking for the first time since he had entered the bunker after eviscerating half a dozen scavvy mutants in the last round. 'We're slated to fight in the next round!'

'We're breaking out of here,' the pit slave said. 'Let me introduce myself. The name's Scuzman Veck. I and my friends here,' he took in the other cyborgs in the sweaty gloom of the bunker with a sweep of his claw, 'have had enough of living life at stinking Phelonius Carbonyne's pleasure. So, after the third round…'

THIS IS IT, fight fans, the one you've all been waiting for. Scuzman Veck's Meat Grinders against the Executioner and the Beast of Broken Spar, Ghyarotha. You won't see the like of this grudge-match again in a long time. Place your bets and remember, when the klaxon goes the blood flows!

The roar of the ground was deafening. Underhivers packed the stands of the arena, all eager to see the pit slaves slaughter each other in new and messily interesting ways. Scuzman Veck and his crew were lined up on the other side of the rust-stained ash floor of the fighting pit with Skedge and the drugged-up Ratskin brute they were calling the Beast of Broken Spar facing them.

Through narrowed eyes, Skedge could see the obese warty bulk of Phelonius Carbonyne squatting like a fat, albino toad on his servitor-carried palanquin within his own private arena box. Diesel engines roared and oily black smoke belched into the air as the pit slaves fired up their

tool-weapons. The crowd roared even louder, in expectation of the bloodshed to come. If the plan was to work they had to make this look convincing…

DON'T PANIC, FIGHT fans! Don't panic! Everything is under control! Please remain calm and return to your seats. Everything is under con-… fzzz… krzzz… You can't come in here! Get out! Hey, watch that power ca-… sprzzzz…skzzz… Get out, everybody! For skav's sake, didn't you hear me? Run while you still can!

Underhivers scattered before him as he powered towards them, sweeping the whirling blur of his buzz saw before him. Exhilaration running through him, Nastrol Skedge came to halt outside the arena gates and looked around him. They had done it. Skav, but they had done it! Well, at least he had done it. He could hear Scuzman Veck still cursing, trapped by the press of Guilder guards in the arena behind him. But Nastrol Skedge was free.

SPIDER DAEMONS

THE HUNTER WATCHED as the bionically altered figure trudged onwards through the metal forest of collapsed scaffolding, punctuated now and then by a fallen monolithic slab of rockcrete. Prey, the hunter thought. Prey for the hunt.

* * *

HEARING THE CRUNCHING footsteps getting nearer, Nesting Python remained perfectly still where he lay on the flat girder beam over the Ratskin path that wound through the ash dunes, so as not to give his position away to whoever, or whatever, it was that approached. He had felt the clumping footsteps before he had even heard them and it had given them all the time he needed to get into position.

Whatever it was that had strayed into his tribe's territory was unknowingly about to become his prey. Its head would become the trophy by which he would prove he had passed the Rite of First Blood and earned the right to be recognised as a warrior of the Redsnake Tribe, a brave no longer. Feeling the juddering stomping even up on the beam, Nesting Python curled his forefinger around the trigger of his handbow.

Then his prey rounded the side of a rockcrete boulder and the young Ratskin baulked. His potential prey was an ugly, hugely-muscled, mohican-haired monster, half-man and half-machine, like something from one of the ghost legends of his people.

But, Nesting Python considered, if he brought down a monster such as this he would earn the respect of even the most hardened warriors of his tribe and Purple Moss would be the one wooing him rather than spurning his advances, as she had done ever since they were children.

Athletically, and silent as methane mist, the Ratskin swung down from the girder, depressing the trigger of his handbow as he did so. The dart flew true and struck the hulking, buzz saw-armed fiend squarely in the chest. Nesting Python landed in a crouch in front of the man-machine, but rather than finding himself facing a dying enemy he was now face-to-face with an enraged beast. Could it be that the creature was somehow immune to the Widowmaker venom he had tipped his arrowheads with?

The man-machine's flesh and blood fist struck him like an iron fist and sent him flying. As Nesting Python scrabbled in the dirt for his handbow, his erstwhile prey fired up its jagged-toothed saw blade.

Sudden as a striking ash-viper, something dropped from the darkness above them on a glittering line and, before the cyborg could take another step, thrust half-metre long steel claws through skin, metal, muscle and bone in one grinding scream of a thrust. Vomiting blood, the man-machine was hoisted into the air so that its iron-shod feet dangled just above the ground.

Nesting Python only caught a glimpse of this new insectoid, chitinous spine-armoured, bulbous-eyed creature before it disappeared back into the darkness, pulling the man-machine's heavy body with it, but it was enough. He knew what it was that had saved his life and it made him feel sick to his stomach.

Spider Daemon, the brave thought, and with that Nesting Python picked himself up and ran.

* * *

HIGH ON A NARROW platform jutting from the concave curving wall of the dome, the Malcadon Spyre Hunter added the Goliath's head to the carefully arranged pile it had collected since the hunt had begun. Twelve so far, and many more where they had come from. Prey just waiting for the kill.

MEDECINE MAN

THE FLICKERING EMERALD flames of the fire illuminated just this one tiny corner of the vast sump-dome, drawing an eerie luminescence from the photo-reactive fungi coating the stalactites of ore-deposits suspended from the roof of the cavernous dome. They in turn cast shimmering, rainbow reflections on the oily sheen of the surface of the polluted lake where it lapped at the ferro-rockrete shore. The eerie copper-green firelight also under lit the Ratskin Shaman's angular features, lending them an even more harshly cold and knife-like quality. The spiral tattoos on his cheeks seemed to swirl in the ever-changing light.

The shaman was clad in the garb of a tribal medicine man of the feral peoples of Necromunda. The rat bones strung to his ceremonial armour knocked against each other as he moved, the hollow sound eerily echo-amplified. From his waist hung the pelt of a giant rat, the same rat whose skull now adorned the top of his shaman's staff. He had a pointed goatee of a beard and from his pierced ears hung tiny archeotech artefacts. Such relics helped him to commune with the Hive Spirits and here, in the uninhabited dome, in the 'natural' environment of the toxic waste zones of the Underhive, he could commune with those same spirits more closely.

Casting a handful of Scarlet Feng spores into the fire, the shaman began his invocation, as thick, foul-smelling orange smoke poured from the fire of burning fungus stalks.

'Great Spirits of the Hive,' the Ratskin intoned. 'Once again our sacred lands have been desecrated by the hivers and evil drawn down upon us. Our hunters have become the hunted, slain by the Spider Daemon in its quest for fresh souls. Your humble servant, Quaking Dome, beseeches you to aid us now, o mighty masters of Hive Primus, the true Lords of the Spire. Send your terrible judgement down upon the defilers. Let the sacrilegious and the blasphemous know the wrath of your retribution,' the

medicine man chanted, throwing a handful of grey-black grit into the flames. Picking up his staff he rattled it over the now sparking purple blaze. ‘By the Hive Spirits, may it be so.’

Quaking Dome was suddenly aware of movement nearby. Looking beyond the fire he peered into the gloom over the lake. Sparkling diamonds eyes looked back at him. He felt the hackles on the back of his neck rise. At the same time he heard the rippling surge out on the lake of something moving towards him over the oily surface.

Raft spiders, hundreds of them, were gliding over the filthy water on spindly, crab-legs, their bodies white and glistening. Hearing a skittering sound above him the shaman looked up. Scuttling down the sides of the dome above him were yet more arachnids. These were covered in coarse black and crimson hair and were as large as dogs. The spiders moved as one, as if guided by one will. Then they stopped, every single one of them, none encroaching within the circle of light cast by the flickering fire. The shaman’s prayers had been answered.

Smiling like a snake, Quaking Dome got to his feet and walked unhesitatingly towards the mass of furry and slime-wet bodies. The arachnids parted before him and then surged in behind him to follow the shaman as he strode towards the tunnel that would take him out of the sacred dome and back towards the settlements of the hivers. Soon the desecrators would know what vengeance was, when the wrath of the Hive Spirits was visited upon them.

RETRIBUTION

THE SETTLEMENT OF Lucky Break burned. Crimson and vermilion flames rose high into the still air of the dome. Above the burning holestead lights flickered, through the smoke, against the ceiling of the dome in a myriad constellations, looking so much like the night sky that untold millions inhabiting the mighty mountain city of Hive Primus would never see. Figures moved amidst the flames, scarlet shadows spewing sanctified death from their holy weapons, roasting penitents and sinners alike in the Emperor's purifying fires of retribution.

Coughing violently, her lungs full of acrid fumes, Crazy Maisy dodged a blundering, smoke-blinded hiver and ducked into cover behind a large water butt. A few more hacking paroxysms and the coughing fit passed. All around her was chaos and confusion as holesteaders ran to and fro through the streets of the gambling town, with no idea where they were going. Splashing her face with the stagnant, green-skinned soup that passed for water in the huge barrel, Maisy tired to locate the rest of the gang.

The Hive Tigers had only come to Lucky Break for a bit of rest and relaxation, after collecting on the Graff Brothers contract, but rather than a couple of night's fun at the gaming tables and winding up the locals in the drinking dens, instead they had found themselves in the middle of a Redemptionist Crusade! She had met and dealt with the insane devotees of House Cawdor before, but these Redemptionists were madder than she was.

There had to be an easier way for a girl to make a living than this, she thought. The saloon-girls of Lucky Break had certainly seemed to be enjoying the high life – that was until the Redemption had showed up in town.

Maisy could hear someone shouting over the screams of the terrified populace and the roaring conflagration. It was a man's voice, booming and authoritative, as if its owner was used to being obeyed, no matter what, and one that had total conviction in the message it preached.

'It is your foul living that brought the spider plague upon us,' the voice proclaimed, 'your debauchery that summoned the swarms of flies, your lack of faith that made the mould harvest fail, your ungodliness that caused the Ratskins to rise against us! So sayeth His most holy Apostle Cinnabar!'

Maisy suddenly found herself caught up in the press of panicking gamblers, bar-girls, prospectors, and hired scum trying to flee the town. She tried to elbow her way out of the pack, which, bizarrely, actually seemed to be carrying her towards the so far unseen preacher. Then suddenly the mob parted and the Escher girl stumbled, ending up on her knees in front a pair of scuffed and scratched black rat-hide boots.

She let his gaze rise and took in first the frayed, once golden hem of a robe, then its soot-blackened, once crimson, heavy sackcloth folds, the racking slide shotgun holstered in a sturdy gun-belt, the bandolier loaded with wide-calibre shells, and the scorch-muzzled flamer, its pilot light a needle of brilliant blue flame, the air around it shimmering with heat-haze. The man's face was covered by a polished, ebony devil-mask carved with a leering, unseemly expression. Behind the lunatic priest stood his anonymously-masked and cowled followers.

The Apostle Cinnabar in turn looked down at the purple-haired girl ganger, clad in laced-up leather trousers and pink nylon crop top, with undisguised disgust, as if she were the cultist of some unspeakable, carnally-obsessed deity.

'Tempter!' the gargoyle-masked man screamed at her, unexpectedly. 'How dare you prostrate yourself before the Apostle Cinnabar, Harbinger of the Holy Redemption, offering yourself to him like some voluptuous incarnation of man's most wanton and base desires?'

What was this guy like? 'You don't want to do this,' Maisy hissed, feeling her cheeks reddening with angry heat.

'Vile harlot! Prepare to be judged by the weight of your own sins!' the slavering Apostle screamed, turning the nozzle of his flamer on her.

One concentrated thought was all it took. The Apostle Cinnabar went hurtling ten metres backwards, smashing aside his zealot lackeys in his flight. Maisy didn't know how she did it, just that she could. It was a talent she had, that was all she could describe it as, a talent that had saved her from certain death more times than see cared to remember. The surrounding crowd gasped and before anybody else noticed, Crazy Maisy was gone.

URBAN LEGEND

‘NOW I KNOW what you’re asking yourself,’ the bounty hunter said, taking a cheroot from a crumpled packet, that had been secreted in one pocket of his long leather coat, and lighting it, all the while keeping the wide-calibre stub gun trained on the Van Saar. ‘What you’re wondering is, did he fire eleven shots or twelve? Well, do you fancy finding out?’

Narve Vanderacken didn’t say anything but moved his hand away from the autopistol lying on the plate metal floor only a few centimetres from his fingertips. He could feel cold sweat beading on his brow and trickling into his greying beard. How had it all come to this? What had started off as a straightforward hunt for a piece of tech, stolen by those Emperor-cursed Escher gangers the Hive Tigers, and a bike chase along Thunder Road, one of the few remaining stretches of navigable highway in the Underhive, had ended up with half his gang killed in a flash-flood of industrial waste, no doubt caused be a discharge from the manufactories of Hive City far above, and Vanderacken himself being pursued across half the Rust Sand Desert by one of the most ruthless and notorious hired guns in the sector, with a reputation that reached from Toxic Sump to Steel Canyon.

Vanderacken looked up at the bounty hunter, the brim of his hat hiding his eyes, silhouetted against the fitfully flickering, red-glowing hazard beacon, that also cast its ruddy light over the scuffed and scored yellow and black diagonals of the factory barn’s loading berths. Nathan Creed, gunslinger, bounty hunter and downhive desperado, took a long drag on the smouldering cheroot and reached into the folds of his coat again. This time he pulled out a black metal sphere, bisected into two hemispheres by a knurled ring. Vanderacken swallowed hard. It was the Inferno device: the stolen piece of tech that had got them all into this mess in the first place.

‘I found this in the smoking ruins of what used to be the gambling hole of Lucky Break,’ the bounty hunter’s voice was a distinctive downhive drawl, ‘thanks to a tip-off from a half-breed, who bought his freedom with the information he gave me, and something the good Doc Haze knocked up for me in his workshop.’

Creed tossed the sphere into the air, making the Van Saar wince, and then caught it deftly in his gloved hand. Vanderacken gulped audibly. In a split second he made his decision: it was now or never. The Van Saar made a lunge for the autopistol and rolled sideways as his hand closed around it. The last of the twelve-shooter’s dum-dum bullets impacted against the floor with a metallic ringing. ‘Damn!’ he cursed.

The bounty hunter dived for cover as a chattering hail of autopistol rounds tore apart the fungus wood crates that he had been standing in front of only moments before. He landed heavily, sliding to a halt behind a crane gantry.

‘Now what you should be asking yourself,’ Vanderacken declared, barely able to contain his new-found mirth at this reversal of fortunes, ‘is how you’re going to get out of here alive now that you’re effectively unarmed and I’m the one holding the loaded gun.’

‘Is that so?’ came Creed’s retort from behind the loading assembly. ‘You know what?’ he went on.

‘What you don’t realise is that I was never after you or this infernal Inferno Device to begin with. I only got involved when you and your boys started using me for target practice.’

‘Okay. So I guess we were both just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.’ Vanderacken’s tone was deadly serious now, as serious as a hivequake. ‘Now give me the device.’

‘I don’t have it,’ came the husky drawl.

‘What do you mean, you don’t –’ It was then that sudden, harsh realisation struck the Van Saar ganger, like a speeding motorbike. ‘Oh shi –’

The sub-sonic explosion shook the factory to its very foundations. What glass remained in its high, gothic-arched windows was blown out in a hail of diamond splinters. Crane pylons came crashing down in a cacophonous clattering crash, while the shockwave buckled the steel plates of the floor, sending barrels and drums bouncing away along the length of the building.

As Narve Vanderacken clawed his way out of the pile of twisted wreckage where he had landed, his body below the waist a bloody mess of pulped bone and tissue, Nathan Creed calmly strode towards him.

‘I told you,’ the bounty hunter said crouching down next to the dying ganger, his voice barely more than a whisper, ‘you shouldn’t have got me involved. I’m bad news. The worst. But seeing as I’ve got your undivided attention perhaps you can help me after all. You wouldn’t happen to know the whereabouts of one outlaw pit slave, arsonist and Guild caravan hijacker, who goes by the name of Crusher Harlon, would you?’