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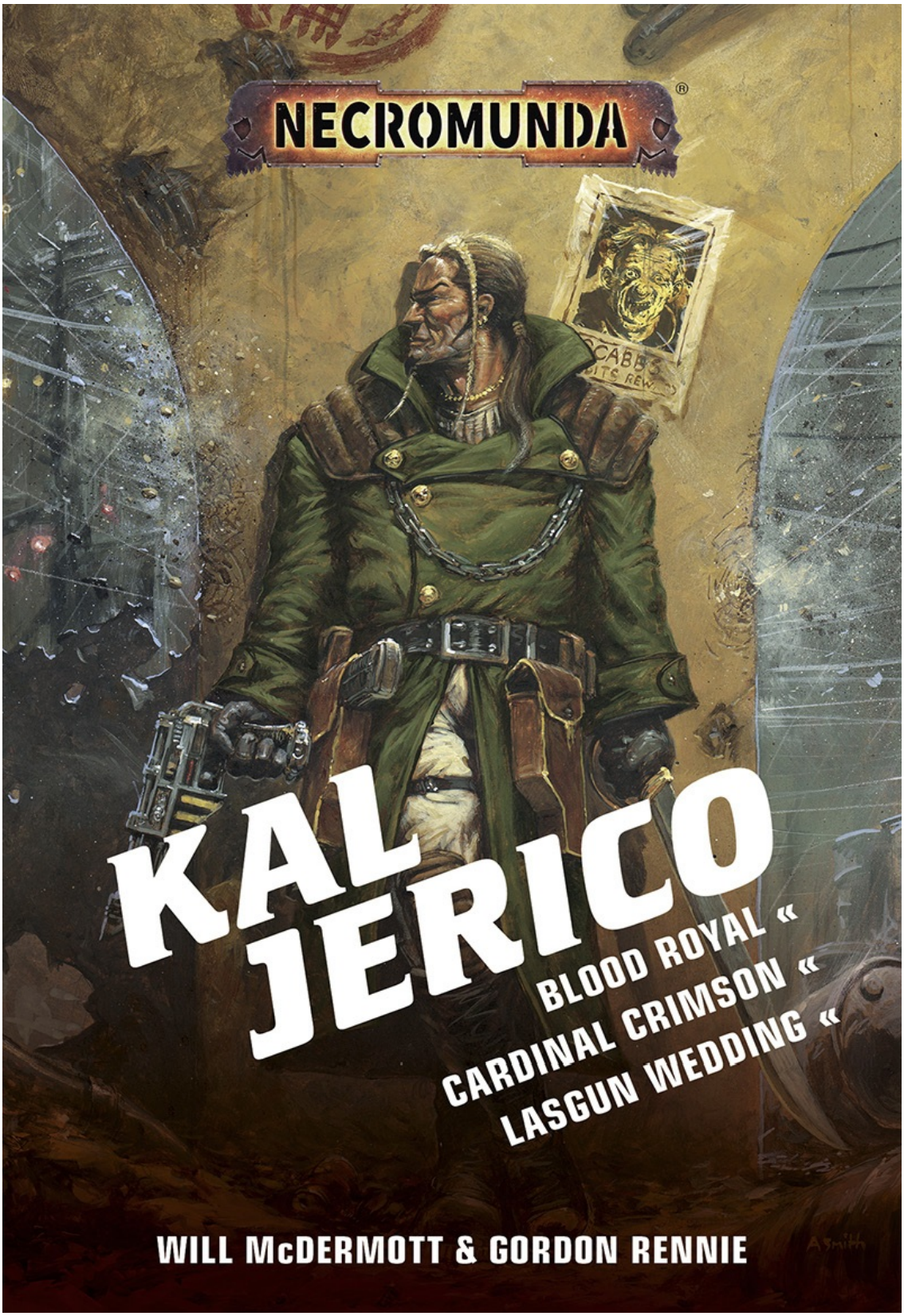
BLOOD ROYAL «
CARDINAL CRIMSON «
LASGUN WEDDING «
WILL McDERMOTT & GORDON RENNIE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NECROMUNDA

KAL JERICO

WILL McDERMOTT & GORDON RENNIE

BLACK LIBRARY

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, Cattalus, 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 re-occupied 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 and 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 firey zealots of the Cawdor. All striving 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 altogether less appealing, possibility.

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

BLOOD ROYAL

PROLOGUE:

SOMETHING WICKED

Arin Bester slipped out the door of Hagen's Hole and leaned against the wall outside. His once-green body armour, faded and stained from years of use, disappeared into the shadows of the Glory Hole twilight. The light coming from the barred windows and narrow doorway behind him provided the only illumination for blocks around. The Underhive settlement had barely enough power to heat and light central dwellings during the hours of 'day', let alone outlying streets and alleys at night.

The old bounty hunter took one last long draught of his purloined Wildsnake before tossing the empty bottle into the alley. The dark liquid burned his throat, and he could feel the dead snake from the bottom of the bottle slide past his tonsils. I must be drunk, he thought, that last swig tasted *good*. As he scratched at the coarse, black hair on his neck, Bester absentmindedly checked his weapons – chainsword on hip, shotgun tied to his back. The rest he could check later.

He closed his eyes to concentrate on standing. The dull-grey wall behind him once hummed with power, but that was in a time before remembering, back when Hive Primus wasn't even a mile high. The dome that was now home to Hagen's and the surrounding Glory Hole settlement had been a crown jewel of the young Hive, its inhabitants slaving away at their machines to make the

nobles rich. But time and the pressing weight of the ten-mile-tall Hive had pushed this once glorious dome, cracked and crumbling, into the depths of the Underhive.

Few amongst the Hive City Houses deigned to enter Glory Hole these days, let alone those prissy nobles high up in the Spire. Not, that is, unless they had fallen from grace or had been forced to flee their enemies, or their family, often one and the same. That was, in a round-about way, how Bester had come to the Hole. He'd been a little too boisterous for the serious leaders of House Van Saar, and after one long and costly drinking binge, his loving family had finally cut him loose.

He'd clawed his way out of the gutter the only way he could – by beating all comers in the pit fights. His fame spread through the Underhive after that, and eventually he made his way to Hagen's. As far as Bester knew, the joint had always been called Hagen's Hole, even though the original Hagen had been dead for centuries. Each new owner tried to make a name for themselves, but the patrons – mercenaries all – insisted on calling every barkeep Hagen, and so the name persisted.

The Hole had been a merc bar almost as long as it had been named Hagen's. That was probably the reason the rundown place had lasted so long. It wasn't much to look at. In fact, it was nothing more than an abandoned power substation on the outskirts of the dome. Blown-out conduits and cracked pipes ran across the ceiling and down the walls inside, making the small rooms feel even more cramped. Iron gratings covered a maze of rusted pipes underfoot, while hundreds of years of debris, congealed into a brown sludge by spilled drinks and spilled blood, filled the voids between the pipes. Hagen – the latest Hagen, if Hagen was his name at all – didn't so much sweep the floor at night as scrape the ooze through the grating.

For all its decay, the presence of mercenaries brought a constant stream of gangers downhive into the settlement and into the bar and business at Hagen's remained steady. They came seeking extra muscle for upcoming battles or guides for treasure-seeking trips beyond the White Wastes. Sometimes they came to town to make a name for themselves by taking down a famous merc. More often than not, the only name they made was chiselled into a headstone.

Merc bars were sacred spaces to those who didn't give a ratskin's snout for the affairs of house or gang, unless they were being paid of course. To the mercs, Hagen's Hole was a place of business and a source of drink and other bodily pleasures. The Hole was where you sold your services and where you spent, or

lost, the rewards. It was a home away from home. No ganger or gang had ever won a battle inside Hagen's Hole. No ganger had ever *survived* a battle fought inside the Hole. The mercs protected their own. They took care of Hagen and his Hole.

Bester reached into a pocket in his skin-tight battlesuit and pulled out a crumpled pack of tox-sticks. Only one left. Damn. He flipped the stick up into his mouth and tossed the crumpled pack toward the discarded bottle. As he lit the stick hanging from his lips, Bester thought he saw movement in the buildings across the street. He switched his augmetic eye to nightvision and scanned the area.

The ruins of an ancient machine shop stood across from the Hole. A huge gash had been blasted in the front wall long ago by archeotech scavengers, and the shop had been picked clean well before Bester's time. It made for a good flop house now when he'd had one too many Wildsnakes. Another flicker of movement drew his attention to the hole in the wall. He adjusted the brightness on his eye and peered into the shop, but saw nothing. He checked the roof. Again nothing. Just a few rats scampering across the conduits that ran from Hagen's Hole to all the other buildings in the area.

The merc knew from personal experience that these pipes no longer carried power. He'd crawled through them often enough to escape the attention of the Watch or to bypass the Glory Hole gates through a hidden escape tunnel beneath Hagen's. All the wiring in these pipes had also been scavenged long ago. Along with machinery parts and abandoned weapons, copper wiring was just about the most valuable archeotech a hiver could find in a sunken dome.

The stink of sweat, sludge and Wildsnake wafted from the doorway into the slightly less toxic night air of Glory Hole, snapping Bester from his reverie. The stench nearly made him puke, and he forgot about the suspicious movement in his flop house as he swallowed the bile. The Hole smelled like a mixture of salty vinegar, fuel vapour, and mouldy hivewasp honey. The odour stuck to your nose hairs and stayed with you long after you left the bar.

Leaving the stench behind, Bester ambled across the street toward the abandoned shop to check on the unwanted guest. It was time to make himself scarce anyway, lest his card-playing buddies come looking for their money. He'd told his companions that he needed to step outside to get a breath of 'fresh' air. But, in reality, he was up three hundred credits and knew that Skreed, Beddy and Dungo wouldn't let him out of the game until they'd won their money back, but he needed these credits to pay off Jerico. Bester had no intention of heading back

into the Hole tonight.

No, it was time to sleep it off, and now it appeared he would have to kick out a squatter before he could bed down. He sidled up to the hole in the wall and peered inside. The bare workshop shone in shades of green to his augmetic eye, while shadows loomed and danced in the periphery of his normal eye, giving the room an eerie, otherworldly appearance; but Bester was used to the odd duality and found that the shadows often gave up more information than the stark, black-and-green world of his nightvision eye.

As he scanned the room, the shadows transformed from amorphous blobs into a series of sharply focused images. Twisted scraps of metal that once held machinery in place dotted the shop floor. The far wall was scorched by fire and laser blasts. A crack ran diagonally from corner to corner. To the side, a crumbling stone stairway led upstairs.

A shadow on the stairs moved abruptly as Bester glanced toward it. He twisted his head to catch the intruder in his nightvision eye, but once again he saw nothing.

'Damn fast,' muttered the bounty hunter. Bester reached over his shoulder and grabbed his shotgun before creeping into the room. He pumped a shell into the chamber and called out. 'I ain't got nothing against you, but this is my place. Get out now and I won't have to shoot you.'

He listened intently, but heard only echoes. Whatever was upstairs moved fast and silent, and seemed to like to keep to the shadows. Maybe it was just a rat. A big rat. Ratskins were known to come into town. Bester had even met a couple of Ratskin mercs acting as guides to the Underhive. They seemed alright to him, but this was his place.

He snuck to the base of the stairs and peered into the darkness above. A man-sized shape flew past the opening, leaving just a streak of black across the green nightvision field. Bester fired. The blast turned the green world blinding white for a moment. From his normal eye, he thought he saw a billowing black shape like wings or a cape.

Bester pumped the shotgun again and moved up the stairs. He blinked away the afterimage of the shotgun blast and then, switching back to normal vision, flicked on the torch attached to the barrel of his weapon.

'Let's see how you like the light, Mr Shadow!' he yelled. As Bester neared the top of the stairs, he unloaded two more cartridges into the room before running in after the shots. He did a quick pirouette, shining the torch around the room. Again, there was no trace of anyone in the place. Not even movement in the

shadows.

He raised the shotgun to pump another cartridge into the chamber, and then he saw it. A black shape loomed above him. It grabbed the barrel of the gun and pulled Bester from his feet, up into the air. He pulled the trigger, but there was no cartridge in the chamber.

The creature slammed Bester into the ceiling. He let go of his weapon and dropped to the floor. Rolling to the side to escape an immediate assault, he heard a clatter behind him and the lights went out. The bounty hunter scrambled to his feet, switched back to nightvision, and unsheathed his chainsword. With a flick of his wrist, the chain began screaming along the length of the blade.

His shotgun lay in the middle of the room. The barrel had been crimped and bent in half. The attached torch lay shattered nearby. He searched the room, but saw nothing but a ragged hole in the ceiling that led to the roof.

Bester looked again at the crumpled shotgun and then at the hole he'd have to crawl through to follow the beast he'd seen. The next decision came easy to the battle-hardened mercenary. 'Okay!' he called out. 'You keep the place. I can sleep mine off somewhere else.'

Chainsword still screaming in his hand, Bester walked over to pick up his ruined shotgun, muttering, 'Whatever you're on will take more than a night's sleep to clear up.' As he bent over to get his gun, the bounty hunter felt a shift in the shadows. He raised his chainsword toward the hole, but it was too late.

The figure swooped through the hole in the ceiling, grabbed Bester by the neck and sword arm, and vaulted back through the hole. Bester finally looked into the face of his assailant just before the hand holding him under the chin twisted, snapping his neck with a loud crack. The chainsword, still screaming, slipped from the dead merc's grasp and fell through the hole, landing next to the shotgun in the room below.

1: FAMILY BUSINESS

Sun streamed past thick, velour drapes – a luxury not known nor needed in the sunless depths of Hive City – and glinted off gold-flecked cords hanging in loops across the bank of windows. The glittering light fell on the back of Gerontius Helmawr, Lord of Hive Primus, and thus ruler of all Necromunda. Helmawr, who normally towered over every room, his political and economic power giving him the stature of a demigod, now sat head in hands and nearly curled into a ball on one of the soft, leather couches arrayed beneath the windows.

From his vantage point atop the spire, the Lord of Hive Primus was used to the sun beating on his back and the rich appointments of the Imperial quarters. In fact, they were a birthright. House Helmawr had ruled Necromunda in the Emperor's name since time immemorial. Helmawr himself had ruled for hundreds of years, longevity was just another commodity his immense wealth and power easily afforded him.

But as brightly as the sun shone on this glorious day, it was a dark mood Lord Helmawr found himself sinking into as he looked at the macabre scene before him. It was hard enough to hold onto his sanity at the best of times, but the stress of today threatened to tip him over the edge. Helmawr was not used to the sight of blood and dead bodies – at least not in his home. Assassination was one thing, many a noble had succumbed to the assassin's blade or a vial of poison emptied into a bowl of soup, but those deaths were clean, artful even, and were accepted practice within the Noble Houses of the Spire. Brutal murder, though, that belonged in the world beyond the Spiral Gates. Violence was a fact of life in Hive City and a way of life in the Underhive. Violence of this nature did not belong in the Imperial palace.

And yet, here it was again.

Helmawr heard himself giggle at the absurdity of the scene before him, and then tried to get a hold of himself. Murder was no cause for laughter.

A palace guard lay dead on the velvet rug at Helmawr's feet. The pool of blood surrounding the body blotted out most of the house crest woven into the fabric. 'That will have to be replaced,' said the lord, pointing at the rug. Four attendants, who always hovered around him like moths fluttering around a flame, jotted down the order on four separate notepads. 'And I suppose we'll need to order some more guards.' Another small giggle escaped his lips.

The body of a second guard lay half on and half off the mahogany four-poster bed that lay opposite him, across the chamber. He'd been cut in half, perhaps while rushing toward his attacker. Blood still dripped off the edge of the silk sheets onto the floor where the rest of the guard's torso and legs had fallen. The blood had probably soaked through the silk sheets all the way to the down mattress, Helmawr realized. The entire bed would have to be destroyed. 'What a waste,' he muttered.

Details. That's what the doctors told him. Concentrate on the little details. He must re-train his mind to be able to maintain focus. 'Have that bed destroyed,' he said to the attendants. 'Or better yet, clean it up and send it to Lord Ty as a birthday present.' The attendants scribbled furiously. It didn't matter whether it was Ty's birthday or not. None of Helmawr's attendants would ever contradict him.

Helmawr was getting bored with this gruesome detail. He felt that there must be some important meeting or another he should be attending. That fact was that he rarely remembered where he should be at any point during the day or, for that matter, what had happened at the last meeting. The attendants kept him apprised of the details he often forgot, but it fell to the royal chamberlain to keep track of his daily itinerary and ensure that Helmawr didn't miss any important meetings.

But that was not possible this day, which made this affair all the more intolerable. The third and final body in the room had belonged to Stiv Harper, Gerontius Helmawr's royal chamberlain and most loyal servant. The battle for the chamberlain's life must have been gruesome. He had been literally hacked to death. The man's severed arms and legs lay at odd angles to his body, forming a crude 'W' on the floor. Helmawr didn't know if it meant anything, but had the attendants make a note of it anyway.

It was the chamberlain's head that most upset Helmawr, though. The top had been sawed off and most of the contents spilled across the polished hardwood. Unlike the two guards, though, there was very little blood around the dismembered chamberlain. Of course, the man had been more machine than flesh. Stiv had been with Helmawr since the beginning, and no expense was

spared to keep such a trusted advisor alive. But this time, there would be no saving Stiv. His wayward son had seen to that. The damage was too severe for even Lord Helmawr's physicians and augmetists to fix.

As Helmawr broke from his pondering, he noticed that the guards who had been searching the room had finished their investigation. They stepped hesitantly up to their lord and awaited further orders.

'What?' Helmawr asked, looking up from the couch.

The guards glanced at each other and hesitated. Finally the sergeant spoke up. 'We didn't find it, my lord,' he said.

'Find *what*?' asked Helmawr.

The sergeant looked confused and pointed at the chamberlain. 'The royal chamberlain's… um… his… er…'

'Oh yes, *that!*' said Helmawr, as one of the attendant's leaned down and whispered into his ear. 'No I didn't expect you would find it. Details, though. Mustn't lose sight of the details. I'm sure the little bastard took it with him.'

He rose and strode across his son's former quarters, kicking Stiv's legs out of the way as he came to the door. 'Clean up this mess!' he called back. 'I'm sure I have important matters to attend to.'

Yes, brutal death had once again come to Lord Helmawr's palace. And once again, it seemed that his homicidal son, Armand, had fled, leaving a tangle of bodies in his wake. But this time the troublesome boy had really gone too far. His son had stolen from his father, and *that* Helmawr could not forgive. He strode down the hall. The attendants ran to keep pace, feverishly writing down names of advisors, who were to be brought before his lordship immediately.

'Kal! Don't shoot him!' yelled Scabbs.

Jerico glanced over the edge of the catwalk to see his buddy scrambling up the service ladder. The numerous scabs on the little half-breed's face cast odd shadows that made it look like he was wearing war paint. 'Why not?' he called back. 'Look what he did to my shirt!' Kal grabbed his sleeve to show Scabbs the rip, tearing the fabric even further in the process. He never should have taken his leather coat off, but it was getting in the way when he climbed the ladder.

'That was my best shirt,' Jerico sneered. The thin, balding man pinned beneath his knee squirmed and tried to speak, perhaps trying to apologise, but all he could do was squeak. 'Hell. It's my only shirt!' added the bounty hunter. He shifted his weight to bear down on the captive's chest.

'So now I think I'll just put a hole in your only head.' Jerico flipped his two

blond braids up out of his eyes and pressed the barrel of his lasgun against the forehead of the mousy little man. He released the safety catch and started to put pressure on the trigger.

Scabbs barrelled into Jerico and the laspistol fired, searing a hole through the metallic ledge and taking a piece of the captive's ear with it. Scabbs and Jerico tumbled toward the edge of the catwalk, both screaming and clawing at the other.

'Don't shoot!'

'What the hell are you doing?'

'We need him!'

'Get off me!'

Jerico felt the edge of the catwalk bite into the small of his back and knew he couldn't stop in time. 'Crap!' he yelled as they tumbled over the ledge. He dropped his weapon and grasped at the ledge with his free hand. 'Hold on!'

Kal's fingers scrambled for purchase as the two men fell in tandem. His hand slapped against a pipe beneath the catwalk and he closed his palm around it as the lasgun clattered and clanged through pipes and cables down to the dome floor twenty metres below.

Jerico's shoulder popped as his torso whipped around beneath the catwalk. Scabbs, arms clenched tightly around Jerico's chest, slipped down to his waist, leaving several streaks of dead skin, as the duo came to a sudden stop. He hooked his fingers into Kal's belt. Above them, Kal could hear his former captive scrambling down the ladder.

'You let him get away!' yelled Kal. He tried desperately to get his free hand onto the pipe.

'I let him get away?' asked Scabbs. 'You were going to shoot him.'

'I was just trying to scare him.' Kal swung back and forth and grasped at the pipe.

'You fired your gun.'

'Only because you tackled me.' Jerico's trousers slipped past his waist and Scabbs began to claw at his partner for purchase. 'Watch it!' yelled Kal. He grabbed Scabbs around the wrist just as his trousers fell to his knees.

'Perhaps you two would like to finish your argument up here?' asked a familiar female voice from the catwalk. 'Perhaps with your clothes on?'

Jerico looked up into Yolanda's brown eyes, which were framed by the Wildcat gang tattoos that ran across her forehead and down both cheeks. 'This is his fault,' he muttered. A moment later, Scabbs was pulling himself up a rope, using

Kal's body to push his feet against as he climbed. Jerico followed shortly after. He rolled onto the catwalk and pulled his wayward trousers up as he spun.

When he got to his feet, he saw the squirrelly captive trussed up and lying on the grating. Blood oozed from the man's shredded ear. A nasty bruise blossoming at his temple was just barely covered by thin wisps of hair. Jerico smiled at Yolanda. 'Good work.'

'Next time you might want to tie up your informant before you two decide to discuss interrogation tactics,' said Yolanda.

Jerico's smile faded. Before Yolanda could react, Kal snatched the laspistol from her holster, and then smiled again. 'Mind if I borrow this?' he asked. He knelt down next to the captive and flicked the safety off. 'Now, you may have heard me say that I wasn't going to kill you,' said Kal. He waved the gun in the face of the quivering informant. 'But that doesn't mean I won't shoot you.'

Jerico grabbed the bound man by the wrists and pointed the pistol at his fingers. 'You might want to unclench your fists and spread your fingers… unless you want me to shoot all of them at once.'

'Give my troops a day, sir, and we'll have that murderous son of a bitch standing before you locked in irons,' said Captain Katerin. His round, red face flushed as he spoke. The sweat that had been beading on his bald head dripped into bushy, black eyebrows.

'And would I be the bitch in this scenario, captain?' asked Gerontius Helmawr. The Lord of the Spire lounged in a high-backed leather chair behind an enormous oak desk. There were no windows in this room, and the only light came from an array of lamps on Helmawr's desk, arranged to keep him in shadow while shining brightly on his staff. The private office was tucked away in the centre of the royal palace, completely shielded on all sides from eavesdropping devices. Long forgotten sound dampening technology made it impossible to hear what was said unless you stood within ten feet of the speaker.

An emergency meeting of Helmawr's top advisors had been called to deal with the Armand situation. Six men stood in a semi-circle facing Helmawr in his private office: Katerin, the captain of the royal guard; Vin Colouri, the guardian of the coffers; Morten Croag, Helmawr's top aide in matters of law; Malchi Prong, the chancellor of the Spire; Hermod Kauderer, master of security and intrigue; and the ranking political officer, a somewhat junior official named Obidiah Clein.

The meeting had not been going well. Helmawr's attendants, who stood behind

him taking notes, constantly had to remind the lord who the advisors were and why they were meeting. The royal chamberlain would normally run these meetings, but he was no longer able to perform those duties. The resulting chaos had obviously left Helmawr even more confused than normal.

'We're talking about my son… what did you say your name was?'

The military man glanced at the other advisors before answering. 'Katerin, my lord, Captain Katerin.'

'Armand is still my son, Katerin,' said Helmawr. 'He may be a little rambunctious at times, but you would do well to regard him with some degree of civility.'

'Sorry, my lord,' Katerin said, bowing slightly. 'My enthusiasm gets the better of me.' The captain of the royal guard dabbed at his forehead with the handkerchief he kept constantly at hand for this very purpose. The sweat began to flow a bit more freely under Helmawr's stare and even the tangle of beard covering Katerin's face glistened with perspiration. He straightened his uniform before continuing. 'All I meant to say, sir, was that my men are ready to tear apart the Lower Hive searching for your… wayward son.'

'I think, perhaps, a more subtle approach would be in order,' stated Hermod Kauderer. 'Kauderer, my lord. Your master of intrigue,' he added. Kauderer was easily a head taller than everyone in the room and towered over the other advisors, but it wasn't his abnormal height that put people off. His narrow face, piercing eyes and sharp features gave one the impression of staring into the face of a hawk who was about to swoop down and rip out your eyes. 'I have agents in place throughout Hive City and enquiries are well underway. I'm sure we can bring this matter to a quick and quiet conclusion, within the hour.'

'Hah!' scoffed Katerin. 'Your agents could never handle that pit b– um, powerful son of our lord. They wouldn't last a minute against him in battle.'

'You assume he would still be standing when my agents got to him,' said Kauderer. He tilted his head slightly and arched his eyebrows as he stared at Katerin. 'If your men storm through the Hive, it will result in a blood bath that will make Armand's indiscretions look like afternoon tea. Discretion is the wise move here.'

'Those were my men he killed up there, Kauderer!' stormed the captain. 'I owe it to them to find their murderer and bring him to justice.' He turned to Lord Helmawr, and continued. 'I could lead a small number of men into the Underhive, sire. A simple search and retrieve mission. Very little collateral damage'

‘I can guarantee no collateral damage,’ stated Kauderer. ‘And no witnesses.’ His lips tightened into a thin smile, or perhaps more of a sneer. Kauderer always looked like he was sneering.

The other advisors smiled as well. Colouri even nodded his head at the last statement. Captain Katerin felt his influence in the matter waning. He looked around for allies. Colouri, Croag, and Prong all dropped their eyes to the floor to check on some speck of dust on their shoes. They rarely took sides openly in battles between Katerin and Kauderer. Both men had considerable power and influence throughout the Spire, and that influence grew stronger as Helmawr’s faculties waned, as they most certainly did now, with his mind scattered by recent events and his most trusted advisor cut into pieces. The captain’s gaze fell upon Obidiah Clein, the junior political officer. ‘You agree with me, don’t you, Clein?’

Clein was only present in the meeting because his superior was the recently dismembered Stiv Harper. He was a small, unassuming man with short-cropped hair and a soft, doughy face topped by wire-rimmed glasses. He was about half the girth of Katerin and half the height of Kauderer. This was Clein’s first time in the spotlight of the big office, but if Katerin thought the little man would be easily cowed without the chamberlain around to back him up, he had obviously misjudged Obidiah Clein.

‘From a strictly political standpoint,’ said Clein, pushing the glasses up his nose and looking back and forth at Katerin and Kauderer, ‘I believe both plans are deficient in one important regard. The other Houses…’

The two strong-willed advisors interrupted and tore into the newcomer before turning on each other again.

‘We must show strength in this matter!’

‘My agents will never be seen.’

‘The other Houses must see our resolve.’

‘Agents of the other Houses can be dealt with.’

‘Your agents will never get close to him.’

‘Your men let him escape in the first place.’

‘Your agents couldn’t find their rears with a stick and a mirror.’

‘What will your men do, bleed on him?’

A sudden crash from the desk ended the argument. The advisors all turned toward their lord. The shattered remains of a crystal decanter lay scattered amidst a puddle of liquid on the desk. Helmawr stood, his face impassive, yet with an almost comical smirk spreading across his lips. He still clutched the

broken glass handle in his hand. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. After a moment, Helmawr dropped the handle onto the desk and sat down in his chair. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said. ‘I believe – that man there – had a point to make, and I would like to hear it.’

All eyes turned toward Obidiah Clein, who took a moment to clean his glasses before proceeding. ‘Obidiah Clein, my lord,’ he began. ‘I am the ranking political officer after the untimely… accidental death of the royal chamberlain.’

‘What did you want to say, Mr Clein?’

‘The real problem is not apprehending your wayward son,’ replied Clein. ‘It is more important to retrieve the item he – um – liberated from my predecessor. We need to get the item your son stole, wouldn’t you agree, sir?’

Clein looked at Helmawr expectantly, almost demanding an answer before continuing. Katerin found the tactic brilliant and wished he had thought of it. The addle-brained Helmawr was easily led, if you knew how to guide him.

Helmawr’s response was immediate. ‘Yes. We must recover what my son stole from me, no matter the cost,’ he said. ‘Take care of it, will you, Clein? I feel I must take a nap now.’ With that, Helmawr leaned back in his leather chair and closed his eyes. A moment later, his soft snoring could be heard wafting across the desk.

Katerin dabbed at his forehead as he looked back and forth at Clein and Kauderer. ‘You heard our lord, he said. ‘We must retrieve the item, whatever the cost may be.’

Clein strode over to the captain and stood directly in front of him. ‘The problem with a frontal assault is not the casualties you will inflict on the hivers,’ he said, ‘although I’m sure Mr Colouri would not enjoy paying for your little escapades downhive. The problem is that as soon as you pass through the Spiral Gates, every other Noble House will track your every move. It’s too visible, and this matter must be handled delicately.’

‘Exactly,’ said Kauderer. ‘My agents are the epitome of tact. No one will even know they were there.’

Clein turned and sauntered over to the intrigue master. Kauderer glared at the top of the little man’s head. Clein hopped up onto Helmawr’s desk to look at Hermod eye to eye. Katerin was starting to realise that the diminutive man before him was much more than a novice bureaucrat, and that might be dangerous.

Clein glared back at Kauderer. ‘As soon as one of your agents ask a single question about Armand,’ he said, ‘spies from every other Noble House will

report back to their superiors and the race will be on to see who can reach him first. Are you willing to bet your life on your spies against the rest of them down there?'

Kauderer was silent.

'I thought not,' said Clein. He jumped off the desk before straightening his glasses which almost fell off his face as he descended. 'That is what we are fighting for here, gentlemen. The information Helmawr's son has access to could ruin this House – that is, it could ruin us all.'

Katerin knew that he had lost this battle. It was time for a united front. 'If we can't send my guards or Kauderer's agents, then what do you suggest?' he asked.

'A third party,' said Clein. 'Someone not officially tied to House Helmawr, who won't raise suspicions amongst the other Houses.' He adjusted his glasses again and smiled. 'We're looking for a criminal hiding out in the lowest reaches of the Hive. I suggest we employ an expert for the task. I suggest we hire a bounty hunter.'

'Ridiculous,' said Kauderer, obviously unable to side with Katerin on anything, no matter how sensible it might seem. 'You can't trust scum like that. They're little better than gangers or muties. They'll turn tail and run at the first hint of trouble, or worse, take our money and then sell us out to the other Houses anyway. We'll be no better off at all – *worse*, in fact. My agents will be a step behind whichever House buys the information.'

Clein just grinned. He had long been ready with the answer to such concerns and, like a true politician, had simply led his counterparts into debating the matter for no reason other than to make himself appear all the more impressive when the time came to impart his own wisdom. 'You see,' he began, 'if my information is correct, I think there is a bounty hunter we can trust.' He was smiling the wide smile of a child who holds the answer to a question that all of the adults have been asking. 'This bounty hunter and Lord Helmawr have a somewhat *special* relationship,' Clein concluded with a grin.

'Now, isn't this more comfortable than climbing around in the ductwork?' asked Kal.

Jerico, Scabbs, Yolanda and Derindi, the wretched little informant who had nearly cost Kal his trousers, were all sitting at a large, round table in the middle of the Sump Hole, Kal's favourite Underhive dive. It had all the charm of a rat-infested slave pit decorated with trash, only the rats were much larger and carried weapons.

The ropes around Derindi's hands and feet had been removed and the bounty hunters were all smiles. To prying eyes, the scene appeared to be nothing more than a group of friends enjoying a drink.

'I'm a dead man,' moaned Derindi. He stared at the bottle of Wildsnake – a foul, brown liquid in a dirty, brown bottle. Still, it was more expensive than Second Best, so things could be worse. No. They probably couldn't. Even the snake in the bottom of the bottle was staring at him. Perspiration matted what little hair Derindi had left above his ears and his palms were so slick that, when he finally picked up the bottle, it nearly slipped from his grasp.

'Don't be like that,' said Yolanda. She giggled and tossed back the blonde locks of hair that had fallen over her cheeks. But Derindi could tell it was all for show; Yolanda didn't giggle. Not unless she wanted something from you.

The show was for the audience that had been forming at the bar and nearby tables. He noticed the icy edge to her words. 'I stopped Kal from shooting your fingers off, didn't I? We're all friends here.' Yolanda's voice grew suddenly loud on the last line, obviously for the benefit of the surrounding gangers and mercenaries.

'You should have let him kill me,' grumbled Derindi. He dried his hands on the rough cloth of his clothes before trying to pick up the bottle again. Perhaps the foul liquid would kill him. 'Bleeding to death through a bloody stump would be like dying in bed compared to what'll happen to me if I talk.'

Derindi thought about running. He looked at the door some metres past the bar and wondered about bolting for it, heading further downhive where neither Jerico nor Svend and his gangers could find him. Jerico wouldn't dare shoot him in the back if he ran, would he? They needed him, and even in the Underhive murder is – well it's at least frowned upon, especially in front of this many witnesses. Derindi looked at the bounty hunter, his teeth clenched into a tight-lipped smile as he picked at the hole in his shirt. Jerico was obviously still pissed off about the rip. And then there was the matter of the trousers. Kal was clearly a man fond of his clothing, and Derindi had thus far made an impressive fist of ruining damn near all of it. Derindi decided not to chance running.

'Oh, it won't matter whether you talk or not,' said Jerico with another forced smile. 'Everyone will think you squealed either way.' He reached into his pocket and Derindi flinched, spraying sweat from his chin onto his shoulder. But when Jerico's hand came back out, it was full of tokens and bonds. He picked one bond from his palm and held it up to look at it.

Derindi saw the gangers at the bar ogle at the ceramite piece as Jerico pretended

to check its authenticity. Then, with a flourish, the bounty hunter slapped the bond onto the table and spoke in an overly loud voice. ‘That’s just the down payment, Derindi. You’ll get the rest when we get our bounty for Svend. Thanks!’

Kal flicked the ceramite bond across the table at Derindi, who caught it out of reflex before it slammed into his stomach. Scabbs reached out and shook Derindi’s hands, his wide smile causing a cascade of loose skin to fall from his cheeks. ‘Yeah, thanks, Derindi. You did the smart thing here,’ he said out loud. Far louder than was necessary, in fact.

Then, in a softer voice, Scabbs added, ‘You’re right, Derindi. Don’t tell us anything. Besides, all we need to do now is sit back and wait for Svend to kill you, and then capture him while he’s digging that bond out of your pocket.’ Derindi pulled away from the scabby bounty hunter, and immediately noticed that the ceramite piece was no longer in his hand. Scabbs’s smile looked more sincere now.

Yolanda leaned in toward Derindi. ‘Or you can tell us where to find Svend right now, and maybe we’ll get to him before he gets to you.’

‘Maybe,’ said Jerico. He picked at the hole in his shirt again. ‘Maybe.’

Captain Katerin took a break from the mound of paperwork on his desk and rubbed two podgy digits into his tired eyes. He hated this part of the job. Weapon requisition forms, guard rotation schedules, disciplinary reports, promotion applications, leave requests – it all came across his desk. Most of it simply needed a signature, but he had to read every piece of paper to make sure his subordinates were doing their jobs correctly and, more importantly, that they weren’t trying to deceive him in some way. The last three Captains of the Royal Guard had lost their positions due to ‘gross incompetence’, which was just a fancy way of saying their subordinates had screwed up. That was not going to happen to Almar Katerin.

The blurry office came back into focus after he pulled the fingers from his eyes, and Katerin practically fell off his chair. ‘How the hell did you get in here?’ he roared, staring up into the hawkish features of Hermod Kauderer. He jumped to his feet, snatched a laspistol from his hip, and pointed it at the head spy. ‘Explain yourself, Kauderer. How did you sneak into my private office?’

Kauderer remained calm in the face of the captain’s rage. He flicked at some invisible piece of fluff on his black robes and raised an eyebrow. ‘Your door was not locked, Captain,’ he said. ‘And I never sneak. I do not, however, make any

sound when I walk, unlike you soldiers, who announce their presence from down the block.'

Katerin decided not to rise to the bait. Instead, he dropped the laspistol on top of the pile of requisition forms and slumped back into his chair. 'What do you want, Kauderer?' he asked. 'I have a great deal of work to do, so let's just skip the normal banter portion of our conversation.'

'Gladly,' said Kauderer. There were chairs facing Katerin's desk, but the master of intrigue did not sit in the presence of others. He enjoyed looking down at people and never gave up the high ground, literally or figuratively. Before continuing, however, he pulled a small device from the pocket of his tunic, flipped a switch, and set the item on Katerin's desk. 'To protect us from prying ears,' he said. 'Now, down to business as you requested. Armand Helmawr must die, and I don't think either of us believes that bastard bounty hunter is the man for the job.'

Katerin pushed the pile of papers aside and leaned forward, suddenly interested in what his rival was saying. 'What do you propose?' he asked. 'That weasel Clein was probably right about using house resources. Our men will attract too much attention.'

'That doesn't mean we can't direct others to do the job that you and I both know must be done.'

'And done right this time,' added Katerin. He spun the laspistol on his desk as he imagined Armand meeting with various, gruesome deaths. 'Done completely and finally.'

'You know what I'm talking about, don't you?' asked the Kauderer.

Katerin nodded, a smirk growing on his face. 'Spyrers.'

'For a start, yes.'

Dungo Bain strode into Hagen's Hole, his metal-tipped boots clanging against the mesh floor, and slapped a token onto the bar. 'Hagen!' he called. 'Snake me.'

The current Hagen, a round man with a long beard and longer, stringy hair, sidled over to the end of the bar. After wiping his podgy hands on a brownish apron that might once have been white, he grabbed a bottle of Wildsnake from the shelf behind the bar and opened it with his last remaining teeth. He slammed the bottle down in front of the bounty hunter, making the credit token jump and sending a plume of the bitter drink sloshing onto the bar.

Hagen wore no shirt beneath the apron, and his flabby chest and protruding gut peaked out around the edges whenever he moved. The patrons never asked nor

checked to see if he wore pants. Hagen leaned over the bar to collect the token, dragging his hair and beard through the puddle in the process.

Dungo pulled the helmet off his head and ran a hand through his thick hair as he checked himself in the mirror behind the bar. He still had helmet head, and the scar that ran from ear to ear across his chin seemed redder than usual. He scratched at the stubble around the scar as he gulped the foul liquid in the bottle, and then looked around the bar. A game was already under way in the back room, but there were few other patrons in the Hole at this time of morning. 'Seen Bester?' he asked.

'Not since last night,' said Hagen. 'I thought he left with you.'

'Nah, he stiffed us,' Dungo replied. 'Ran out for a smoke with three hundred credits in his pocket and never returned.' He drained the bottle and spat the snake onto the floor. It flopped onto the grate, but didn't quite make it through to the pipes. Hagen had another open bottle in front of the bounty hunter before his token even hit the bar.

'That's right,' said Hagen. He owes me for a Snake, too.' Hagen flipped his hair back over his shoulder, and it hit the mirror with a wet slap. 'When I see that rat…'

He never got to finish the statement, for at that moment Jak Skreed entered Hagen's Hole carrying a body over his shoulder. Jak was a bull of a man, easily topping two metres tall and nearly twice as wide at the shoulders as he was at the waist. Sweat seemed to constantly glisten on his bulging, black biceps. 'We have a problem,' said Skreed.

'Ya sure do, Jak,' said Hagen. 'Ya know better than to bring your bounties in here. It's not sanitary.'

'Not my bounty,' said Jak as dropped the dead body on the floor. The corpse made an odd sound as it hit the metal grate, like a burlap sack full of sticks. The mouth on the body was wide open and the eyes bulged, as if the poor soul had been screaming at the moment of his death. The skin on the arms and face was cracked and leathery, and had shrunk so much you could see the contour of the bones underneath. He looked like he'd been dead and buried for months. But Dungo noticed the faded green battle suit and knew immediately that couldn't be the case.

Jak confirmed his suspicion. 'It's Bester,' he said. 'Or it was yesterday.' To drive his point home, Skreed dropped the mangled remains of Arin Bester's shotgun on top of the body. Dungo could see the hash marks etched into the barrel.

‘Thirty-six,’ he said counting quickly. ‘Seven tallies of five and one extra – that’s Bester’s gun alright. He just bagged number thirty-six last week. Bought us all a round of Snake. What in the Spire happened to him?’

‘Can’t say,’ muttered Skreed as he stepped over the body. He walked up to Dungo, and pulled a huge handful of credit tokens mixed with a few ceramite bonds out of his pocket and dropped them on the bar. ‘His winnings were still in his pocket, and all of his weapons were sheathed except the shotgun and his chainsword, which we found still running in his flop spot across the street. The body we found… elsewhere.’

‘It weren’t no robbery then, huh?’ asked Dungo. Skreed shook his head.

‘What could have done that to him?’ asked Hagen, pointing at the desiccated corpse of their former friend. ‘He looks, I dunno, deader than most bodies I seen.’

Jak plucked a token from the pile and flipped it to Hagen, who got him a bottle of Wildsnake. Skreed took a long pull at the bottle before answering. ‘Beddy thinks it’s a vampire,’ he said after a long burp. ‘I think she’s read too many of those pulps, but near as we can tell, all of the blood’s been drained from his body and there are a couple of small wounds on his neck – puncture-like, you know.’

He tilted his bottle up above his face, letting the liquor flow into his open mouth. He caught the snake between his teeth when it flopped out of the bottle, bit it in half and swallowed. ‘Beddy’s out hunting vampires right now.’ He pulled half a snake from his lips and flicked it onto the floor. ‘Says it’s better to do it in the daylight. I told her it don’t matter when you can’t even see the sun, but you know Beddy.’

Dungo didn’t want to ask the next question, so he took a swig from his second bottle to steel his nerves. He swallowed hard as he realized too late that the snake had slid down his throat. He hated the damn snake. ‘Where d’you find the body?’ he asked after a coughing fit that failed to expel the slithering beast.

‘That’s the damndest thing,’ said Skreed. ‘It was stuffed into the power pipes – not the ones running from the Hole over to the machine shop – the main lines hung from the ceiling of the dome.’

Hagen’s jaw dropped. ‘You mean the pipes nobody’s ever scavenged because they’re too high up?’

Skreed nodded. ‘That’s right. We never would have found the body, except there was a pile of copper wiring on the roof. Beddy looked up and saw the feet sticking out. I shot a line into his boot and pulled him out.’

‘Lucky he was wearing his body suit, or his body would have got crushed when

he fell,' said Hagen.

'Yeah, lucky,' said Dungo. He grabbed a token from Bester's winnings and tossed it to the barkeep. 'Do you think that suit would fit me?'

Nemo sat in the darkened chamber and contemplated the day ahead. The Underhive's most notorious crimelord (as Nemo liked to think of himself) enjoyed the dark, and often dimmed the various vid screens that surrounded him. He'd lived in the dark most of his life in the twilight world beneath Hive City. That city was dimly lit compared to the golden splendour of the Spire, but it had power enough for luxuries like light and heat. In the Underhive, there was precious little power for anything.

For the crimelord, the choice had been simple. Life was uncertain enough downhive without relying on tools that could fail, get lost or be stolen without a moment's notice. Instead, he had learned to see, to live, to thrive in the dark. Nemo lived on pure instinct, sensing danger before it arrived, 'seeing' contours in the shape of the darkness around him, and relying on reflexes honed by the strap of experience to the unnatural sharpness of a power sword.

A faint hiss from above alerted the crimelord to an incoming message. One of the most recent technological luxuries Nemo had installed in his subterranean base of operations was a message tube. Powering the tube had been easy; he simply tapped into the tube's power source. The logistics of keeping the tube a secret had been monumental, however. The Hive City end of his tube rotated to a different nexus after passing each message into his network. There were simply too many tube stations in the Hive for the authorities to check, so it was nearly impossible for them to track the tubes back to his base.

Once he had connected to the tube network, a well-trained, highly intelligent rat had been fed into the system that searched for the special capsules Nemo's associates had to use, and routed these capsules to his tube network. Nemo had considered using the rat to hunt down messages to or from important figures in the Hive, but had ultimately decided the security risk was too high. If someone ever suspected their messages were being hijacked, or found rat droppings in one of the capsules, the game would be up.

Very few people had access to Nemo's special capsules, and those that did still needed a special code to send a message to Nemo. He periodically changed those codes to ensure that only his business associates could use the system. But the tube had been a profitable expenditure. His most lucrative jobs always arrived via the tube, generally straight from the spire.

This particular message, like dozens before it, dropped from the tube into the inky blackness of the crimelord's chambers, and Nemo grabbed the capsule before it hit his desk. His fingertips tapped another code – one only he knew – into the end of the capsule. This extra layer of security deactivated an acid trap that would destroy the message before it could be read. In addition to conditioning his senses to life in the dark during his long years in the Underhive, Nemo had also cultivated a healthy sense of paranoia.

The capsule clicked open in his hands and a roll of paper dropped onto the table. Nemo flicked on a lamp to read the message – not because he needed the light, but because the lamp was part of the message system itself. The page practically glowed in the eerie, black luminescence, illuminating words that would have been invisible under any other light.

Nemo read the message twice, not quite believing it the first time. He turned off the lamp after committing the details of the message to memory and then tossed the paper into a different tube that led directly into an Underhive sewage pipe with effluent so corrosive it would destroy the paper quicker than an incinerator. He sat in the dark for a few moments longer, letting his eyes readjust until the shadows came into focus again, then began to write a series of carefully worded notes to be sent to select members of his organisation. This job would require strict discipline and a certain finesse that only his top operatives possessed. Nemo thought he might actually have to get involved in this job personally, but it would be worth the risk. Well worth it, in fact.

2: PLAN ‘W’

Kal Jerico stood astride an air duct high above Glory Hole. His long, leather coat billowed around his legs, blown by a steady stream of air from a crack in the duct at his feet. He leaned out to see the settlement below with a pair of infrared goggles held up to his eyes in one hand. His other hand rested on the butt of the laspistol at his waist.

Jerico had chosen this spot for the ambush carefully, sitting as it did above a crossroads that Svend Gunderson, rogue ganger from House Orlock, would have no choice but to pass. Assuming, of course, that Derindi’s information could be trusted. Plus, the cracked airduct allowed Kal to look heroic while he waited.

‘How long are you going to stand like that?’ asked Yolanda from one side.

Kal looked over. The daughter of Lord Catallus turned Escher gang leader turned bounty hunter was flipping her sword from hand to hand. The look on her face told Kal she was ready to use the weapon, on him if necessary.

‘Until I see Svend coming down the street,’ he replied, putting the goggles back up to his eyes.

‘Or until we push him off,’ added Scabbs. ‘It’s not a fashion show, Kal. You don’t have to strike a pose.’

Kal turned to his old partner, who was picking at one of the perpetual sores that dotted his ugly face. ‘A lot you would know about fashion shows,’ he sneered. ‘Look, one thing you two need to learn about bounty hunting is that it’s as much about style and looks as it is about strength and courage.’

‘With you, Kal, it’s mostly about luck, dumb luck,’ said Yolanda. She sheathed her sword and grabbed the goggles from Kal. ‘Let me look for a while.’ She pushed the swarthy bounty hunter out of her way and took up position above the crossroads.

Kal and Scabbs watched in dumbfounded silence as Yolanda’s breech cloth flapped in the breeze coming from the cracked pipe, showing tantalising

glimpses of her inner thigh. She must have felt the warm air rising between her legs, because a moment later, Yolanda gave up on her heroic pose to move away from the crack.

Kal drew a deep breath, shook the images from his head and regrouped. ‘Did you ever think, Yolanda, that maybe my style and grace bring me good luck?’ he asked, as he sat on the ductwork to take a break. ‘It’s hard work being this good looking. I should get something out of it, don’t you think?’

‘Besides all the women, you mean?’ asked Scabbs.

Kal nodded. ‘Yes. Besides all the women.’ He slapped Scabbs across the top of the head and was immediately sorry he had, as he looked for somewhere to wipe his hand. Eventually he gave up and wiped it on Scabbs’s legs, leaving a slightly less disgusting smear on his palm.

‘Alright,’ said Kal. ‘With Yolanda watching for Svend, this is a good time to go over the plan one last time. According to Derindi, our Orlock bandit has been hiding out in an old hole out in the White Wastes. But he’s supposed to come into the settlement today to get supplies from Derindi.’

‘What if Derindi was lying just to get us to let him go?’ asked Yolanda. She had crouched at the edge of the air duct, well away from the crack to watch the road.

‘I thought of that,’ said Kal. ‘But I don’t think Derindi was smart enough to lie to us. And, if he did, well he wasn’t that hard to find the first time.’ Jerico pulled out his lasgun and used the barrel to draw a map in the dust. ‘Now, Svend will have to pass this crossroads right beneath us on his way to meet Derindi. When he walks into the intersection, I drop down in front of him, while Yolanda drops down behind him… ’

‘Where do I go?’ asked Scabbs. He leaned down to get a better look at the map, and his stench hit Kal like a hot blast of wind from the air duct.

‘Helmawr’s rump,’ said Jerico. ‘Get downwind. How can you track anything when you smell that bad?’ he shooed the half-breed ratskin back a pace with his pistol before continuing. ‘As I was about to say, you, Scabbs, will drop down on this side of Svend. With us blocking three of his exits, Svend will be forced to run down this street, which we have already blocked up, so he’ll be trapped. With any luck, he’ll come peacefully and we can get the full bounty.’

‘Here he comes!’ said Yolanda. She dropped the goggles and drew her sword.

‘Remember,’ said Kal, ‘the bounty on Svend is tripled alive, so if he tries to fight his way out of the trap, shoot to wound.’ He pushed himself back to his feet. ‘Okay, Scabbs, Yolanda – get into position.’

‘Um, Kal?’ said Scabbs.

Kal dusted himself down, before looking up. ‘What is it, Scabbs?’

‘Don’t shoot me, but Yolanda’s already gone.’

Kal looked at the empty spot where the buxom but deadly ex-ganger had crouched moments ago, just as he heard the distinctive ‘skrak’ of a laspistol shot from below.

‘Crap,’ said Kal. He pulled out his second pistol and jumped off the ductwork. ‘I guess we go with plan W as usual.’

At the opposite end of Glory Hole, Beddy Bor’Wick ran along a rooftop in a slight crouch, her pulse rifle cradled in her arms. She was following a trail of fresh blood. Intermittent spatters steamed on the cold, concrete roof. The vampire couldn’t have gone far. She scanned the adjoining buildings, the barrel of the rifle following her eyes. But she saw no movement nor any sign of recent visitors beyond the regular vermin.

Beddy glanced up as she ran, worried the vampire might swoop down on her, but there was nothing but cables, ducts and conduits running along the dome above her. Her black boot felt the edge of a hole, and Beddy instinctively jumped. She’d nearly fallen through an old blast hole in the roof. As it was, the small, wiry but fairly buxom bounty hunter lost her footing when a chunk of concrete fell away as she landed.

Her momentum pitched Beddy forward as she fell through the roof. Her knees scraped against the edge of the hole before her pelvis slammed into the roof, knocking the wind out of her and sending her rifle flying from her hands. She began to slip backward into the hole, scrabbling with her legs and arms against the dusty concrete for purchase.

Beddy winced in pain as she got a knee up against the ragged side of the hole. She knew there was more fresh blood waiting for her when she finally climbed out of this hole. Both knees burned and she could feel a warm trickle of liquid running down her legs into her boots. She gritted her teeth through the pain and climbed out of the hole, rolling over on her back to keep her knees elevated for the moment.

As she lay there, taking deep breaths and working through the pain shooting down her legs, Beddy noticed for the first time that all of the cables, ducts and conduits running along the top of the dome in this section of Glory Hole seemed to converge on a nearly vertical shaft above her. Forgetting her aching knees for a moment, Beddy pulled herself over toward her rifle, keeping an eye on the shaft as she moved.

With rifle in hand once again, Beddy took a moment to check her knees. The shredded skin looked like something a butcher had run through a grinder. Blood and pus oozed from the six-centimetre wounds. She pulled a canister of spray adhesive from a pouch on her belt and administered a bounty hunter's field patch. It would have to do until she could get to a surgeon, because now she had a vampire to kill.

She stood and looked around. The trail of blood definitely ended on the far side of the blast hole. The vampire could have dropped into the building through the hole but, remembering how she and Skreed had found Bester, Beddy was betting on the shaft. As far as she knew, there was no bounty on a vampire, but it had already killed and drained Bester, and probably at least one more victim, so somebody would pay for this waste-spawned monster's death.

Beddy unhooked a grapnel shooter from her belt and took aim at the side of the shaft up as far as she could see. When she fired, the magnetic grapnel rocketed toward the shaft, trailing a thin strand of monofilament from a spool attached to her belt. The wire cable was as light as string, but as strong as steel. The grapnel was good for getting into hard-to-reach places, and the cable could also be used as a garrotte. Its versatility made the grapnel Beddy's favourite piece of equipment.

As soon as the grapnel attached, a winch within the spool began to reel it back in, pulling Beddy up into the shaft. When she got to the end of the line, the bounty hunter wedged her feet in between several pipes to hold her body in place, and looked up into the shaft. It was pitch black beyond the meagre light that streamed in from the noonday streetlamps in the dome below. Beddy took a moment to don a nightvision visor, pulling it down past her tightly-curled, wiry, black hair. The shaft continued on into the darkness, well past the limits of her visor.

'Nothing for it but to keep going,' muttered Beddy as she lined up another shot with the grapnel. The line whizzed out past the edge of her sight before the grapnel clanged into metal and held. The winch began pulling her up farther into the shaft.

When she released her feet from their holds, Beddy felt like she was falling, but only for a moment before she began to rise up into the shaft. She held her rifle in one hand and used the other to steady herself during the ascent. She had to concentrate on the walls to keep from banging into the pipes and conduits that snaked their way up through the shaft.

As she reached what should be the end of the line, Beddy glanced up, but

instead of seeing the grapnel attached to a wall, it was held out over the shaft by some dark form lurking in a side tunnel. She raised her rifle to shoot, but the figure jerked the line, and whipped a loop around Beddy's neck. The loop snapped tight, slicing through leather, skin and bone like scissors through paper.

In the distance, the rats heard the clang, clang, clang, thud of a falling object, and scurried over the concrete roof to see what treasure they might find.

By the time Jerico hit the street, Yolanda was chasing Svend the wrong way, away from the dead end. Even worse, they were both heading toward him, and Yolanda was shooting wildly. The Orlock's leather vest flapped open as he ran, showing a bolero decked out with frag grenades hanging over his dirty white shirt. Kal pointed his own lasgun at Svend, but had to dive to the side as a stream of Yolanda's lasblasts sizzled the air, right where his head had been.

Kal rolled to the ground and tried to kick Svend in the knees as he ran past. The ganger's metal-clad boots slammed into Kal's leather-protected shins with a crack, spinning the bounty hunter around and leaving him face-down at the edge of a sewer grate. 'Crap! That stinks worse than Scabbs,' he groaned.

A moment later, Yolanda charged through, her hair whipping across her face and her chest heaving and straining at her cotton shirt. The buxom bounty hunter nearly kicked Jerico in the ribs as she vaulted over him. She let loose with several more blasts at the retreating Svend as he weaved back and forth across the street. Her last shot singed the ganger's ponytail. She was shooting at his head!

'Alive!' yelled Kal. 'Yolanda, alive! Don't you listen to me?'

'What?' screamed Yolanda. She turned to look back at the prone Kal. At that moment, the fleeing Svend tossed a grenade over his shoulder.

'Oh crap!' muttered Jerico. He rolled away from the bouncing grenade as he screamed. 'Never mind! Run! Grenade!'

Jerico heard the grenade clinking as it bounced ever closer. He knew there was no way he could roll out of the blast radius. He also knew that by the time he stood up, it would be too late anyway. So he rolled and hoped his luck and good looks would save him once again. A pair of boots and a distinctive odour flashed past Jerico. A moment later he heard a dull thunk, followed by a deafening explosion.

The shockwave turned Jerico's roll into an out-of-control tumble. Shrapnel rained down around him, some of it biting through his leather coat into his flesh. But the explosion had sounded too far away and the fragments seemed sparse

and weak. What in the Spire had Scabbs done?

Kal tumbled to a stop and pushed himself up to his hands and knees. Scabbs lay sprawled on the ground down the street, one leg sticking straight up in the air. His already tattered clothes had been shredded by flying fragments, and Kal could see blood soaking through his shirt in numerous spots.

The building next to Scabbs had a new entrance on the third floor. A charred hole between two windows bore witness to the power of pyrotechnics. A pile of new rubble littered the street beneath the hole. Somehow the grenade had exploded against the side of the building, three storeys up. Kal stood and glanced back and forth between the blast hole and the bleeding Scabbs.

'You son of a ratskin!' he exclaimed as he ran over to his partner's side. 'You kicked the grenade. Of all the scav-minded, dumb things to do. You could have blown your foot off.'

Scabbs groaned as he finally lowered his leg. He tried to sit up and groaned again. 'A little help, Kal?' he asked in a pitiful, small voice.

'Quit yer whining,' said Kal as he kicked Scabbs in the rump. 'I'm not done yelling at you for being stupid.'

'I was saving your life,' protested Scabbs. Kal couldn't help but notice that the half-breed's voice was stronger and clearer all of a sudden.

'That was your first mistake.' Jerico leaned down and offered a hand to his friend, surreptitiously checking the little man's injuries as he helped him to his feet. Amazingly, all the cuts seemed superficial. The bloodstains had grown no larger while they talked. 'I take that back,' said Kal, with a smirk. 'Your first mistake was being born.'

'Uh, boys?' asked Yolanda, appearing from behind a doorway across the street. She was completely unharmed, and seemed to have had time to comb her wayward hair before returning.

'Or perhaps teaming up with someone even more reckless than me.'

'Boys?' asked Yolanda again.

'What?' they both yelled together.

Yolanda sauntered over, a smug look on her face. One eyebrow arched, giving the tattoo on her forehead several more lines. 'While you've been gabbing, did either of you think to look for our quarry?'

'Helmawr's rump,' said Scabbs. 'He must have gotten away in the confusion of the explosion.'

'Unless the blast got him, or one of Yolanda's shots put a hole through his head,' said Kal as he scanned the street. 'Yolanda, don't you realise that "dead or

alive" means we can bring some of them in alive? They're worth even more that way.'

'Yeah, but they're more trouble that way, too,' said Yolanda. She put her hands on her hips and stared hard at Kal. 'Frag 'em all and sort out the heads later. That's what I always say.'

'But we had a plan,' said Kal with a pout. 'I drew a map and everything.'

'It's called "Plan W",' added Scabbs.

'No, that's something dif–' Kal stopped. He looked at the debris from the bombed building. There was something sticking out from beneath the concrete rubble. It looked like a steel-wrapped boot. Jerico smacked Scabbs on the back of the head and pointed out the buried remains of their bounty to his partners. 'Damn, Scabbs. You killed him. There goes two-thirds of our bounty.'

He walked over to the pile and began pulling chunks of concrete off of the body. 'Don't just stand there,' he called back to Yolanda and Scabbs. 'Your share is under here, too.'

Later as Scabbs rolled a block out of the way, he asked, 'Kal? What is "Plan W"?'

Kal sighed, thinking about all the bounty that had disappeared with a bang. 'The W stands for wing it, Scabbs.'

'Then why do we use it so often?'

Kal looked at the crushed remains of Svend Gunderson. 'Because nothing else works quite so well.'

In just a few hours, Nemo the Faceless, self-appointed Spymaster of Hive Primus, had collected a dizzying amount of information concerning the current affairs of one Kal Jerico. He knew that his old nemesis had met with a snitch named Derindi in the Sump Hole. He knew that Jerico and his crew had travelled to Glory Hole tracking a rogue Orlock ganger named Svend Gunderson. In fact, Nemo was currently enjoying the antics of the swarthy bounty hunter and his filthy comrades via a remote camera as they dug through rubble to unearth Gunderson's body. Most importantly, Nemo knew the identity of Jerico's next assignment *and* employer, even though the bounty hunter had no idea what fun his immediate future held.

Nemo looked up from his control console and noticed that the balding little snitch was still standing in his office. How long had he been there? Nemo didn't actually care. At least he's been quiet, like a mouse or, yes, a weasel. In fact, Nemo had to admit that Derindi really did look like a rodent as he stood in the

dark, wringing his hands. Is a weasel a rodent? Nemo pondered. Ah well, probably some ratskin blood in him. They do make the best informants, though. Be a shame to lose Derindi.

The Kal Jerico show went on the road on the small screen to Nemo's left. It was time to get back to work, so time for Derindi to be elsewhere. Nemo touched a control on one of the many panels arrayed around him. A moment later a door slid open quite noiselessly behind Derindi. Meagre light entered the chamber along with two of Nemo's henchmen – Orlock twins named Brynn and Riyl wearing matching but colour-coded clothing. One always dressed in indigo while the other always wore crimson. The only problem was that nobody could ever remember which one wore which colour.

'Sir,' said Brynn and Riyl in unison as they came to attention behind Derindi. The snitch jumped a foot into the air.

The twins – and only Nemo could call them that as they despised being considered a pair, even though they were never apart – liked to call themselves Seek and Destroy. They looked tough enough with their black leather vests over red and blue sleeveless shirts, bandanna-covered shaved heads and dark sunglasses, which they wore even in Nemo's shadowy office. In reality, though, Brynn and Riyl were little more than errand boys that Nemo used for small tasks, like taking care of rats.

'Hello, boys,' he said. The twins winced, but remained silent. They had learned not to correct the boss. Nemo smiled behind his mirrored, black mask. He enjoyed their constant displeasure at his use of collective pronouns. 'My business with Mr Derindi is completed. Show him out, and make sure he gets what he is owed for his services.'

Panic streaked across Derindi's face as the twins grabbed him under both arms and hoisted him up off the ground. 'I swear I didn't know Svend was in your employ, Mr Nemo, sir. I woulda let Jerico kill me before giving him up if I'd known I was crossing you.'

The little weasel was shaking so hard, Nemo thought he might slip right out of the twins' grasp. 'Not to worry, Derindi,' he said. 'Your particular services are far more valuable to me than even a hundred Svends.'

Derindi's shaking transformed into vibrations as his head began bobbing up and down like a jackhammer. 'That's true, Mr Nemo, sir. We both deal in information. We're information brokers, you might say.'

'Well, I am a broker, Derindi,' said Nemo. 'Actually, *the* broker. And you are nothing more than a small-time gossip collector. But I see your point.' As he

talked, Nemo triggered several more controls on a few different panels, but he didn't like what he saw. Kal Jerico's face, larger than life, filled one of Nemo's screens. The view kept tilting and twisting, and he could see fingertips at the edge of the screen. The damn bounty hunter had spotted the tail Nemo had placed on him earlier that day!

'Mr Nemo, sir?' Derindi's whining voice floated across the chamber. Nemo snapped his fingers and the snitch stayed quiet.

When Nemo looked back at the screen, the view had shifted. He could now see a Delaque agent – his agent – held off the ground with Yolanda's hands around his neck. A moment later, Nemo saw the ground rush up at the camera and then the screen went black. Nemo sat and seethed. He needed to stay close to Jerico, but the bounty hunter was too suspicious, especially of the Delaque.

A soft whimper from the twice-forgotten Derindi made Nemo twist his faceless head around toward the weasel. It was well past time for the snitch to die. Even through all the platitudes, Nemo had always intended to kill the snitch. He just enjoyed torturing them with hope first. But now, as he looked at the offensively inoffensive little man, a thought occurred to the spymaster.

'Yes boys,' he said to the twins. 'Pay Mr Derindi for his trouble and give him some gear. Derindi, I have an assignment for you.'

'What in the Spire was that thing?' asked Scabbs. He kneeled down next to Kal and looked at the broken remains of Nemo's spy camera strewn on the ground. Before Kal smashed the device, it had looked like a weapon of some sort, except with a glass lens stuck in the end of the barrel. Scabbs had thought it might be a new type of laspistol.

Scabbs picked through pieces on the ground. The casing had cracked open, revealing circuit boards, miniaturized motors and gears, and two curved pieces of glass that apparently once moved up and down the barrel. On the back end, above the handle, was what looked like the smashed remnants of a tiny pict screen.

'Spy camera,' said Kal. He ground his boot into the circuit boards, catching one of Scabbs's fingers under his heel. 'See that metal rod at the top?' Scabbs nodded as he sucked on his finger. 'An antenna. Somebody was watching us. Spying on us!'

'Any idea who?' asked Yolanda. She looked at the dead ganger lying crumpled at her feet, his head twisted almost completely around.

'Too many ideas,' said Kal. 'He's a Delaque. I'd guess from the colours he's

wearing that he belongs… used to belong to the Silent Vipers. House Delaque doesn't like me much. Perhaps another bounty hunter hired him to follow us to Svend. Or, maybe he's just one of my hundreds of adoring fans, and all he wanted was an autograph.'

'More likely he was one of your hundreds of enemies looking to cash in the bounty on your head,' said Yolanda.

'I paid that months ago.'

'Maybe he didn't get the message,' said Yolanda, pointing at the dead ganger. She bent down and began searching his pockets. 'No. No bounty posters,' she announced. 'Some loose credits and weapon reloads, though.' She pocketed the found treasures. 'Killers keepers, I always say.'

'Nemo,' said Scabbs a moment later. He was still poking through the shattered spy camera.

'Yeah. Could be Nemo,' said Kal. 'He's got a thing for messing with my life.'

'No, I mean this is Nemo's gadget,' said Scabbs. 'I recognise the imprint pattern on these circuit boards. Only Nemo uses anything this sophisticated downhive.

'He could have been outfitted by one of the Noble Houses,' said Yolanda as she stuck the ganger's weapon in an extra holster. 'Most of his other gear is pretty standard Hive City issue.'

'Nemo,' said Jerico. He dropped his head and ran a hand through the locks of braided blond hair that constantly flipped into his eyes. 'Helmawr's rump. It's Nemo alright. I can feel it. Something nasty has been crawling up and down my spine all morning. Our lives are about to get a lot more interesting.'

'What do you mean *our* lives?' asked Yolanda, a note of hysteria entering her voice. 'The last time Nemo got his claws into you, *I* almost died. You can handle this round on your own.' She kicked the dead Delaque agent in the ribs and stalked off down the street, her loin-cloth slapping her legs in a syncopated rhythm with the steady beat of her boots.

'Yolanda!' called Scabbs. He stood and started running after her.

Kal grabbed his scab-covered sidekick by the shoulder as he ran past, almost pulling him over backwards. 'Let her go, Scabbs,' said Jerico. 'She'll be back. Besides, if Nemo is after us, we have more than enough problems of our own. We don't have time to deal with women issues.'

'But she might get into trouble without us to back her up,' whined Scabbs.

Kal looked into the scabby face and saw real concern in his friend's beady eyes. Possibly for the first time, Kal realized that the little half-breed really cared for

the Amazon-sized bounty hunter. Scabbs constantly complained about the time he had spent as Yolanda's partner. She was reckless, he said, even more reckless than Jerico, and had almost gotten him killed on more than one occasion. But he obviously enjoyed the danger. Why else would he stick around with both Kal and Yolanda, as they took him to death's door every other day? And then forced *him* to knock on it.

Jerico softened a bit toward his sidekick and put an arm around Scabbs's shoulder, instantly regretting the contact as he was sure he could feel some small critter crawl up his arm. He cringed and kept the arm where it was. 'Yolanda can handle herself just fine,' he said. 'She's tougher than a Goliath and trickier than a Delaque.'

'Yeah,' sniffled Scabbs, 'and crazier than a scavvy.'

'That's our Yolanda,' agreed Kal with a chuckle. 'What in the Underhive could possibly threaten her?'

'I want the head of Yolanda Catallus!' screamed Vicksen Colteen as she stormed into the Wildcats' hideout. Spiky blue hair waved around above the Escher gang leader's eyes like an enraged sea anemone. The sides of her head had been shaved clean to allow the Wildcats tattoo on her forehead to wrap around her ears, but behind the shock of blue spikes, auburn locks flowed straight over Vicksen's head into a long ponytail that reached the small of her back.

She wore a spiked collar on her long, muscular neck, to which were attached the straps of a skin-tight half-vest that ended well above her pierced and tattooed navel. This was no frilly, feminine vest like those a Spire noblewoman would wear over a silk blouse. This leather vest was pulled taut around the ganger's ample bosom, and was studded with brass rings that held live grenades or empty pins from used munitions.

Below the half-vest, the Escher wore a double bandolier as a belt. The bandolier, which swayed up and down atop Vicksen's hips as she strode through the doorway, was filled with shotgun shells and also held the sheath for her chainsword. A pair of tight, tan breeches that looked almost painted on hung low on her hips and hugged her long legs all the way down to her knees, where they met black, spike-heeled boots that shone in the candlelight.

'What's she done now?' asked Themis, Vicksen's second-in- command. Themis Van'Upp had grown up inside House van Saar, but struck out on her own at eleven, fed up with her role as a housemaid in the male-dominated van Saar world. She'd been a Wildcat ever since Vicksen had found her, half-naked and

screaming at the top of her lungs, in the middle of a street brawl over a loaf of bread. Themis had run off into an alley with the loaf, while the boys she had beaten limped away, bent over and groaning.

Themis wore a vest similar to Vicksen's, but topped by a leather overcoat with long chains that hung down from the shoulder to bang against her waist. Her long, blonde hair fell in sheets around her round face, outlining the Wildcat tattoo that circled her eyes and ran down her cheeks to her jaw-line. She was sitting at a makeshift table crafted from a petrified piece of wood that might once have been a door lying across cinderblocks. Themis's heavy stubber sat in several pieces on the table in front of her. She finished wiping down the firing pin and laid it on the table as Vicksen dropped onto a cinderblock across from her.

'It's not anything that witch has done,' she began. 'It's her scavving legacy!' She snapped her fingers twice and a moment later a scrawny man wearing dirty, cotton shirt and breeches scurried into the room through a rusted iron door near the back of the room. Vicksen and Themis sat in the burned-out remains of what must have once been a bar or bistro back when this dome had been a thriving hub of commerce. The front walls were all but gone, just a few blocks to either side of the entrance giving little more than the suggestion of walls, and the furnishings had long since been stolen or rotted away. But in the back, the Wildcats had found a complete kitchen with working stoves and ovens, once power had been redirected to the dome.

The bistro was the nerve centre of the Wildcat camp, which encompassed all the buildings on the square. Most were nothing more than burned-out shells, but the gang members found more than enough prime sleeping quarters in the houses, shops, and inns situated on the square, and Vicksen herself lived above the kitchen, which was both warm from the ovens, and close enough to the kitchen for the mavants, who were little more than male slaves, to hear her frequent summons.

The soiled servant shuffled up to the gang leader, hanging his head low to avoid eye contact. 'Yes, mistress,' he said. 'What do you wish?'

'Soup,' she demanded, 'and a bottle of Wildsnake.' She kicked the male slave in the rear as he turned to trundle back toward the kitchen. 'Make sure the soup is hot and the 'Snake cold this time!'

'If only I could get that kind of fear and respect from the other gang leaders,' sighed Vicksen as she turned back to the table. Themis was busy rebuilding her weapon, and the gang leader watched with awe as her second-in-command

snapped pieces together with almost unnatural speed and precision. After a few seconds, the heavy stubber sat gleaming on the table. Themis picked up the large weapon and spun it twice in her hands before slinging it through the chain hanging at her side.

'What's the problem?' asked Themis. 'We need to show the Manic Miners, the Circuit Breakers and all the other local gangs who rule this section of the Underhive again?' Her eyebrows furrowed and a frightening glare flared in her eyes as she spoke.

'Perhaps,' said Vicksen. 'Since Yolanda left, the Circuit Breakers have encroached on several territories and taken archeotech that is rightfully ours, while Trogan, the Orlock gang leader, has nearly convinced the merchant guilds that the Wildcats are a leaderless, outlaw gang, so they won't deal with us.'

'But you're the leader!' snapped Themis. She grabbed the butt of her heavy stubber and swung the weapon forward. 'Let me show them some fear and respect.'

'The real problem is Yolanda,' huffed Vicksen. 'A Wildcat leader doesn't just leave. A Wildcat leader dies defending the tribe or at the hands of the new leader in a challenge battle. Until Yolanda is dead, the Wildcats have no leader.'

'What can we do?' asked Themis.

'We must find and kill Yolanda Catallus. *I* must kill Yolanda to claim my rightful place as leader!'

'Then find her we will,' said Themis, still holding her heavy stubber. 'No matter who or what gets in our way.'

'Gather the cats,' said Vicksen. 'We're going hunting.'

Yolanda stormed through the mostly deserted streets of Glory Hole like a hivequake rumbling through layer after layer of domes. At this time of day, most residents of the Underhive settlement were out prospecting for archeotech or still sleeping off the previous night's 'Snake. Those settlers who were on the street took one look at the dark cloud surrounding Yolanda's face and the swift gait of her long, muscular legs, and quickly decided not to be there any longer.

The constant slamming of doors and scurrying of feet in front of her didn't improve Yolanda's mood either. 'Rotten, moth-eaten, slug of a scav-worm,' she grumbled as she walked. 'Acts like the whole Hive revolves around him, like he's the emperor of the scavving universe. Didn't even try to stop me from leaving. Too much trouble to be around. What in the Hive is their problem anyway?'

She yelled at a retreating figure carrying several bags overflowing with bread and meats, some shopkeeper heading to the market, or perhaps a thief retreating from the market, who had paused to glance at the stalking bounty hunter. ‘What are you looking at?’ she demanded. Then, when the plump, little man scurried off, she added ‘That’s it! Run away from me. I’m a scavving nuisance to your pitiful life!’ Yolanda drew her pistol in a flash and shot at the now running man, barely missing his head and chipping off a chunk of concrete from the partially-collapsed wall behind him.

Yolanda’s feet had taken her nearly to the far side of Glory Hole, but she hardly even noticed where she was going or where she’d been since stomping away from Kal and Scabbs. ‘At least Scabbs had called after me,’ she grumbled, continuing her running rant against Kal Jerico. ‘But no! Don’t let my former partner show any loyalty to me, Mister High-and-Mighty-Bounty-Hunter. You don’t own the whole, scavving Hive, Jerico!’

This last line was screamed at the crumbling buildings of Glory Hole with an intensity and rage rarely witnessed in the Underhive. At least, rarely witnessed by anyone who survived to tell the tale. The entire street went quiet in the wake of Yolanda’s primal scream. The only sound was the rhythmic stomp of the bounty hunter’s boots.

In the almost unnatural silence, a shadow passed over Yolanda’s head. Pistol immediately in hand, her eyes darted toward the rooftops. A flash of movement drew her gaze to the conduits emerging from the top of the building next to her. She fired.

‘Where we going, Kal?’ asked Scabbs as they wandered the streets of Glory Hole. Jerico’s meanderings since Yolanda left had led the scabby half-breed to believe that they were searching for their wayward partner. They’d been going up one street and down another all afternoon, often going in circles or retracing their steps from hours earlier.

They had currently stopped in front of a burned-out factory that Scabbs was sure he’d seen at least twice already. The rear of the building no longer existed. A hivequake had long ago brought an entire section of dome down on the stone and steel building. All of the useful equipment inside the factory had been demolished or buried under tonnes of stone, never to be recovered; at least not until the next quake shifted it all into a deeper cavern. The quake had opened a handy escape passage that Scabbs knew about, which led from Glory Hole out to an abandoned strike in the wastes.

As Scabbs looked at the landmark they had passed twice in as many hours, he knew one thing was certain; if Kal Jerico was actually trying to get somewhere, they should have been there long ago.

Jerico ran his fingers though the dyed gold locks dangling in front of his face and gave Scabbs a sheepish grin. 'I'm looking for Hagen's Hole, but I think it must have moved.'

'You mean you're lost, don't you?' admonished Scabbs.

'Not lost exactly,' said Kal, now smirking like a mischievous cat. 'I'd say more like momentarily between landmarks.'

Scabbs sighed. 'What you need,' he said while pointing one podgy finger at the nose of his smirking partner, 'is someone skilled at finding their way through the back alleys of the Underhive, perhaps a tracker who knows shortcuts, secret paths or just the most direct route from one side of the scavving dome to the other.'

Kal slapped Scabbs on the back. 'Excellent idea. A guide. We can hire one at Hagen's.'

'If you can ever find it,' muttered Scabbs. He took a deep breath. He could tell that Kal was never going to ask for help, let alone admit he was lost. But the little man was determined to give it one more try. 'I do have some skills as a tracker, you know.'

'Picked that up from me, have you?' asked Kal, his grin broadening across his chiselled face.

'Helmawr's rump!' exclaimed Scabbs. 'The Hole is just around the corner.'

Kal walked to the intersection and looked down the street. 'So it is. I've found it!' he said.

'Go in there and find yourself a new tracker, you ungrateful…' Scabbs fell silent as Jerico strode out of sight and then, after only a moment's reflection, ran to catch up to his partner.

Hagen's Hole was abuzz when Kal stepped through the door. Oddly, though, the noise all came from the front room, which was filled past capacity with bounty hunters from all over the Underhive. At least two dozen mercenaries packed the room. Kal could see Dungo and Skreed, regulars in Hagen's for many years, along with Gorgh, Hern, and Lebow from Dead End Pass, and The King (nobody knew his real name), who rarely came up from Down Town unless chasing some mutie that was trying to escape uphive. Big names all, and Kal couldn't remember a time when he'd seen them all in the same watering hole.

The gaming tables in Hagen's back rooms, which normally would be the focus of attention for most of the patrons this time of night, sat vacant except for those poor souls on the perimeter of the throng who couldn't push their way through to the centre of all of the attention.

That wasn't a problem for Kal Jerico, though. He pulled out his trusty lasgun and fired at the ceiling. The sharp report of the blast and the sudden hiss of air escaping the neat hole he'd just put into the grey conduit above him brought all eyes in the room to Kal Jerico.

The moment would have been perfect if not for the untimely arrival of Scabbs, who rushed through the doorway and slammed into Jerico's back, sending them both to the floor in a heap. The room erupted into laughter as Jerico tried to roll over and kick the scabby half-ratskin tracker off of him and onto the floor. For his part, Scabbs must have realised what would happen to him once Jerico got to his feet, and simply scuttled over and over Kal as the much larger bounty hunter rolled around on the crowded floor.

The laughter had reached a fever pitch when Jerico stuck his lasgun into Scabbs's gut and shouted, 'Get off of me you little runt or, so help me Helmawr, I will turn you into a pile of ratskin droppings!' This had the effect of redoubling the laughter in the room, but also scared Scabbs enough to make him jump off and dash into one of the back rooms.

A hand reached down and grabbed Kal by the arm, hoisting him easily to his feet. Kal looked down into the smiling and still chortling face of Hern. Tears rolled down his plump, red cheeks and fell the short distance from his stubbly chin to his huge, rounded shoulders. Hern was a short man, but had arms the size of most men's thighs. What scared the renegades that Hern hunted the most was that the muscular bounty hunter wore no visible weapons. Most of his friends called him the headhunter, but never to his face.

'Thanks for the laugh, Kal,' said Hern as he released his grip on Kal's arm. Jerico was sure the five red imprints on his forearm would still be there in the morning. 'We can always count on you for a moment of levity at our darkest hours.'

Kal and Hern easily pushed their way back through the crowd to the bar where a bottle of Wildsnake awaited Jerico. 'Darkest hours?' he asked. 'What's happened? Why's everyone here tonight? Did old Helmawr finally die?'

'Now why would that upset any of us?' asked Dungo. 'No, we're all here about the Underhive vampire. Hadn't you heard?'

'Underhive vampire?' asked Kal as he took a swig of 'Snake. Hagen's best was

just as bad as he remembered, but he forced it down and enjoyed the warmth that spread through his body a moment later.

Hagen spoke up. He seemed to be the local authority on the subject. ‘It’s killed two people in Glory Hole so far,’ he said while mopping the bar with a drab cloth as well as part of his long beard, which had gotten stuck to a particularly nasty stain in the cloth. ‘Killed ’em and drained all their blood.’

‘Anybody we know?’

All the heads in the bar bobbed up and down as one.

‘Bester,’ said Dungo.

‘Arin Bester?’ said Kal, almost spitting out the ‘Snake. He swallowed hard. ‘Nah. It’d take an army to kill that old pit champion. He’s stronger than Hern.’

‘He’s dead all right,’ said Skreed. I brought him in myself. Vampire snapped his neck like kindling and bent the barrel of his shotgun.’ He dropped the ruined weapon on the bar as an exclamation point.

‘Damn. Not Bester?’ Jerico slammed his bottle onto the bar. ‘Damn. He owed me two hundred credits!’

‘Beddy also found the body of Pete Parcher earlier today,’ said Hagen. ‘He runs a guild shop over on the south side of the dome…’

‘Or used to before his body was drained and left on the roof of his shop,’ added Dungo.

‘I take it the guild has put out a bounty?’ said Kal hopefully. Maybe he could get the money Bester owed him, with interest.

‘Two thousand credits!’ said Skreed. ‘Beddy’s out there right now trying to cash in.’

Credit symbols danced in Kal’s eyes. The debauchery he could wreak in watering holes throughout the Underhive with that kind of money made the bounty hunter’s heart thump as fast as a repeating rifle. But another more immediate yearning, one that had quickly developed below his beltline, forced Kal to retreat from the throng, which had now broken into several groups who all seemed to be planning their attacks on the vampire.

In the alley beside Hagen’s Hole, Kal relieved his watery burden against the wall while pondering the best way to track and defeat the vampire. It was obviously some mutant beast from the deepest depths of the Underhive. How else could The King have heard about it? It was strong and apparently attacked without warning.

But Jerico knew that none of that mattered. Sure the beast had taken out Bester, but the man was getting on in years and anybody can be taken by surprise.

Jerico, though, had three things that even the best in the business, all of whom were in the Hole tonight, did not have. He had Plan W, which was a tried and true method to defeat any kind of surprise. He had two partners to draw the beast's attention while he lined up a shot. And he had the fabled Kal Jerico luck.

Kal heard a noise behind him and turned too late. Helmawr's rump. That's just my luck, thought Jerico to himself.

3: HEADS OR TAILS

Yolanda's laspistol blast echoed in the empty streets. A shape dropped from the conduit above her. When it hit the street in front of her, something rolled off into the ever-present rubble. The object at her feet was about a metre long, brown, furry, and headless. Bare patches of skin dotted the body, showing old sores from battles and diseases that had never quite healed over.

It was a rat. She'd been startled by a lousy Hive rat. Good thing Kal and Scabbs weren't around to see her so jittery. Her paranoia circuits must be working overtime. Stupid Jerico. This was all his fault, she remembered. With Nemo on them again, even a rat could be dangerous. Yolanda kicked the headless rat into the rubble.

That's when she saw it. The head. But it wasn't the rat's head. She'd blasted that clean away. This was a human head, covered by tightly-curled, black hair. Yolanda had a sick feeling in her stomach as she walked over to get a better look. Not from the shock of seeing a human head. She'd carried enough of those into the guilder's offices as proof of her bounties. No, she was fairly sure she recognised this particular head, even though she could only see the back of it.

She picked up the head to get a better look. Much of the skin and underlying muscles on the face had been gnawed away by rats, leaving a gruesome, bloody patchwork. But the thick, black curls with roughly the texture of steel wool, along with the gold teeth clearly visible within the lipless mouth, confirmed Yolanda's fears. It was Beddy Bor'Wick.

Yolanda examined the head to see if she could figure out what had happened to her fellow bounty hunter. The skull seemed to be intact, and what was left of the skin had no burn holes or scorch marks. Beddy could have been shot in the torso and her head severed afterward.

She examined the cut marks. Luckily, the rats hadn't eaten their way down to the neck yet. The cut was clean, but it hadn't been cauterised. So, not a laspistol,

power sword or laser scalpel. The cut was too clean for a chainsword, though. And who, or what, would have the strength to make such a clean cut with only the strength of their bare hands behind the blow?

Yolanda opened her pack and pulled out a blood-stained cloth bag. She stuffed Beddy's head into the bag and dropped it into a special compartment in her pack. She looked at the pile of rubble. It sloped gently up toward the roof where she had shot the rat. Probably the local thugs and thieves had shaped it for an easy escape. She would use it for a different purpose. It was time to hit the rooftops and find Beddy's killer. Or at least the rest of Beddy.

Rats scurried off across the conduit pipes as Yolanda reached the top of the pile. She reached up and pulled herself onto the rooftop. Standing with her hands on her hips, she surveyed this section of the dome from her elevated vantage point. It looked exactly the same as every other part of Glory Hole. The once glorious dome now held little more than partially-destroyed buildings and rats. Lots and lots of rats.

Yolanda decided to follow the rats. If there was a body anywhere up here, the vermin would find it first. She looked at the bundle of pipes that stretched to the building across the street. The rat she had killed had been scampering across with Beddy's head when she'd taken its own head. The conduit looked sturdy enough, and the bounty hunter could see footprints in the dust from recent vermin traffic of the human variety, so she decided to chance it.

She loped easily across the pipes and dropped onto the roof on the other side. Judging from the huge exhaust tubes rising up from the building all the way to the dome, she was atop an old factory of some sort. The rats had all vanished before she arrived but a trail of blood led away from the pipe, probably from the rat dragging Beddy's head. She followed this across the roof and another set of conduit pipes to a large, flat roof with a blast hole in the middle.

Two trails of blood led away from the hole: a fresh one coming toward her that she was now sure had come from the severed head in her pack; and another, leading off from the other side of the hole. There was no body in sight, though, and an eerie silence had descended around her.

Yolanda slipped her sword from the sheath banging against her bare thigh. Her other hand found its way to the butt of her laspistol as she scanned the rooftops. Nothing. Not even the rats scurried about anymore. As she crept toward the hole, she began to hear a strange scrabbling sound. There was more blood at the edge of the hole, but it didn't seem to have any connection to either trail. She could also see that the other blood trail had already dried.

The scrabbling sound was louder, and she could hear what she recognised as the chirping sound of rats again. She looked down into the hole. There, twenty feet below, just barely visible in the deepening gloom of the Glory Hole twilight, was a body. Yolanda flicked on a torch and shined it into the hole, revealing a headless body covered in a swarm of huge rats. She shot a blast into the pack beside the body and the swarm dispersed. It was Beddy alright. Her rifle was still sheathed on her back, and a spool of grapnel wire laid coiled atop her body. Oddly, there was no blood visible, not even oozing from the numerous rat bites.

'What in the Hive?' asked Yolanda.

Kal Jerico awoke to a bright light shining in his eyes. His side ached. He couldn't move his arms or legs, and he had a headache that started at the base of his skull and wrapped around his head to dig into his eyeballs. 'I won't tell you anything!' he cried out automatically. 'I don't care how much you beat me, how much you torture me, I…' He paused as he looked around at his surroundings, '…am yours to command.'

The bright light streamed in from a bank of windows over the massive bed where Kal lay. He was pinned to the mattress by a slim brunette in a sheer bodysuit snuggled up against one shoulder, a buxom blonde in a black corset and stockings lying on the other shoulder, and a voluptuous redhead in a long satin nightgown sprawled across his legs. Kal's leather coat and trousers had, at some time during the night, been replaced by red silk pyjamas.

The Spire. Even without the golden rays of sunshine beating down on him and the bevy of gorgeous ladies who smelled of lilacs instead of sludge, he would have known where he was. The walls of the room were white. Not even the grungy, brownish white of Hive City, but pure, alabaster white; whiter even than the pale skin of the redhead at his feet.

And the air. It didn't hang there in your mouth and nose like a haze of grease in a fry kitchen. It simply passed through to your lungs with just the barest whisper of pine dew. Of course, the air was thinner. He was, after all, about ten miles higher within the Hive than when he went to sleep.

Sleep. No. Drugged. Or stunned. Or both. The night before started to come back to him. He'd stepped outside Hagen's to shake out the snake. Then he'd turned to find Spire guards surrounding him and a needle gun jammed into his ribs. That explained the pain in his side. The headache must have come from whatever the needle had injected, which also put him out for the rest of the night.

He looked at the girls and the silk pyjamas again. 'If this is a jail, then I'm

signing up for a life sentence.' He extracted one arm and started stroking the bare shoulder of the blonde on his right. Her tanned skin was smooth, supple, and freshly bathed. A far cry from the grungy and sometimes scaly women he normally had on his arms downhive.

'A man could get used to this,' said Kal. All three women were still deep in sleep. He watched their bosoms rise and fall as they breathed, mesmerised by the rhythmic dance of soft flesh. His headache persisted, but what bothered Jerico even more was that he couldn't remember anything after losing consciousness. Here he was with perhaps the three most beautiful women he'd ever slept with, and he was pretty sure all he had done was sleep. Well, that would change soon, he said to himself as his hand strayed from the blonde's shoulder toward her neck.

But his suspicious mind, attuned to life in the Underhive, wouldn't relax and let go of the fact that he had been kidnapped and drugged by someone as yet unknown. Plus, the oversized paranoid region of his brain told Kal that it couldn't be a coincidence that the kidnapping had occurred only hours after he'd found Nemo's man spying on him.

He should get up, he knew that. He should get out of bed, find his clothes and weapons, figure out where he was and deal with whoever had brought him here. The brunette on his left moaned and shifted in her sleep, brushing her entire stocking-clad body up against Kal's side. 'Or I could stay here and interrogate the girls,' he said. 'Repeatedly. It could take hours, but I'm sure it will be fruitful.'

Maybe it was a prison after all. A prison specially built to hold Kal Jerico.

Derindi crouched behind the large conduit pipe and watched the entrance to Hagen's Hole below. Beads of sweat dotted his bare head from just above his eyes all the way down to his neck. He wiped one temple, running his hand through the thin wisps of hair above his ears, only succeeding in plastering the little hair he had against his head. He wiped the other side, forgetting again about the bandage over what was left of his ear.

Clenching his teeth to hold in the scream, Derindi groaned and grumbled, 'Damn Jerico. He'll pay for this!'

'Concentrate,' purred a voice in his good ear. 'Where is Jerico?' asked Nemo through the radio his men had so graciously implanted in the snitch's eardrum.

A subvocal transmitter attached to his vocal cords was obviously broadcasting everything he said back to the spymaster. It had been a shock when he realised it

earlier at Pinky's Parlour in Down Town. He had since resigned himself to the fact that he was now an owned man. 'My sources say he and the half-breed went into Hagen's several hours ago. Nobody's seen them leave, so I assume they're still in there.'

'You assume!' roared the voice. Derindi's inner ear felt like it was going to explode. He definitely didn't want to make Nemo angry anymore. 'Go in and find out, you fool!'

The protest came out before he could think to hold his tongue. 'But the place is crawling with bounty hunters,' he blurted. 'They've come from all over the Underhive to catch some mutant vampire.'

There was a pause that was almost more frightening than the impending scream. 'Interesting,' came the subdued response. 'I had not heard about a gathering of hired guns in Glory Hole or of this mutant vampire.'

'Yeah, it killed Bester last night,' said Derindi under his breath, happy to have something of value for his new master. 'Supposed to be huge. Some say it's invisible.'

'Hmmm. Doubtful, but possible.' Another pause. Derindi knew better than to interrupt Nemo's thought processes. 'Get into that bar,' he said after a moment. 'Find out everything you can about this so-called vampire – and find Kal Jerico!'

The ringing in his ears subsided after a moment, but the headache that followed would linger for quite some time. Derindi knew there was one way he could get into Hagen's undetected, but it would mean crossing the conduit to the roof where the first vampire attack had supposedly taken place. This was not something he wanted to do. But the alternative was to fail Nemo, which was just as deadly, and probably more painful.

He looked across the street at the dark roof where Bester had fought the vampire. The shadows loomed and seemed to move. Fear gripped the little man and he wished, not for the first time, that he'd picked a different line of work. Of course, in the Underhive, you didn't so much choose your life as it chose you, often for dinner.

'Okay,' he said to himself and Nemo, if only to give that final push he needed to get up, 'here I go.' There was silence from the other end of the radio. Derindi climbed out from his hiding place and crept across the conduit.

Halfway across, he remembered that the twins, Seek and Destroy, had given him some new gear as well as the implants. Derindi wrapped his legs around the pipe and opened the pack. Inside was a pict camera with an attached antenna, a grapnel, a needle gun and a pair of goggles. He slipped the goggles on and

flipped them to nightvision.

He scanned the roof and the dome overhead, but saw nothing moving against the greenish background of conduits, cables, and broken concrete. Feeling only slightly better (they said Bester never saw the monster coming), Derindi crawled the rest of the way across.

'Now, where's that access panel?' he asked himself. He felt along the end of the conduit until his fingers found the hidden clasp. *Depress for two seconds, wait three seconds, depress twice for one second each*. A hatch slid open and Derindi crawled inside the pipe. The panel slid shut behind him.

The trip back to the roof of Hagen's was far easier on his nerves. The vampire was said to be three metres tall and as broad as a Goliath. It would never fit inside the pipe. Halfway back, something banged on the end of the pipe behind him. Derindi fell flat inside the pipe and didn't move. Another clang came shortly after the first, and this one was closer.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Something big was running down the pipe. Derindi scrambled to get onto his hands and feet and ran like a crab the entire length of the pipe. He dove into the shaft at the end, plummeting into the darkness toward the basement of Hagen's Hole.

'So, do you mean to tell me that you girls don't know where we are either?' asked Kal.

The blonde, whose name was Candi, currently sat behind the bounty hunter, giving him a back rub while he in turn stroked the back of Sandi, the redhead. Brandi, the brunette, was taking a break in an overstuffed chair next to the door. All three girls worked at the infamous Kitty Club, renowned the whole Hive over for their beautiful and accommodating employees.

Brandi sucked on a grape before answering. 'We were hired for a private party by some guy,' she said. 'That's all we know.'

Candi nibbled on Kal's ear as her hands rubbed his bare shoulders. 'We were blindfolded and brought here,' she whispered. 'I still have the blindfold if you like that kind of thing.'

Kal took a deep breath and shook his head. He had to stay focused and Candi was making that difficult. The interrogation had been enjoyable, but not terribly fruitful. Whoever had imprisoned him certainly wanted Kal to enjoy himself, but the door was locked and outside the window was a ten mile drop to the base of the Hive. Worst of all, his clothes and weapons were nowhere to be found within the small apartment.

‘What did he look like,’ he asked, ‘this guy who hired you?’ In his mind Kal was taking a cold shower, desperately trying to maintain some control as Candi licked at his earlobe. Sandi turned around in front of him and began kissing Jerico’s chest. The water in Kal’s imaginary shower began to steam.

‘I don’t know,’ said Brandi. ‘He was a guy. All I saw was the top of his head.’

‘Yeah,’ added Sandi, ‘They never look you in the eye.’

All three girls laughed at the private joke. Kal had to admit he would have a hard time looking them in the eyes. As beautiful as their faces were, there were just more interesting aspects to these girls than their eyes.

‘He had short hair and professor glasses,’ said Brandi. ‘You know the little round ones with the wire frames? The kind that all the bookish types always wear.’

Kal exhaled in several short gasps as the girls’ ministrations threatened to break his concentration. ‘What was he wearing?’ he asked after a few minutes.

‘Why all the questions, lover?’ asked Brandi. ‘Enjoy the party. If you’re good, I’ll show you something fun I can do with these grapes.’ Brandi grabbed a handful of grapes and sauntered over toward the bed.

Before she could show Kal her grape trick, the door opened and a short man with a buzz cut and wire-rimmed professor glasses walked in, flanked by two House Helmawr guards.

‘Good morning, Mr Jerico,’ he said. A smile crept across his face as he looked at the shirtless bounty hunter and the semi-clad ladies. ‘My name is Obidiah Clein. I hope you have been enjoying Lord Helmawr’s accommodations. But I’m afraid this party is now over.’

Derindi saw the bottom of the shaft rushing toward him in the green glow of the nightvision goggles. He slammed his hands and feet against the sides of the chute in a desperate attempt to slow down. At the last second, he ducked his head and used his hands to absorb some of the impact. He rolled out of the shaft and spun across the room, crashing into a stack of kegs before he could stop. He could hear the Wildsnake slosh around inside and scuttled away before any of the kegs fell over on top of him.

‘Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!’ he cried. Luckily, it seemed Nemo was attending to other matters, for there was no response from his ear drum receiver. Derindi took stock. He had no protruding bones, no gushing blood, and the rocking keg hadn’t fallen. Pain shot up his forearms, though, and it felt like somebody was pounding a beat on both of his elbows. Plus a drip, drip, drip on his cheek told the snitch

that his wounded ear had bled through the bandage.

But he was alive and inside Hagen's Hole. At least that part of the plan had worked out. He listened at the shaft, but heard no more banging. Whatever had been following him had gone, or was simply waiting for him to climb back out. From here, he could climb up into Hagen's, spy on the patrons from a special panel that he was sure none of the bounty hunters even knew about, or move one of the kegs and gain access to an escape hatch that would get him out of Glory Hole for good.

Derindi sighed and crept under the stairway into a crawl space. This area was filled with old pipes and conduits from the time that Hagen's had been a power station. It was a maze that extended throughout most of the basement. The floor was sticky from centuries of ooze and muck mixed with layer upon layer of dust. It was like walking through paste.

After several twists and turns, the snitch stopped and looked up at the low ceiling. This was the worst part. The spy panel was a simple sliding door, but he knew from experience what lay on the other side. The panel opened up beneath the grate floor in the middle of Hagen's front room; the grate that constantly filled with the effluvia from the bar above.

There was normally a table set over the panel. Derindi and a few others who knew about the panel would always 'help' each new Hagen find the best layout for the place, taking care to preserve their own special spyhole. But Derindi knew the table only protected the panel so much and Hagen's would likely be busy at this time of day. He slid it back as quickly as he could, pulling his aching arm down and away with a jerk.

It didn't matter. No matter how quickly Derindi moved, the mixture of Wildsnake, spit, blood and too many other liquids too awful to imagine always sluiced through the opening and coated his forearm. He waited another minute to let the last drop of ooze drip onto the floor, and then climbed onto the pipes to stick his head through the opening.

A small section of floor above the panel had been cleared of most pipes, giving Derindi a clear view of the bar through the grate floor. A commotion must have erupted at the front of the bar just moments earlier because everyone in the bar was rushing toward the door. All he could see was feet and legs running past him, and he could hear nothing but shouting.

A moment later a single voice rang out and quieted the mob. 'Shut up, you band of scum,' yelled Yolanda, 'and let me through.' The Hole went completely quiet, and the next thing that Derindi heard made his heart skip a beat. It was the clang,

clang, clang of boots against the grate, just like he'd heard on the pipe. As the crowd parted, he saw the normally graceful, long-legged Yolanda stomping toward him under the weight of a body slung over her shoulder.

As Yolanda came closer he lost sight of her face and the body as they were blocked by the table. With a thump, the body was slung practically on top of Derindi, making him jump. He almost screamed when he saw that the body was missing its head.

'It's Beddy all right,' he heard Yolanda say. He pulled his eyes away from the headless corpse and looked at the legs surrounding the table. There were Yolanda's bare thighs, Hern's camo pants and thick boots, Gorgh's knee-high snakeskin boots with the hidden boot knife, and Lebow's suede boots sticking out from his tight, red pants. Across the table from this group stood someone wearing white leather strides and matching shoes: The King! Derindi knew he didn't want to be seen in this bar today.

'She's been completely drained of blood,' said Yolanda. 'Damndest thing I ever saw.'

'She's not the first,' said another voice. It was Hagen. Derindi recognised his shabby grey dungarees with the stains on the thighs where he wiped his hands. 'The beast got Bester two nights ago and a shopkeeper yesterday.'

'Beddy thought it was a vampire,' said another voice that he knew to be Skreed. 'She went out to search for it to get the bounty.'

'I'd say she found it,' said Yolanda.

'Where'd you find her?' asked Hern

'That depends,' said Yolanda.

'On what?'

'On how big the bounty is on this beast.'

'Two thousand credits,' said a voice Derindi recognized as Scabbs. 'Hi Yolanda. Am I glad to see you!'

'In that case, Hern, that is information for me and my partners only.'

'Make that partner,' said Scabbs.

There was a pause and Derindi gulped as he guessed what was coming next.

'Why? Where's Jerico?'

'I don't know,' said Scabbs. 'He's been gone for hours. I kinda hoped he was with you.'

Oh crap, thought Derindi. He dropped down to the floor and closed the panel. He needed to make a report to Nemo. The spymaster wasn't going to be happy about this.

Obidiah Clein and an entourage of royal guards escorted Kal, fully clothed once again, through the lush quarters of Gerontius Helmawr's estate. The affluence of the palace gave the bounty hunter some pause. The walls were a mosaic of individually carved and highly polished stones arranged to depict scenes from the history of House Helmawr. The floors were carpeted in a plush, white fabric that made it feel like he was walking on piles of fur. At one point, the guards marched him past a series of real wooden doors, carved in bas relief with the busts of House rulers from ages past.

Then there was the light. The light never ceased to amaze Jerico. Sure, he'd experienced it before. He'd grown up a Spire brat, and had even spent some time recently above the Spiral Gates. But this was his first good look at the palace, and the sunshine shone with a brilliance here that was unsurpassed anywhere else in the Hive. The light streamed in from banks of windows. Every room, every hallway, every corridor was bathed in the golden rays of the sun.

It was almost enough to make Kal think of giving up his life in the gloom of the Underhive, but as he looked at the faces of the guards who, even without their uniforms, all looked alike, Kal knew he was not built for this life. Too many rules. Too much boredom. March here. March there. Do what you're told. Don't talk back. Kal Jerico had never been very good at obeying orders.

But now here he was, marching to the beat of Lord Helmawr. The whole thing left a bad taste in his mouth, like a half-bitten snake. Of course, the Spire did have its perks, like sunshine, liquor that wasn't strained through Hagen's old socks, food you could actually taste and clean women who could do interesting tricks with grapes. Hell, just eating fresh fruit was a trick in the Underhive.

So, he'd listen to his lordship's proposal, for why else go to all the trouble of dragging him up to the very top of the Hive except to make him do something he didn't want to do? Kal didn't do anything without payment, and Helmawr would have to come up with some amazing bounty to make Kal Jerico sit up and salute, and perhaps that same payment might just make it worthwhile.

As he ruminated on what his price might be, the group came to a sudden stop outside a plain-looking door. Kal noticed he was no longer bathed in sunlight. In fact, he now realised that the last few rooms had gotten gradually darker. The door opened. It was thick, like the door to a vault, and moved slowly inward. The room beyond was pitch black, except for a bank of lights shining in the distance.

The guard behind Kal pushed him into the room. Kal instinctively swivelled and kicked the man in the groin. The other guards drew weapons and pointed

them at the bounty hunter. ‘Sorry,’ said Kal with a slight smirk on his face. ‘He touched me, I touched him.’ He looked down at the guard curled into a ball. ‘Better get some ice on that.’ Kal turned and strode across the black room toward the light. Clein followed, but the guards remained at the door.

The scene at the other end of the room was almost surreal. A lone desk sat in the dark with lights blaring into the faces of five men, two of whom obviously dominated the others. One freakishly tall with sharp features who glared at everyone and another who reminded Kal of a battle tank, a massive battle tank ready to run over anything in its path. There were also shapes in the shadows behind the desk, but with the light in his eyes, Kal couldn’t see anything much beyond the top of the desk.

‘Who is this?’ asked a voice from the shadows.

Clein answered. ‘Kal Jerico, your lordship. As you requested.’

‘I requested?’ asked the voice. ‘Why would I request to see someone I don’t even know?’

Kal heard the collective sigh from the other men in the room. All, that is, except Clein, who leaned in to Kal and whispered, ‘He has good days and bad days.’

‘I can guess which this is,’ replied Kal. He pushed his way past the hawk and the tank and jumped up on the desk. ‘It’s me, Father,’ he said into the darkness. He kicked at Clein who began pulling on his ankle. ‘Kal Jerico, bounty hunter.’

‘My son?’ asked the voice. ‘I don’t have any sons.’ Kal could hear another noise in the darkness, like rats scrabbling on the ground. He squinted to see in the gloom. There were four young men in white tunics and breeches, busily writing on parchment they held in their hands.

‘Yes, you do, sire,’ Clein said. He’d given up on pulling Kal off the desk, and was obviously trying to move the meeting along. ‘Many, in fact.’

‘I doubt you remember Mother,’ said Kal. He sat down on the dark side of the desk and looked at his father. Helmawr looked like a man of fifty, with a thick shock of silver hair and chiselled features that reminded Kal of his own face. Of course, Jerico knew that the Lord of the Spire must be well over two hundred years old. The body had held up well. Too bad about his mind, though. ‘I’m your son, all right,’ he said. ‘Not that you ever gave me any birthday presents.’

‘Never?’ asked the still confused Helmawr. The scribes busily wrote down everything said in the room. ‘Clein, give my son something fitting,’ he said. ‘I know. Give him the spear I received on my last birthday.’ He leaned in toward Kal. ‘I think you will like that one, and I don’t have much use for spears these days.’

Kal easily resisted the urge to give the old man a hug. A slight cough from Clein behind him made the bounty hunter realise he should move this along. ‘Well, I’ve taken up enough of your time,’ he said as he stood. ‘I’m going to go talk with these men about that job you wanted me to handle.’

The light of recognition still failed to flare in the old man’s face, but the canny Clein was more than ready to handle the situation. ‘Yes, sire,’ Clein interrupted, ‘young Kal is the man who I earlier recommended might be of use to use in the… present situation.’

‘Ah yes,’ groaned Helmawr. ‘The Armand problem. My other son. Well, one of my other sons. Very bad one at that. Stole from me. Go find him, Kal. Find him and bring back–’

‘Yes, sir!’ cut in Clein. ‘Mr Jerico’s right. We won’t take up any more of your time. I can brief Kal on the *particulars* while we retrieve that birthday present.’

Without another word from Clein, Jerico found himself surrounded by guards again, who hustled him out of the room. The one he’d kicked kept his distance and glared at the bounty hunter as they left the gloom and made their way back toward the light.

‘He’s not coming back, is he?’ Yolanda asked. Hagen’s hole had finally calmed down. Most of the mercenaries had left to search for the vampire. Yolanda was fairly certain it wouldn’t come out of hiding for a while after its large Beddy meal, so she wasn’t worried. Besides, she was the only one who knew where to start looking.

‘No, I don’t really think so,’ replied Scabbs. ‘He didn’t even say goodbye. He must have been pretty mad at me.’

‘Wasn’t you he was mad at,’ said Yolanda, staring into the nearly empty bottle of Wildsnake. She’d been nursing the bottle for an hour or so, waiting for Kal to return. She hated the vile stuff, but you couldn’t be one of the boys unless you drank the ‘Snake. The whole ‘Snake. So there she sat, staring at the little guy wriggling in the bottom of the bottle. It would be so much easier if she could just shoot it, but no, the code said you had to swallow the snake or bite it in half. Neither was all that much fun, really, but if there was one thing Yolanda was known for, it was for taking the whole snake, usually in one go. ‘I guess I shouldn’t have walked out like that, but he didn’t even try to stop me, so good riddance I say.’

Scabbs nodded, which caused a cascade of dried skin to flake off his face. ‘It’s not like this is the first time he’s done this disappearing act,’ he said. ‘And we do

just fine together without him.'

'You saying you want to team up again?' asked Yolanda. The snake was still wriggling.

Scabbs nodded again. 'Yeah. We had fun together.'

Yolanda smiled. 'Like that time with the plague zombies? Now that was a hoot.' Scabbs had stopped nodding, but Yolanda barely noticed. She was getting caught up in the moment. She picked up the bottle, swallowed the last swig along with the snake, then slammed the bottle down and jumped up from the table and grabbed Scabbs around the shoulders as he peered around the bar, as if looking for a means of escape.

'Besides, Scabbs, old pal,' she said as she pulled him hard against her leather-encased bosom, 'when our partner left us, he took the bounty with him.'

'You mean?'

Yolanda nodded again. 'Yep. We're broke.' She pulled him towards the door. 'Now, let's go find us a vampire. I've got a great plan. We'll wait until it's hungry again, and then give it something really scabby to eat.'

Derindi saw Yolanda and Scabbs leave Hagen's Hole from his hiding place on the roof of the bar. He was still a little spooked from his last trip across the conduits, but now realised that the heavy footsteps had belonged to the amazonian Yolanda weighed down by a dead body. He slipped out from behind the pipes and scrambled across the top of the conduit to cross the street behind the retreating duo.

With Jerico missing, Nemo had told Derindi to follow Scabbs and Yolanda. They would almost certainly lead him back to the wayward bounty hunter. As he landed on the roof where the first vampire attack took place, Derindi felt the hair on the back of his neck tingle. The place spooked him, and he didn't want to become a vampire meal, but it was still preferable to the unbearable and unending torture he would face if he failed.

He ran across the roof, keeping his eyes up in the air to spot incoming vampires. Unfortunately, he didn't see the hole in the roof. As he fell into the darkness, Derindi yelled, 'Oh crap!' and then instantly regretted it as his inner ear exploded with the response from Nemo.

Kal strapped on his weapon belt and checked the many daggers placed strategically about his body to make sure he hadn't missed any. They had returned to the quarters where he had spent a sleepy night and fun-filled morning with the girls. Sadly, their contract had obviously run out, because they were no

longer in the suite.

'So, basically, you just want me to find this Armand Helmawr,' said Kal, 'who, if I understand you right, is bat crap insane and sporadically homicidal, and then relieve him of some item. But you won't tell me what the item is, you have no idea where he's gone, and I can't tell anyone else what I'm doing or who I'm looking for. Does that about sum it up?'

'Yes,' said Obidiah Clein.

'Not a problem,' said Kal. 'And my fee for this bounty hunt is?'

'I have been authorised by Lord Helmawr to grant you full diplomatic privileges as an heir to the throne of House Helmawr, rightful and just rulers of Hive Primus.'

'Would I get an allowance with that?' Kal asked as he searched his pack and bags.

'Each of Lord Helmawr's legitimate heirs gets an annual stipend in the amount of 100,000 credits.'

'Annually? Huh! That's a decent bounty.' Kal straightened up. 'Say, you didn't see a head in my stuff when you guys stripped me, did you?'

Clein cringed. 'Yes. It was disgusting. We had it incinerated.'

'Then you can add fifteen hundred credits to that stipend,' Kal said. 'That's what that head was worth.' He slung the much lighter pack over his shoulder. 'Oh, and before I go, where's my birthday present?'

'I sent Valtin Schemko to get it,' admitted Clein. 'He will meet us at one of the secret entrances to the Helmawr estate and escort you back to Hive City.'

'Whoa,' said Kal. He stopped and stared down at the short administrator. To Clein's credit, he didn't flinch a bit. 'I thought I was to work alone. You know, not tell anyone about who I'm going after? I don't need some pernickety bureaucrat hanging around while I'm working. I have a certain style, and that tends to get crimped by little toadies getting themselves killed around me.'

'This is non-negotiable,' said Clein. 'Valtin will accompany you and return with you and the item if you are successful. You need not fear for his safety. He is one of my personal guards.'

Kal looked around at Clein's entourage. One of the guards was missing. He got a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach as he searched their faces. Yes. He was right. The missing guard was the very same one he had kicked in the groin. This was going to be so much fun.

Clein smiled. 'Please take good care of my guard. Without him, you'll have a very difficult time getting back into the Spire once the job is done. Remember,

100,000 credits per year, plus access to girls like Candi, Brandi, and Sandi any time you like.'

'And grapes, right?' asked Kal. 'Lots and lots of grapes.'

'What the hell was that?' asked Captain Katerin. He had paced back and forth in his office for almost an hour after the Jerico meeting waiting for Kauderer. Sweat streamed down his bare head in every direction. His handkerchief practically dripped in his hand. 'We've lost all control. And that bounty hunter – I've never seen such insolence.'

'Patience, captain,' said Kauderer. He pulled out a tox stick and placed it between his lips. 'We must endure some trials if we are to triumph.'

'Trials?' asked Katerin, his voice almost on the edge of hysteria. 'That was agony. Keeping my mouth shut in that ludicrous meeting was absolute torture. If that man is ever added to the line of succession, it will be my last day in this house.'

'You may very well be looking for a job sooner than that, my dear captain,' purred Kauderer. He paused to light his tox stick and take a long drag. Katerin was practically vibrating by the time the intrigue master continued. 'House Helmawr is at a critical juncture. Our lord's mind is failing. That much is obvious. I do not know how much longer we can hold his leadership together. And when he falls, he may well take the entire house down with him.'

Katerin sat on the edge of his desk and mopped his brow with the wet cloth. 'This much I know,' he said. 'There are simply too many heirs. After two hundred years, the old man is still siring possible successors. The power struggle will make the last House war look like a gang brawl. But what can we do about it?'

'I believe we must find the "rightful" heir and make sure he takes the throne when the time comes.' Kauderer puffed on his tox stick and smiled.

Katerin's eyebrows furrowed as he tried to fathom the meaning of the oft obtuse spymaster. 'But who is the rightful heir?' he asked. 'I doubt even the old man remembers, even on his good days.'

'The rightful heir is whomever we can control once we place him on the throne.' Kauderer's smile widened even further, which on his face was an even scarier sight than the hawkish scowl he usually wore.

'But what of the others?' asked Katerin. The military man was not used to all of this cloak and dagger work. He preferred a simple, stand-up fight. 'There will still be opposition voiced from all sides when the old man passes.'

‘We will have to eliminate all the opposition before it can be voiced, starting with that murderous Armand and that smug, self-important bounty hunter. Our Spyrers will make sure of that, and bring the item back to us for a little insurance when the time comes.’

Nemo was waiting for a call. It was long overdue. He was not a patient man. He was a slave to no one’s schedule or whim. Normally he would remove an employee who made him wait so much as a minute for a report, but this was a special informant, who could not be so easily replaced and thus Nemo allowed him some tardiness.

So, he had kept busy watching the antics of Yolanda, Scabbs, and poor Derindi. What an oaf. Nemo almost felt like keeping the weasel around after all this was done, just for the entertainment value the little man provided. But he could not be seen as going soft, so Derindi would have to be removed along with Kal Jerico and his cohorts once the item was safe in the spymaster’s hands.

The light from the numerous monitors glinted off Nemo’s glassy mask as he turned his head this way and that to watch the various spycams he had in place throughout the Underhive. Every once in a while he would flip a switch and cock his head as he listened in on a whispered conversation or some nefarious business transaction. Then he would make notes for his less devious employees, like the twins, about whom to shake down for tribute or purloined items.

Time passed quickly. Nemo truly enjoyed his work and he had almost forgotten about the call when a light blinked on a special panel and an alarm buzzed within his visor. The spymaster touched a switch next to the blinking light, which completed the connection and began the decryption process. A moment later, he heard the voice in the ear jack inside his helmet.

The voice sounded mechanical, a by-product of the encryption and decryption necessary to get vocal information out of the Spire without detection. But Nemo knew who was on the other end. Nobody else had access to this particular circuit.

‘He’s left the Spire,’ said the voice in Nemo’s ear.

‘Is he alone?’ asked the spymaster.

‘No. He travels with a royal guard in disguise.’

‘Will there be any repercussions if this guard should not return?’

‘None that I cannot handle.’

‘Where are they headed?’

‘That I do not know,’ replied the mechanical voice. ‘They are being taken to the

cargo entrance in Hive City. They should arrive within the hour.'

'That's not a lot of time.'

'I'm terribly sorry. I could not contact you earlier. I was not alone.'

There was a pause. For his part, Nemo was done with the conversation and had already flipped several switches to put plans into motion to follow Kal Jerico, but he knew the informant had one final question. 'Is there anything else?' he finally asked.

'Y-Yes,' came the tentative response. 'About my payment…'

'Believe me,' said the spymaster. 'When this is over, you will be able to buy and sell Gerontius Helmawr.'

Grunn and Thag trudged across the White Wastes on their way toward Hive City. Both Goliaths carried twin hundred gallon cisterns of slime that swayed back and forth on great yokes slung across their shoulders. The slime, harvested from beneath the dust that coated the floor of the Wastes and gave the area its name, would fetch a high price in the City markets.

Each thundering step Grunn and Thag took drove their broad feet deep into the dust. The Wastes were a huge void inside the Hive between countless different domes. Dust had accumulated for centuries, blown into the void along with ventilation exhaust from the surrounding domes. Beneath the dust could be found deposits of the valuable green slime. A few hardy individuals, like the Goliaths, lived in the Wastes as slime farmers.

Goliaths were seen as barbaric, even amongst the residents of Hive City who toiled amidst harmful chemicals, dirty water, and poorly recycled air. The Goliaths survived on the periphery of this harsh world, in the deepest and most toxic regions, performing gruelling tasks no other Hivers could or wished to perform.

For all this, they had grown larger, stronger and meaner. The toxins in the air and the sludge they harvested had killed all but the hardiest amongst them and today they were giants, and practically revelled in their role as the grunt workers upon whose backs the mighty Hive had been built.

Grunn and Thag, though, were an oddity even amongst House Goliath. They had turned their backs on the mines and slag pits to live and work in the Wastes as slime farmers. Thag, a large brute of a ganger in his youth, had risen quickly in the ranks of the Sligan gang. Using his heavy stubber, he'd demolished entire raiding parties, turning Sligan's gang into the one of the most feared in the Underhive, and winning him a position of respect and power, as well as the

enmity of Uglar, another heavy fighter in the gang, who coveted the power of leadership.

Through Uglar's treachery, Thag found himself with a bounty on his head and was sold into the pits where he was forced to fight for his freedom. There he met and fell in love with Grunn. They fought side-by-side for two years to earn back the price on their heads. Thag vowed he would never again work for anyone but himself, so he and Grunn left the pits and made a home in the White Wastes.

Thag and Grunn had been walking the Wastes half the night and most of the day without rest when a shadow passed over them. Light in the wastes came from fungus growing amongst the gridwork and pipes lining the voids between domes. Warmed by power coursing through the conduits, the fungus phosphoresced, giving the Wastes an eerie bluish-white daytime all its own.

Nothing lived in the Wastes except the few lone farmers like Thag and Grunn and bands of roaming scavvies. Thag would have welcomed the diversion of a good scavvy battle, but knew of nothing in the Wastes that could fly. He glanced up in time to see a large black shape dropping on them from a hole in the metal sky. Warrior instincts launched the Goliath into action.

Thag whipped his shoulders around to launch one of the cisterns off the end of the yoke into the air toward the descending attacker. A chainsword whined to life above him, and Thag saw the cistern explode in a torrent of shards and slime. A moment later, the dark shape splashed through the green cloud, the chainsword still blazing in its hand.

Thag sloughed off the yoke and drew his own weapon; a massive, two-headed axe with spikes extending out between the twin blades. Beside him, Grunn dropped her cisterns onto the white dust, ripped the inch-thick chain from the yoke, and began swinging it over her head.

As their assailant hit the ground, it rolled forward and came back up before Thag could react. Not quite as broad as Thag, the incoming attacker was nearly as tall as the Goliath and powerfully built. It appeared to be scaled or perhaps covered in strange, black-plated armour. Tubular vessels snaked their way up from its arms and chest to the base of its hideous head. Glowing, red eyes looked out from a featureless, black face with no mouth.

Thag swung his axe across and down as the attacker moved in, trying to cut off the beast's angle of attack, but it simply ploughed through the Goliath's weapon, taking the curved edge of the axe against its chest. Thag's arms quivered as the axe bounced off the armoured plates and he barely had enough time to fall backward onto the dust to avoid the buzzing chainsword.

The beast stood above him. The chainsword plunged down again from the top of its arc, but Grunn's chain flashed over his head, wrapping around the creature's wrist and pulling it aside. Thag rolled out from under the attacker, right into the slime from his dropped cistern. He tried to rise, but slipped to his knees, just as the black beast grabbed Grunn's chain and gave a mighty yank.

Grunn tried to hold her ground but the huge creature pulled her off balance. As she stumbled forward, it spun around, sweeping the chainsword around in an arc at chest height. Grunn fell to the dust, cut in half by the powerful swing. Thag, finally back on his feet again, rushed forward in a blind rage and right into the rounded tip of the still-buzzing chainsword.

The Goliath could feel his organs shredding inside of him as the chain ripped through his body. He fell to his knees once again and then toppled over onto the white dust next to his beloved. Unable to move with his bowels turned into so much ground meat, Thag was helpless to stop the beast as it bent over Grunn's sliced body and plunged the fingers of one hand into her throat.

The last thing Thag saw before the darkness took him was blood-red liquid coursing through the tubes up toward the beast's mouthless, black head.

4: THE GANG'S ALL HERE

Valtin stared out the window. He hadn't said a word since they left the Palace in the two-seat transport. They were currently circling the top of the Spire on autopilot, their pod bathed in sunshine, as they waited for clearance to descend into the perpetual grey cloud cover some five miles below.

'Never been outside the Spire, eh?' asked Kal.

'It's just so incredible!' said Valtin.

'Well enjoy the view now,' he said, 'because once we get into the clouds, your world will disappear, and then we'll step out into a whole new world that's not quite so incredible.'

'You've been out here before?'

'Outside the Hive?' asked Kal. 'Once or twice.' He saw Valtin forming the obvious next question and cut him off. 'I don't like to talk about it. Ever!'

But Kal had to admit the view was amazing. It was one thing to bask in the sun's rays with the walls of the Palace around you and the entire Spire beneath your feet. It was an entirely different matter to be in the sunshine looking back at the ten-mile tall conical Hive; to know that there was nothing between you and the ground but air, clouds, and a three-mile thick layer of noxious fumes.

The Hive wasn't exactly beautiful, though. It was simply impressive. Some effort had been made to make the exterior visually pleasing, certainly. Towers were attached here and there, complete with ramparts. Huge balconies stretched around the cone in places, overlooking the clouds. But the sheer size of the Hive itself dwarfed such architectural embellishments. They might have been impressive up close, perhaps even beautiful, but the ten-mile-high cone that seemed to float on a sea of clouds simply dominated the scene.

Valtin looked as though he wanted to push the question of Jerico's previous excursions outside the Spire, but instead turned back to the window. Kal took another look at the guard's outfit and snorted. He had changed out of his uniform

into what he must have thought was Underhive casual attire. This consisted of a leather coat with silver buckles down the front and silver chains hanging over each shoulder, black leather chaps with red silk piping running down the seams, and a pair of knee-high, floppy leather boots with silver buckles that matched those on the coat.

'We'll have to do something about that before we get too far,' Kal said to himself. It wasn't so much the garish ornamentation – which would have to go – it was the fact that the leather practically glistened in its newness. Valtin would stand out like a bright red target the moment they set foot in Hive City.

The outfit was simply outlandish, made with the Spire mindset that everything looked better shined to a bright sheen, with a few baubles attached. It reminded him of the spear Valtin had presented to him before they left. It looked like a decent weapon, and in fact it was a fine piece of real wood, which itself was worth at least ten times the bounty on Svend they'd tossed down the incinerator, but the craftsman had ruined the weapon by encrusting the shaft with gems, and inlaying graceful swirls of gold along the entire length. He could sell the various parts for a fortune, but as a weapon it was worthless. All that extra weight threw off the balance. Unfortunately, he would have to carry it with him until he could sell off the valuable bits and pieces.

Kal glanced at Valtin again. He didn't really seem a bad sort. The kick to the groin had been all but forgotten. The guard hadn't even brought it up, and he seemed genuinely enthusiastic about accompanying Jerico on the hunt, but there was something oddly familiar about the palace guard. He had a certain air of confidence, a slight twinkle in the eye, and a particular sharpness of the chin that Kal suddenly recognised.

'Are we related?' he asked. Kal often found that bluntness cut through people's defences, but the question hardly phased Valtin a bit.

'My father was Major Geraint Lee Helmawr, a former commander in the House Guard, and son of our lord Gerontius Helmawr.'

'That would make you my…'

'Nephew, yes,' replied Valtin.

'Well half-nephew, probably,' said Kal with a laugh. 'Dear old dad has never been a one-woman man.' He turned to face his new-found relative. 'So, what happened to your father?'

'That bastard Armand killed him.'

'Ahh, so this is family business for you, is it?' Kal asked. 'I had thought that little bureaucrat Clein had simply ordered you to go.'

Valtin's eyes flickered away from Kal for a moment before he answered. 'I have my orders,' he said. 'But I volunteered for the mission, as did several others.'

'All relatives, I assume,' said Kal.

Valtin simply nodded, and Kal noticed the same introspective look in the guard's eyes again. The look passed and Valtin smiled. 'What about you?' he asked.

'What about me, what?' replied Kal, not willing to make anything easy on his nephew.

'Why are you doing this if not out of family obligation?'

Now it was Kal's turn to smile. 'Ahh, I see I have a lot to teach you, nephew,' he said, wagging a finger at Valtin. 'I don't do anything except for love or money, and the only person I love is Kal Jerico.'

'You mean to say you have no interest in the family?' asked Valtin. 'Don't you want to return to the Spire?'

'Only so far as it impacts me,' said Kal. 'I've lived in the Spire before. It's boring and it's political – two things I can easily live without. Sure, I'll take Dad's money, and if that means I have to live up there for a year, so be it, but I can then take that hundred grand stipend and live out the rest of my life where you know who your enemies are because they're pointing a gun at your head.'

'Sounds lonely.'

'No. I've got friends, and I can always buy love, or at least rent it,' said Kal with a smirk. He stopped and shook his head. 'No. Lonely is sitting in a dark room surrounded by advisors you can't trust and family who all want you dead.'

'I don't want Grandfather dead,' said Valtin, and Kal could tell the kid actually meant it.

'Then you may be the only one,' he said. 'Look, it's obvious that the only thing holding the house together right now are Father's advisors and the power of Gerontius Helmawr as a figurehead. They need him and he needs them, but as soon as a suitable replacement shows up or anyone gets evidence that Helmawr is a house of cards, it'll all be over for dear old Dad, and maybe the house. At that point, the safest place for any Helmawr will be the Underhive, thank you very much. So, I'll take my reward for turning on my brother, and then turn tail and do what I always do when the going gets tough…'

Valtin gave him a blank look.

'Hide, nephew, hide.'

Valtin fell silent for a time and eventually turned to look back out the window.

The transport had finally begun its descent and they were now surrounded by roiling grey clouds. ‘You know those scribes you saw behind Grandfather, back in the safe room?’

Kal wasn’t sure what this had to do with anything, but bit on the question anyway. ‘The ones that wrote down everything the old man said?’

‘Yes.’ Valtin didn’t even look at Kal as he spoke. ‘When he’s… not quite himself, they write down everything that happens around him, and then read it back to him later.’

‘Okay,’ said Kal, still not sure where this was going. ‘Seems reasonable.’

‘Afterwards, all the records are burned.’ He stopped for a minute and continued staring at the clouds swirling past the window. Jerico could tell that his nephew was getting up the nerve to say something more, and left him alone. ‘If a scribe gets fired or leaves the house for any reason, we have standing orders to shoot them. They will go to any lengths to keep Grandfather’s failing mental abilities a secret.’

‘Interesting.’

The two Helmawr relatives spent the rest of the trip in silence, each with his own thoughts about what the future might hold.

Lysanne motioned the two Escher juves on ahead. Tay and Tor were their names. Tay was tall and statuesque, the model of an Escher, with long, blonde hair. Tor was shorter, with almond skin and slightly slanted eyes, giving her a mysterious look. They’d been Lysanne’s first recruits after getting promoted by Vicksen. Now she was leading her first mission and wanted everything to go just right. It was a simple patrol. She and the juves were heading down to Dust Falls to search for Yolanda.

She knew that Vicksen didn’t expect any trouble, otherwise she would have sent more experienced gang members, but you could never be too careful, especially with that Underhive vampire on the loose. Themis said that reports of vampire attacks had been coming in from all over the Underhive in the last few days.

Tor indicated the all clear, so Lysanne and the others jogged towards the corner. Lysanne’s cropped, mousey-brown hair bobbed as she ran. She was dressed in loose-fitting black pants and a wraparound top that tied at the sides, providing free motion when fighting. Two ornate symbols were painted on her back, spelling out ‘sister’ and ‘friend,’ which to Lysanne were one and the same. She pulled out her plasma pistol as she ran forward, just in case. You can’t be too

careful.

Tay stood at the door to The Dusty Hole, the main merc drinking hole in Dust Falls. Tor was crossing the street to join her. The Dusty Hole was usually full of ratskin scouts for hire. They led gangs over the Falls on the one-mile trip down to the Hive Bottom. The risk was great, but so was the reward, if you survived. If anyone had information about Yolanda, they'd be in here and should be willing to part with the info for the right price. And if not, well, that's what the plasma gun was for.

Lysanne was just about to cross the street to join Tay and Tor when the front of the bar exploded, sending the two juves flying into the air. 'Spread out!' yelled Lysanne to the rest of her gang jogging along behind. 'Find cover!' The young ganger ran into the street, grabbed Tor by the collar, and started pulling her back toward the corner.

She looked over at Tay, but knew it was probably too late. The blast had shredded her body. Worse than that, though, was the site Lysanne beheld at the end of the street. 'Spyrers!' yelled Lysanne. She redoubled her efforts to get Tor to safety as laser blasts slammed into the ground all around her.

A five-member Spyrer team, decked out in their impressive mechanical rigs, marched down the street. They looked more like robots than men in their power armour. These were noble-born gangers wearing the latest and greatest innovations in armour, with weapons you'd normally expect to see mounted on a tank attached to their arms and backs.

'What in the Hive are they doing here?' asked Ashya from the corner.

'How should I know?' replied Lysanne. She'd finally reached the side street, and laid Tor down next to Ashya. 'Why don't you go ask them nicely?' she said with a sneer. Looking at Tor, bleeding and burnt beside her, and Tay lying unconscious, or worse, in the street, Lysanne wasn't in the mood to talk.

She peered around the corner again. 'Damn. They're on the move and one of them is missing!' Luckily, the big brute with rocket launchers for hands was lagging behind, but there was one with a wicked-looking filament sword and a shield that glinted strangely in the light, along with two others with some strange tubes attached to their back. The fifth one had just disappeared.

'Ashya, Ginger, Ellie and Jenna,' she called out. 'Cover me. I'm going after Tay.'

'Bu–' said Ashya.

'Just do it. I'm not leaving her here to become an ornament on their armour.'

Jenna sent a line of flame down the street while Ashya and Ellie shot laser

blasts through the fire with their laspistols. Ginger cocked her grenade launcher and pumped a couple of plasma grenades down the street.

Lysanne knew their weapons would have little effect against the heavily armoured Spyrers, but they might distract them just long enough, if she was quick. She sprinted back into the street, dived and rolled up next to Tay. Laser blasts burned holes in the ground all around her. The Spyrer with the monofilament sword advanced on her. She shot a blast from her plasma pistol at him, but he blocked it with his shield. The blast just seemed to get sucked into the jewelled surface. She didn't know what to make of that until he pointed the shield at her and the plasma bolt streamed back at her. Lysanne threw her arms up, but a jet of flame from Jenna intercepted the plasma, which exploded between Lysanne and the Spyrers.

'Get out of here or you're dead,' Lysanne yelled at Jenna. She lifted Tay onto her shoulders and ran toward the blasted front of The Dusty Hole, calling back, 'I'll meet you at the rendezvous point. Go, go!'

Lysanne got just inside the bar when another explosion rocked the building. Chunks of stone and metal beams fell all around her, and then her world went black.

Lysanne opened her eyes, but couldn't see a thing. Her head throbbed and she still felt a little dizzy, but she didn't think she'd broken anything. There was a weight on her back and she couldn't get up. She reached back. Whatever was on top of her was cold, but soft. She pulled her hand back immediately and tried to crawl forward. She moved a few inches and then a few more. Something shifted and creaked behind her, but nothing more fell. Dust rose up around her, making her cough.

A few more inches and her legs were clear. She sat up to get out of the dust and noticed some dim light seeping into the room. She got up carefully, testing her legs and the floor as she stood, and then felt her way around the debris toward where she had entered. Light was coming from a window that had not been totally covered with debris. She pushed through the opening and fell out onto the street.

The street was empty. There was no sign of the Spyrers or her Wildcat sisters. Lysanne had no idea how much time had passed, but decided to make her way to the rendezvous point anyway. They were supposed to meet just outside the settlement by the Dust Falls – a huge hole caused by a waterfall of chemical waste that had eaten its way right through to the bottom of the Hive. All that was

left now was the hole and the dust that followed the waste, giving the settlement its name.

Lysanne checked her gear as she jogged toward the Falls. Her plasma pistol was gone and her pack had been crushed. Tay was dead now. She was sure of that. The body had been ice cold on her back. Tay's body had probably saved her life back there. 'I'll make those Spyrer scum pay,' she said quietly to herself.

The Falls were just ahead, but it was strangely quiet. She slowed down and crept forward to the edge of the last building before the hole. There were the Spyrers at the edge. The one that had disappeared was hovering over the hole. Her hunting rig incorporated huge wings that Lysanne hadn't noticed before.

The flying spyrer was carrying a human body, holding it under the arms and dangling it over the hole. It was Ashya! She was kicking and screaming, but Lysanne recognised her straight black hair and the tight-fitting grey pantsuit she'd been wearing earlier. Lysanne went for her weapon, and then remembered it wasn't in her holster anymore.

She looked around for the rest of her gang, but didn't see any of them. The Spyrer with the filament sword was saying something.

'We know he was here!' he screamed. 'We found one of his weapons in the settlement.'

'Who?' Ashya yelled. 'The vampire?

'Vampire? What vampire?' asked the Spyrer leader.

'It attacked someone here a few days ago,' said Ashya. Now let me go!'

'First tell me about this vampire.'

'I don't know anything,' said Ashya. She'd stopped squirming but looked horribly frightened. Lysanne couldn't do anything but watch. 'It's supposed to be huge. Three metres tall. And it can fly. And it sucks blood. I don't know what you want!'

'Where is this vampire now?'

'The last I heard, it was in Glory Hole,' she answered. 'That's all I know. Please let me go.'

'You heard the lady,' said the Spyrer. 'Let her go.'

Lysanne stifled a scream as Ashya plummeted down into Dust Falls. Her scream could be heard for a long time.

'What in the Hive do we want with some mutant vampire, Jonas?' asked the Spryer with the rocket launcher arms.

'That's just Underhive superstition,' replied Jonas. 'I'm sure it's our quarry. The timing is right, among other things. Pack it up folks. We're headed for Glory

Hole.’

Oh scav, thought Lysanne. That was where the rest of the Wildcats were headed. She loped away from the Spyrers, trying to think where she could get a weapon big enough to cut through that power armour.

Markel Bobo was having a good day. He was on a simple R & R mission – reconnoitre and report. Even better, his target was currently on an inbound transport, there was only one access point to observe, and the subject was easily recognisable. Bobo had been able to spend an extra hour at the gaming tables before sauntering down town and holing up in one of his favourite duck blinds.

It was a sweet set-up. He entered Madam Noritake’s House of Fun, paid for a room, and sat in a comfy chair in a darkened room with a full view of the Hive City docks. If the transport bringing his duck into town was delayed, his day could get even better. He *had* paid for the room already.

Bobo was well suited to his line of work. He was short, slightly built, and fairly nondescript. Most people who passed him on the street didn’t give the little man a first glance, let alone a second, and Bobo liked it that way. He could disappear in plain sight or in the shadows. Anyone who underestimated Markel Bobo usually wound up dropped into Dust Falls.

His clothes were nothing remarkable. A simple cloth shirt and pants, not too clean, but not dirty either. He wore no visible weapons, and anyone who cared to worry about whether he was armed wouldn’t be able to detect any under his clothes without stripping him bare. But Markel had access to no less than a dozen lethal weapons, not counting the ones he had stashed under the chair before sitting down.

So there Bobo sat in his comfy chair, eating a bowl of real soup courtesy of Jenn Strings, one of Madam Noritake’s girls who was sweet on Markel, and enjoying his easy R and R mission, when his day went totally to hell.

Bobo resettled his visor over his eyes and focused on the roof of the House Cawdor warehouse where he’d seen a glint of light where it didn’t belong. Yes, there it was again. The unmistakable shine of glass or metal reflecting a bit of light. Bobo wouldn’t have even noticed it, except a group of dock workers were busy loading a shipment. The crane lights were at just the right height and angle to reflect whatever was on the roof of the warehouse into Bobo’s room.

He focused in further and found what he was looking for. There, tucked between an air duct, heading up toward the top of the dome, and a group of conduits that ran the length of the docks supplying power to all of the

warehouses, sat K W Dutt with a pict camera pointed down at the docks.

Bobo had always thought Dutt was far too tall to make a competent spy. That was one of the reasons he had never tried to recruit him as an agent. He was almost freakishly tall, especially compared to Bobo's one-point-five metre frame, wore rumpled, almost too large clothing, and had a shock of sandy hair that seemed to constantly fly around his head.

Where Bobo lived by remaining uniquely unremarkable and unmemorable, Dutt stood out like a peacock. His appearance almost demanded people to notice him as soon as he walked into a room, but somehow it worked for Dutt. He was so tall and so obviously dishevelled that people took pains to get out of his way and forget him as soon as he was gone.

But his height had given Dutt away today. If Bobo had used the Cawdor warehouse blind, he'd have been completely hidden behind the pipes. In fact he might have needed to stand on a box to see over the conduits. Bobo checked the time. The transport was due in fifteen minutes. Just enough time to check in and get guidance on how to proceed. No matter what, though, Bobo's easy mission had just gotten complicated.

It took a few minutes to set up a secure line. Bobo opened the case that Jenn kept for him and had placed under the bed before he arrived. Inside was a portable jammer that would shield the room and a closed-circuit pict-caller. With the click of a button, a tripod extended from the bottom of the case. He set it in the middle of the room and placed the jammer on top. When Bobo turned on the device, he could feel his short, stringy hair stand up as the power field ionised the air. No matter what he thought of House van Saar, he couldn't help but be impressed by their technology, especially when he hadn't actually paid for it.

He took the pict-caller over to the bed and opened a hidden panel in the wall behind the headboard. Inside was a conduit that had been cut open to expose the copper wire inside. It took just fifteen seconds to splice the device into the wiring. Bobo always timed it. He pressed a familiar series of buttons on the pict-caller, activated his personal encryption key, and then retired to his chair to keep one eye on Dutt while he waited.

A few minutes later the pict-caller beeped. Dutt hadn't moved yet and the transport was still ten minutes out. Bobo flicked a switch and stood to attention.

He heard a voice say, 'What is it, Bobo?' a moment before the image of Hermod Kauderer appeared on the screen. 'The transport hasn't even landed yet.'

'There's been a development, sir,' Bobo said. 'Nemo has sent a man to the

docks as well. One of his best agents.'

'I see,' said Kauderer. Even from the small pict-screen placed on the low bed, the hawkish master of intrigue seemed to be looking down at Bobo. 'That was to be expected.'

Bobo was specially trained in the art of reading people. He had to know within seconds whether a person was trustworthy or not, whether they were telling the truth or lying, whether they should live or die. He could not read Kauderer at all. 'Should I dispatch him sir?'

'Whatever for?'

'If Nemo has put his best agent on this,' said Bobo, getting a bit flustered by his master's nonchalance, 'he must be taking a personal interest in Jerico's mission. It would seem prudent to keep the spymaster in the dark.'

'And alerting him to the fact that we know of his involvement seems imprudent to me,' said Kauderer. 'Proceed as ordered. Monitor Jerico's mission and report only if he succeeds. All else is being handled.'

'And what about Dutt, sir?' said Bobo. 'Um, Nemo's agent.'

'Take him out for tea for all I care,' said Kauderer. 'Just do not lose sight of Jerico.'

Bobo could read his master's tone easily now and kept his mouth shut, except for a quick 'Yes, sir,' before cutting the connection.

He stared at the blank screen for a moment longer before packing up the case and sitting back at his window. Dutt was still at his post, and the transport was now five minutes out. Nothing to do but wait; wait and think about the conversation with Kauderer. After a while, just before the transport was scheduled to dock, Bobo came to a decision. He stood at the window in full view of the docks, and turned on the lights. Just for a moment, just long enough to catch sight of Dutt staring at him from the warehouse roof.

This mission just got much more interesting, he thought.

Yolanda stood on the roof next to the hole where she had found Beddy's decapitated body. She had struck a pose, with her fists on her hips and one leg slightly forward as if she were an ornament on the prow of a ship. Of course, if she were Kal Jerico, she realised, a ventilation fan nearby would produce a stiff breeze to make her leather jacket and loin-cloth flutter in its artificial wind.

She straightened up and peered down into the hole. 'Find anything?' she called down.

'Yeah,' said Scabbs, his voice the only evidence of his presence in the darkness

below. ‘Lots of rats.’

‘Well you should feel right at home then,’ Yolanda said with a chuckle. ‘Ask them if they saw which way the vampire went,’ she added. ‘You’re practically family, right? You probably dated one of their sisters.’

As Yolanda laughed at her jokes, she saw Scabbs’s torch stop moving in the darkness below. At first she thought he was just mad about the rat jokes, but after a minute the torch still hadn’t moved again.

‘Scabbs?’ she called. ‘Are you all right?’

There was no answer.

‘Scabbs? Stop fooling around. You’re starting to scare me.’

Still no answer. Yolanda listened, but all she could hear was her heart beating in her ample chest. She pulled out her laspistols, triggered the torches atop each one and jumped down into the hole. Standing with her arms outstretched in either direction, Yolanda slowly rotated, throwing light around the room. She finally found Scabbs, crouched on the floor next to his torch.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked, creeping over toward him but still waving one gun around the room to make sure they were alone. When she got close enough to see the floor around her partner, Yolanda screamed. ‘What in Helmawr’s name are you doing?’

Scabbs, surrounded by dead rats, was on his knees leaning down with his face almost touching the ground. At first, Yolanda thought he might be praying for the souls of his dead family members lying around him. Then she noticed that one of the dead rats was directly beneath the scabby half-breed’s face. That was when she screamed.

Scabbs looked up. ‘What?’ He looked back down at the rat and suddenly realised what Yolanda was thinking. ‘No,’ he said dismissively, ‘I was checking for puncture wounds.’ He grabbed his torch and stood up. ‘All of these rats have been completely drained, just like Beddy.’

‘Helmawr’s rump,’ said Yolanda. ‘They were alive yesterday.’

Scabbs nodded. ‘It fed on them after Beddy. And if Beddy didn’t fill it up, these rats sure didn’t do the job.’

‘It’s out hunting right now,’ she said.

Scabbs nodded again. ‘Well, it should be easy to track. All we have to do is follow the trail of dead bodies.’

Yolanda realised something else as well. ‘Come on,’ she said as she put out the torches and holstered her pistols. ‘It’s time to leave Glory Hole.’ She headed back to the hole and motioned for Scabbs to give her a boost.

‘Why?’ Scabbs asked as he waddled over to Yolanda. He interlocked his hands and looked up at her. She scowled at him in the dim light streaming through the hole and pointed at the floor. A moment later she climbed onto his back, as he crouched on the floor and jumped up to reach the edge of the roof.

When they were both back on the roof, Yolanda observed. ‘It drained the rats instead of finding another victim. Why?’

Scabbs shrugged.

‘Rats won’t be missed like people,’ she said. ‘It could have been days before anyone found these drained rats. She was pacing back and forth across the roof now, barely even noticing that her loin cloth and leather jacket were flapping in the breeze she created with her long strides. ‘But another person? With all these bounty hunters in town?’

She stopped in front of Scabbs, who still wore his normal stupid expression. ‘Don’t you get it?’ she asked, thumping him on the top of his head with her fist. Nothing. She wanted to scream.

‘Why did it eat again so soon after Beddy?’ Another shrug.

‘It was gorging itself to prepare for a trip, but didn’t want to leave any more dead bodies behind for us to follow. The vampire left town last night.’

Scabbs raised his hands in submission. ‘Fine. Let’s say you’re right,’ he said. ‘How do we find it now? There’s no trail of bodies. We’re at a dead end.’

‘Are we?’ asked Yolanda. ‘We have you, the greatest half-breed ratskin tracker in all Glory Hole.’ Scabbs smiled at the back-handed compliment and a few flakes of skin fell off his cheeks.

‘It ate its last meal here,’ she said. ‘It can’t have left through the settlement gates. So, where did it go? What secret exit do you know about that it could have used from this rooftop?’

A light bulb finally flared into life in the dark recesses of Scabbs’s brain. He scanned the settlement, apparently getting his bearings. He looked up and down each street, did a few high-level calculations on his fingertips and then smiled. He pointed almost straight up without even looking.

Yolanda followed the finger up to the top of the dome, where a wide shaft extended at a forty-five degree angle out of the settlement into the vast wilderness spaces between domes. Yolanda clapped Scabbs on the shoulder, raising a dust cloud that coated her fingers. ‘Fantastic,’ she said. ‘Now, how do we get up there?’

Scabbs produced Beddy’s grapnel, which he had obviously purloined, and handed it to Yolanda.

Kal sauntered up the docks, breathing in the stale air, heavy with a multitude of odours. To the right was the sharp stench of spoiled meat coming from the Cawdor warehouse. To the left he got a thick, oily whiff of petrol from the fuel station and straight ahead was Hive City itself, with all those odours plus the bitter smell of Wildsnake and the pungent musk emanating from Madam Noritake's.

He was nearly home. So Hive City was quite the tumultuous life-in-your-own-hands place that the Underhive was, but he found it a damn sight more palatable than the Spire, all the same. The only thing ruining Kal's day now – other than being forced to work for his father and the fact that Nemo seemed to be after him again – was that he had that stupid spear strapped across his back.

'Welcome to Hive City,' he said to Valtin.

'It's not clean,' admitted the Helmawr guard, 'but it's not nearly as bad as I imagined.'

The two left the dock area and walked down a short street between squat, square buildings made of grey stone and metal. Variety, colour, and ornamentation were nowhere to be seen down here. Down in the real Hive, practicality and functionality were all that mattered.

'Remember,' said Kal. 'This isn't the Underhive.'

'What's the difference?'

'Spoken like a true Spire brat,' Kal laughed. 'For one thing, most of the buildings are still standing and occupied. For another thing, the air gets recycled once in a while and you can find your way around without a flashlight, assuming we knew where we were going. Plus you can walk for blocks without a gang war erupting around you. There are laws here against that sort of thing.'

'Not so in the Underhive?'

'The only law in the Underhive is the kind you carry strapped to your waist.'

They came to an intersection and Kal looked to the left and right. The connecting streets didn't run straight. They both curved away from the dome walls. Kal remembered that one direction had a bunch of cut-backs and dead ends; relics of generations of rebuilding due to hivequakes. Unfortunately, he could never remember which way had the more direct route into the main part of the city.

'Which way is it to that shop?' he wondered out loud.

While Kal tried to remember if he should turn left or right, Valtin asked, 'But I thought we were supposed to head down into the Underhive. Isn't that where nobles go to hide from the family?'

‘Technically true, dear nephew,’ said Kal. ‘But there are one or two tasks we must accomplish here first.’

‘What? Get drunk and find some women?’

Kal laughed again. ‘You forgot gambling,’ he said. ‘That comes between the drinking and the wenching. No, we need to fix your clothes and get my dog.’ With that, Kal made a decision and turned left.

An hour later, hopelessly lost in Hive City, he decided that left was probably the wrong decision. ‘Damn Scabbs,’ he muttered. ‘Where are you when I need you? Probably still sitting in Hagen’s Hole drinking on my tab.’

‘Kill me if you want,’ said Hagen. ‘I can’t tell you where they went because I don’t know where they went.’

Themis tossed the big, hairy bartender into the corner as if he was nothing more than a sack of laundry. He lay there, his beard matted with blood and his left eye swollen shut. He was pretty sure that at least three ribs were broken. He landed in a puddle of Wildsnake, but it really didn’t matter, since his clothes were already drenched with blood, sweat and spit. Only the spit didn’t belong to him.

The Wildcats had taken Hagen by surprise while he was napping on the gaming table. It was the only table in the place sturdy enough to hold his huge frame. The bar had been packed with mercenaries for two full days and nights and Hagen had been beat. Everyone had finally left to hunt the vampire, so he decided to take a rest.

Then the Wildcats stormed in. The door was gone, lost to a frag grenade. The explosion woke Hagen and he had immediately rolled off the table into a corner. The lousy Escher women then shot up the front room and most of his stock behind the bar. They didn’t seem to care that no one was in the bar. In fact, it seemed to make them even madder.

Hagen had tried to crawl to the storeroom door. If he could make it down the stairs, he might have a chance of getting to the escape hatch, but the one they called Themis saw him and shot another frag grenade over his head toward the door. Hagen dived back over the gaming table just as the door exploded. The fragments ripped through the table and cut the bartender in the head and shoulders.

They were on him before he could crawl out from under the remains of the table. The next hour had been a blur of kicking, beating, spitting, and screaming. They didn’t even bother to ask questions until after he’d regained consciousness the second time. Hagen didn’t hold back any information. He told them about the

vampire, the dead mercenaries, Yolanda, Scabbs, and Kal: everything. But it didn't seem to matter. The torture and the spitting continued. He'd heard that Escher women hated men. Now, he knew it for certain.

The black cloud of unconsciousness threatened to take him again as the gang members moved into the front room. Hagen feared he wouldn't wake up this time so fought to keep his head clear. He heard Themis speak. She was a tall, powerfully-built blonde who Hagen could have gone for in any other circumstance (he loved a strong woman who could toss him around a little).

'He doesn't know where she went,' said Themis. 'Or if he does, he'll take it to his grave.'

'Kill him,' said another voice Hagen knew to be Vicksen Colteen, perhaps the scariest Escher woman in the Underhive, which was really saying something. 'Send a message to the shopkeepers that we are the Wildcats no matter who leads us.'

A dozen weapons cocked in a rapid staccato of clicks.

'We don't want to step over that line,' said Themis. 'A physical interview is one thing, but murdering Hagen? That puts a bounty on our heads and ticks off every mercenary from here to Dust Falls. Leave him alive and everyone knows that the Wildcats took on Hagen's Hole and won!'

'Fine,' said Vicksen. 'He lives. But we're no closer to Yolanda than we were a day ago.'

'Then we'll just have to interview a few of the fine folk in Glory Hole. Someone must have seen where she and the little scab-faced half-breed went.'

The next sound Hagen heard was the scuffling of feet on the metal grate floor and then silence. Minutes passed and they didn't return. Each breath sent an explosion of pain through his chest, and he wasn't sure if he could even move. He had to find help before the darkness took him again. He didn't want to let Themis down and end up dead anyway.

Hagen began to pull himself across the grate toward the shattered front door.

Several hours after leaving the docks, Kal finally found a familiar landmark. They were only a few streets away from Fewell's armoury now. Valtin had been quiet most of the way, but as Kal picked up the pace, he asked, 'Do you know where you are now, or are we still lost?'

'Lost?' said Kal, putting on his best innocent bystander face. 'We weren't lost. I was just trying to confuse those trying to follow us.'

'Were we being followed?'

‘Stands to reason,’ said Kal. ‘Seems like somebody’s always watching me and somehow getting to where I’m going ten steps ahead of me.’ In a way, Jerico was glad they had taken such a circuitous route. If anyone had been following them, he’d certainly made them work for it. And, it had given him time to notice something odd about Hive City.

‘Did you notice anything strange while we walked the streets?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Valtin looked a little disgusted. ‘Just that there seemed to be an awful lot of them that ended in brick walls.’

‘Have you heard any screams in the last few hours?’

‘No.’

‘Any lasblasts?’

‘No.’

‘Sirens? Claxons? Explosions?’

‘No,’ said Valtin. He grabbed Kal by the shoulder to stop him. ‘Why? I’ve gone days without hearing any one of those things.’

‘But as you said, this is not the Spire,’ replied Kal. ‘Sure, it’s peaceful here in Hive City compared to the Underhive, but in three hours time we should have at least witnessed a mugging or seen an enforcer rousting a burglar. It’s scavving quiet around here, and that ain’t normal.’

They had arrived at Fewell’s armoury. The sign by the door showed a suit of body armour with two crossed swords that appeared to be piercing the armour. Kal had never gotten up the nerve to ask Fewell if that had been intentional or if some disgruntled client had altered the image.

‘This is the place,’ said Kal.

‘I have body armour,’ replied Valtin. He looked closely at the sign. ‘And mine doesn’t have any holes in it.’

‘The owner’s been watching my dog,’ said Kal, ‘and fixing a few busted plates on his back.’

‘Fixing a few whats on his where?’

‘Just come on.’

They walked into Fewells. It was almost a home away from home for Kal, which was quite a trick since he had no home. Racks of body armour in various stages of creation or repair littered the cramped shop, making it tough to walk through to the counter. Hung on the walls in a haphazard fashion were metal weapons of all shapes and sizes from little rib stickers for the up-and-coming midget assassin to massive, crush-your-head-with-one-blow axes sized for a Goliath.

‘Fewell,’ called out Kal. ‘Is Wotan ready to g–’

He never got a chance to finish the sentence. A huge creature flashed over the counter and bounded through the shop. Rack after rack fell to the floor, creating a cacophony of clattering metal. Valtin yelled an exclamation as the beast burst through the last of the racks and leapt into the air toward them.

‘Wotan!’ cried Kal as the metallic hound drove him over backwards and landed astride his chest. Wotan was easily a metre tall at the shoulders and almost two metres long from the point of his metal teeth to the tip of his tail. His head had been moulded to resemble a real dog with ears that stood up and a little bulb of a nose on the end of his snout. But he was all metal, with extra plating at the shoulders and joints, and long metal spikes for claws.

He barked, which sounded a lot like bones breaking. ‘This is your dog?’ asked Valtin.

‘Yep.’ Kal pushed Wotan’s nose aside to make the dog move off his chest and then stood up. He patted Wotan on the head.

‘I don’t want to know where you got him, do I?’ continued Valtin.

‘And I don’t want to tell you,’ Kal replied.

Fewell was coming through the racks, picking each one up as he made his way through the store. ‘I’m glad you’re here, Kal,’ he said. ‘I’m getting tired of picking up these scavving racks.’

Fewell was a mountain of a man. He stood well over two metres tall and had a broad chest to match, but his comically oversized head seemed all the bigger thanks to his short-cropped, sandy hair and smooth chin. Kal had never seen so much as a whisker on Fewell’s face, let alone the stubble most men sported at this time of day, which gave him the look of an overgrown adolescent.

‘I’ll take him off your hands,’ said Kal, ‘But…’

‘I know, you’ll have to pay me later,’ finished Fewell. He rarely smiled, and he spoke in a constant monotone, which made it almost impossible to tell when he was joking and when he was really mad.

‘Um, not only that,’ continued Kal, but could I bother you for a sharp knife, some heavy pliers, and a little information?’

‘What’s mine is yours,’ replied Fewell. ‘You’ll take it anyway.’ He went back to the counter to retrieve the items.

‘What do you need those for?’ asked Valtin. He shied away from Wotan, who was busy sniffing the guard’s boots.

‘They’re for you,’ said Kal. ‘We need to make some changes to your outfit.’

‘Who’s your pretty boyfriend, Kal?’ asked Fewell when he returned with the

tools.

'See what I mean?' said Kal. He took the pliers from Fewell, and said, 'He's my nephew. I'm teaching him how to fit in down in the Underhive.' Kal reached out with the pliers, grabbed hold of one of the silver buckles on Valtin's coat, and pulled. The leather ripped away, leaving a gash where the buckle used to be.

'You'll take these in trade, won't you Fewell' asked Kal as he grabbed the next buckle in line.

Scabbs looked at the drained bodies of the two Goliaths. 'I knew these two,' he said. 'That's Thag, or at least it was. He was one of the strongest pit fighters I'd ever seen. Cost me a hundred credits the first and only time I ever bet against him.'

'And the female?' asked Yolanda with a sigh. She was tired. Tired from trekking across the dust and tired of finding dead bodies. The two Goliaths upped the body count in the Wastes alone to twelve. A bloody dozen, she thought. No. A *bloodless* dozen.

'Grunn,' replied Scabbs. 'She's who I bet on with those hundred credits. It was their first match. Thag got her down in a chokehold and the crowd was calling for her death, but Thag wouldn't do it. He refused to kill her and forfeited all of his earnings to that point. Took him another two years to get out of the pits, but he took Grunn with him and they've lived in the Wastes ever since.'

'It's a beautiful story, really,' said Yolanda. 'But is there a point?'

'Nothing could beat Thag,' he said. 'Nothing! Not if he knew it was coming. And, look! His axe is still in his hands, and he was skewered through the chest. Thag was facing the vampire, weapon in hand, when it killed him.'

'So?' asked Yolanda. 'It's just like Beddy. Just like those Scavvy warbands we found out here earlier. It kills, it eats, and it moves on. Why is this one any different?'

'Thag was a powerful fighter,' insisted Scabbs. He was getting pretty agitated. The scabby skin on his face flaked off as he shook with emotion. 'I doubt you and Jerico could have taken him together on a good day. But Thag doesn't have a mark on him except the death blow. The vampire killed him with one hit! One hit! How in the Hive are we supposed to kill it if Thag and Grunn together couldn't beat it?'

'I don't know,' said Yolanda. 'Maybe we can starve it to death. Maybe Thud and Grunzilla here wounded it and we'll find *its* corpse over the next rise. I don't care. We're bounty hunters. We track killers and bring them in, dead or alive. It's

what we do.'

When she was done talking, Yolanda noticed Scabbs staring at her. She glanced down at her clothes to make sure nothing was showing that shouldn't be showing. 'What?' she asked, finally. 'Do I have dust in my hair?'

'Starve it to death,' muttered Scabbs.

'Huh?' asked Yolanda. She began to worry that her scabby partner had succumbed to waste fever. Too much time under the phosphorescent light, breathing in the hive dust made people go a little off. She figured people who lived in the Wastes were probably a little off to begin with.

'You said, "We could starve it do death,"' said Yolanda. 'Have you noticed the vampire is feeding a lot more often? It drained Bester the first night, the shopkeeper and Beddy the next day, and then today, it's fed at least twelve times.'

'Unless there are other bodies we don't know about.'

'Maybe,' agreed Scabbs. 'But you have to admit that today has been a banner day in the bloodsucking business.'

Yolanda shrugged. 'Okay. It's eating more. What's that mean?'

'I don't know,' said Scabbs, 'but if its appetite is growing, you know where it must be headed.'

Yolanda wasn't listening anymore, though. 'Um, that's really great Scabbs, but we should go now.'

'What?' asked Scabbs. 'We can't just leave Thag here. We need to give him and Grunn a proper burial, or at least look through his pockets to see if I can get back my hundred credits.'

'Now, Scabbs!' urged Yolanda. She'd pulled out a pair of binoculars and was looking at the Wastes behind them. 'We have company.'

'Scavvies?' asked Scabbs. It was almost a squeak.

'Worse,' said Yolanda as she began to run. 'Wildcats!'

5: CAT FIGHT

Squatz's life was finally getting back to normal after that trouble a few months back. His bar, The Breath of Fresh Air, had been home territory to no less than three gangs. It was a sort of neutral ground where all the gangers could enjoy a drop of Wildsnake or his House Special along with the freshest air for miles around, thanks to the huge fan at the junction of no less than three ventilation shafts that sat above the square outside his door.

But then a strange little man came through looking for some lost bit of archeotech, sparking a gang war the likes of which Hive City had not seen in generations. Sure, the Fresh Air was situated amongst the lowest levels of the city, but this wasn't the Underhive, and the rule of law still applied. At least that's what Squatz had thought, but even the enforcers had proved powerless to stop this particular turf war and before you could say 'Did you spill my Wildsnake?' pretty much all his regulars were dead.

The loss of the three gangs left a nervous void as every gang within three domes wanted to lay claim to that fan and the fresh air it produced. Squatz's gold mine turned into a money pit overnight. Brawls were constantly broken up by the enforcers, rogue gangers menacing his more law-abiding patrons and the occasional shootout in the street had all driven his more respectable, hardworking patrons away and racked up a huge repair bill for Squatz. At long last, a Van Saar gang led by a runt named Quill had finally taken control. They often hung out in the bar after working their Underhive territories. They kept to themselves for the most part, and kept the other gangs out of the district. A sort of peace had returned to the Fresh Air.

Quill and his boys were in the back room, whooping it up over some big victory. Squatz stood on the plank behind the bar and watched them while cleaning glasses. He was a short man with only one eye. Some people might call him a dwarf. Those people wouldn't live to apologise. He scratched at the patch

over his empty eye socket. He hated wearing it, but Quill had made it very clear that he had no choice. Squatz loathed owning a one-gang bar, but it was better than the alternative.

Quill and his gang headed toward the bar from the back. Quill wore brown body armour with long barbs attached to the shoulders and upper back, making him look a little like a porcupine. Squatz figured it was the best joke the ganger's brain could come up with. He opened a bottle of House Special as they approached, but Quill flicked the back of his hand at the barman. 'Important business. We'll be back later. I don't want to catch you with that patch off again,' he said as they left.

Squatz took a long draught from the bottle, wiped his hand over his mouth, and then raised the bottle in a mock salute. He hopped off his plank and went around the end of the bar to go clean up the table. A moment later he heard lasblasts coming from the square. 'Not so damn close to my bar!' he yelled and ran to the door.

Squatz arrived just in time to see a huge beast of a man, with wild tangles of hair streaming around his face, land in the middle of Quill's men. He towered over the Van Saar gang, his huge black shoulders reaching the top of their heads. And there were tubes coming out of his chest and arms that snaked their way over his shoulders. It had to be the vampire, but Squatz was certain that he was wearing some sort of power armour. *The vampire was a Spyrer*.

Squatz backed away from the doorway, so as not to be seen, and watched. The vampire grabbed a juve named Kenner by the top of his head and tossed him into the air. Kenner slammed into the fan, which screamed in protest as it cut through the foreign body jammed between its blades.

'That's going to cost me business for a month,' said Squatz.

The rest of the gang reacted quickly, fanning out and diving for cover. A couple of them headed for the Fresh Air, but Squatz didn't want the vampire following them in, so he slammed the door closed and slid the bolt into place. He then moved to a window so he could see the rest of the battle.

The two gangers he'd just locked out turned, but the vampire was right behind them. He now wore some sort of mirrored helmet with glowing red eyes. The tubes that had been slung over his shoulders were attached around the base of the helmet. One of the gangers at the door got off a plasma bolt shot. It exploded on the vampire's chest. When the flames died away, Squatz could see that the explosion had done nothing more than chip away at one of the black plates on the armour.

The vampire swung a huge fist at the ganger, hitting and shattering the plasma gun. The resulting explosion knocked Squatz to the floor. When he got back up, the vampire was moving away. The two gangers lay in a bloody heap outside his door. The rest of Quill's gang opened fire from around the square. Laser blasts, shotgun rounds and stubber shots all rebounded off the armour, doing little or no damage.

One of the Van Saar, a tall, bull-headed ganger named Domerud, stood his ground on the other side of the square, unloading clip after clip from his autogun in rapid fire that bounced off the vampire's armour. With blinding speed, the vampire sprinted across to Domerud and grabbed the weapon from his hand. The vampire spun the weapon around, jammed the barrel through Domerud's sternum and pulled the trigger.

The resulting spray of bullets shot clean out of Dom's back and took down two gangers stood behind him. The vampire hoisted Domerud's limp carcass over his head and tossed him toward Quill. The Van Saar ducked, but by the time he'd straightened up the vampire was right above him. Quill stood his ground, aimed his heavy plasma gun at the vampire, and fired.

Squatz gave him credit. The gang leader must have known what would happen, but had obviously decided in that split second that it was the only way to save the rest of his gang. The explosion engulfed both the vampire and Quill in fire and black smoke that roiled up toward the roof of the square in a billowing cloud. That ought to alert the enforcers, thought Squatz. Not that they could do anything about the rampaging vampire. Enforcers would be no match for a Spyrer.

The huge fan that gave the Fresh Air its name dispersed the smoke after a few moments. Quill's body lay in a charred heap on the ground, but the vampire was still standing. He wasn't moving; just standing and perhaps swaying a little. Squatz wondered if the gang leader had succeeded where all others had failed. Then the vampire turned. Squatz could see a small hole in his rig where a chunk of armour plate had been blown off, but that was the sum total of Quill's sacrificial act.

Hauk, Quill's second-in-command, an imposing figure standing well over two metres tall and broad across the chest, called for a retreat. The tattered remnants of the gang ran toward the exits from the square, while Hauk and two juves named Wat and Baddy laid down covering fire. The juves both fired laser blasts that hit the vampire in the head. The shots seemed to get absorbed by the mirrored material, and then red beams shot out from the eyes, burning both juves

on the spot.

Hauk dropped his weapon and ran, pushing his way past two enforcers who were running toward the square. They took one look at the carnage and the imposing figure of the Spyrer-rigged vampire and turned to chase after Hauk. Funny thing is, thought Squatz, if they catch Hauk, he'll probably get charged with murdering his own gang. The peace has to be kept, no matter the cost.

The vampire didn't pursue Hauk or the enforcers. Squatz watched in amazement as the vampire picked up several bodies and jumped onto the horizontal ventilation shaft coming out of the fan housing. He scaled the vertical shaft above the fan and disappeared into the darkness.

A while later, as Squatz was about to go out into the square to see if anyone was still alive, he heard a noise from above the fan. The vampire was coming back down. Squatz closed the door and slunk back to his window. The vampire picked up the rest of the bodies and climbed back into the darkness.

Squatz decided to stay inside for the rest of the day, and perhaps the next few as well. He could live on synthnuts and House Special if he had to, but he wasn't opening that door for anyone or anything.

'This is fine looking silver, Kal,' said Fewell. He held all of Valtin's buckles in his meaty hands, along with the two silver chains from his jacket. The front of Valtin's jacket was in shreds as were the tops of his boots where Kal had ripped off all the buckles. 'This'll make a nice dint in what you owe me for the last five years.'

'Now about that information,' said Kal. He was kneeling next to Valtin with the knife, using it to rip off the silk piping.

'That'll cost you extra.'

'Add it to my tab,' said Kal with a chuckle. 'As always.' He was done with the silk piping and was now scratching and cutting at the too-clean and too-perfect pants and coat.

'Ow!' cried Valtin. 'Watch that knife.'

'Spire baby,' said Kal. 'It's not even all that sharp.' When he was finished, Kal tossed the knife toward one of the armour racks. It stuck fast. 'Okay. It's a little sharp.' A broad grin swept across his face. Kal turned to Fewell. 'I'm looking for another relative of mine.'

'Another fancy pants Spire brat like this one?' asked Fewell. He pulled the knife out of the rack and pushed his way back to the counter through all the armour that Wotan had knocked over.

Kal motioned to Valtin to pick up the armour, but Wotan just knocked them over again as he padded after Kal. When he got to the counter, Kal continued. ‘No,’ he said. ‘This relative is older, more experienced. I don’t think this is his first trip down here.’

‘What’s he look like?’

Kal realised he didn’t know and didn’t have a picture. ‘Well, probably a lot like me,’ he said, smiling. ‘You know, dashing good looks, regal chin, full head of hair.’

Fewell raised his eyebrows and stared at the bounty hunter. ‘Well, if you don’t know what he looks like and he knows how to blend in, it’ll be awfully hard to find him. The Underhive’s a pretty big place.’

‘He, um, has a bit of a temper,’ added Valtin. He’d replaced all the armour and joined the conversation. ‘Any, er, murders in the last few days?’

Now Fewell gave Valtin the same incredulous look. ‘Murders in the last few days, you say, huh? Well, gee, I dunno. Just maybe a dozen or so. You boys ain’t heard of the Underhive Vampire?’

‘Oh that,’ said Kal. ‘I heard about that down by Glory Hole. Killed Bester.’ He stopped and stared at Fewell. ‘A dozen? All in Glory Hole?’

‘Nah! All over the Underhive and even in Hive City.’ The armour maker picked up a small hammer and a rounded sheet of metal and began tapping out some dents. ‘All the way down to Dust Falls, I hear.’

Valtin pushed Kal out of the way to get closer to the armourer. ‘When did you say all this vampire business started?’

‘I didn’t say.’ Fewell looked at Valtin and then back down at his work. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Valtin glanced at Kal, who sighed. ‘Lesson number two, nephew: down here everything has a price.’ Valtin stared at Jerico, still not getting it. ‘You’ll have to pay him for the info.’

‘But he was giving it to you for free.’

‘He knows I don’t have any money,’ said Kal, ‘and he’d just add it to my tab later, anyway.’ He looked at Fewell. ‘I really ought to look at that tab sometime to keep you honest.’

‘Says the pot to the kettle,’ replied Fewell.

Valtin ignored the two of them and dug into his pants for some credits. He looked at Kal again, wanting to ask how much to pay, but decided to chance it on his own. He laid down a five-credit chip. Jerico jerked his thumb into the air. Valtin took the five chip back and dropped a 100 credit bond. Jerico gasped, but

Fewell had snatched it up without even missing a beat with his hammer.

'The first murder was here in Hive City three nights ago. After that, it's hard to say, but it seems like they were strung out from here to Dust Falls and then up to Glory Hole. Don't know after that.'

'The timing is about right,' said Valtin. He turned to Kal. 'There's something else you should know,' he said.

'What now?'

'Armand is most likely wearing his Spyrer rig.'

'You've got to be kidding me,' said Kal.

Valtin nodded.

'And you just thought to tell me this now?'

Another nod.

'Hey Fewell,' said Kal, sarcasm dripping off his voice. 'You wouldn't happen to have a spare monofilament sword in the back, would you?'

'No, but I know where you might get one,' he replied in the same monotone droll he'd used when answering Valtin.

Kal's mouth dropped open. 'Where?'

Fewell hesitated, looked over at Valtin, obviously wondering if he could get any more credits out of Kal's nephew, but then looked back at Kal's face, which was now stewing red. 'Out of the Spyrer team that's tracking your vampire!' he replied, finally.

Hagen winced as Skreed wrapped a sheet around his torso to help stabilise the broken ribs. He and Dungo had come into the bar just as Hagen was about to pass out again. They'd poured the better part of a bottle of Wildsnake down his throat, which had shocked his system enough to keep him conscious. Then Dungo went to Hagen's place, which was just a spare room in the basement, to fetch bandages and a fresh shirt for the bartender while Skreed helped Hagen wash the blood and spit out of his beard.

The Wildsnake was taking effect, spreading its warmth through his beaten body and numbing the pain for a while. He didn't even complain when Dungo opened two more bottles for himself and Skreed.

'What in the Hive happened?' Skreed asked finally.

'Wildcats came looking for Yolanda,' replied Hagen. He groaned. Just talking made his ribs ache.

'We should take you to Hive City and find you a real doc,' said Dungo. He took a long pull at his bottle, as if worried they might leave right away.

‘Nah,’ said Hagen. ‘It’s just cracked ribs and a cracked head. Nothing the docs can do that a little rest won’t cure.’ Fact was, Hagen was afraid of only two things in life. One was spiders. He’d nearly been eaten by a giant hive spider once and was now skittish around all eight-legged creatures. The other thing was doctors. You couldn’t trust a person you had to pay to cut you open. It just didn’t seem right.

The three drank in silence for a while. Hagen wondered if the Hole would ever be the same. The vampire had driven off or killed most of his business. All of Glory Hole had been scared into their homes. It would take months to pay for all the damage the Wildcats had caused. By then, the mercenaries would have found a new hole to hang out in.

The silence was broken by an explosion down the street. ‘Not again,’ said Hagen. With nothing left to lose, he pushed himself out of the chair with a groan and hobbled over to the door, which Skreed had propped against the opening. He peeked through the crack between the door and the frame. ‘Helmawr’s rump,’ he cried. ‘Spyrers.’

A rocket exploded outside the Hole. The concussion blasted the door into Hagen. He flew across the room, hit the far wall, and fell to the floor. A second later the door landed on top of him. Hagen tried to push the door off, but his ribs screamed at him. Then he heard Dungo scream as well, and he decided to stay put.

Several lasblasts echoed through the room and then Hagen heard a whistling noise that he’d only heard once before in his life, followed by another scream and a dull thud. The whistling was the sound a monofilament sword made as it ripped through the atoms of the air and pretty much any object in its path

A commanding voice said, ‘Where’s the vampire?’

Skreed, his voice halting and choking as he spoke, answered: ‘It… left Glory… don’t know… where it went.’

‘What’s the closest settlement?’

‘Nothing close. Just the Wastes and then Hive City.’

Hagen heard a sickening crack and then the unmistakable sound of another body hitting the floor.

‘We head straight for the City,’ said the voice. ‘He has to eat.’

The Spyrers left, but Hagen waited a very long time before crawling out from under the door. As he suspected, Skreed and Dungo lay dead on the floor. Dungo lay in a bloody mass while Skreed lay next to his severed arm, his head lying at an awkward angle to his body. Hagen, moving very slowly, went downstairs and

packed a satchel and then cleaned out the cash box.

First, he was going to go see a medicae, and then head out to take on those damn spiders again to get at their treasure. That had to be safer than running this place.

Derindi poked his head farther out of the hive dust to see what Yolanda was yelling about. She seemed to be looking his way and he feared that the statuesque bounty hunter had spotted his hiding spot. It had been tough following them across the White Wastes, but his small stature and willingness to cover his entire body with dust had kept Derindi hidden for the better part of a day. Of course, his whole body itched.

Now she was looking right at him through her binoculars. But he'd been almost completely buried! How could she have seen him? He glanced over his shoulder to see if there was something else she might be excited about. 'Oh, crap!' he said and ducked back under the dust just as the Wildcat gang thundered past.

He felt lucky that only two of the large Escher women had stepped on him as they ran past. He stuck his head back up a moment later, only to have it kicked from behind by a straggler. The last thing Derindi saw before losing consciousness was the bouncing bottom of a young Escher wearing a black outfit with some strange red writing on the back.

Yolanda glanced behind her. She'd been running for only a few minutes, but already Scabbs had fallen a full dust dune behind. The Wastes were inside the Hive, but the strange ventilation-spawned wind patterns from the surrounding domes that had brought the dust to this area in the first place, also produced dunes that looked almost natural.

The Wildcats were maybe two dunes behind Scabbs and would start firing soon. Yolanda could see the curved wall of a dome ahead, but she knew the Eschers would be on top of her before she could find the entrance tunnel, and would reach Scabbs before he even made the wall.

They had to make a stand. The question was, did she make it before or after Scabbs got shot? Better to have a wall behind her, but by then Scabbs would be dead. 'Helmawr's rump,' she said. 'I'd better save the little scabber.'

Yolanda dived to the ground at the bottom of the next dune, and then crawled back to peer over the top. When Scabbs crested the dune, she reached out and tripped her partner, sending him rolling down the dune. 'Get up here,' she hissed and then pulled out her laspistols.

As the Wildcats reached the top of the dune behind her, Yolanda fired two

blasts that slammed into the hive dust, melting it into slag under Vicksen's feet. 'That's far enough!' yelled Yolanda. 'Speak your piece and leave, or I'll shoot you where you stand.'

Yolanda could just see Vicksen's head and shoulders and the tops of two or three Wildcats behind their leader without exposing herself too much. Vicksen turned and said something to one of the girls and then turned back and cupped her hands around her mouth. Yolanda watched the other ganger as Vicksen spoke.

'We need your help, Yolanda,' she called. 'Let me come over there – alone – and we'll talk about it.'

The ganger Vicksen had spoken to had her head bowed, like she was working on something. Whatever, it was, it made Yolanda suspicious. That, and the fact that Eschers were not known for talking out their problems. 'I don't believe you,' she said and punctuated the statement with another blast from her laspistol that went right past Vicksens's ear. 'The next one goes between your eyes. Now leave!'

'I've got a better idea,' said Vicksen. 'You leave – in pieces.'

The other ganger turned, with a grenade launcher in her hands. Yolanda pushed away from the dust and rolled sideways down the dune as the top exploded, sending a cloud of dust and metal fragments raining down around her. She slammed into Scabbs, who had made it half way up, and both of them rolled, bumping and jostling each other, all the way to the bottom.

By the time Yolanda and Scabbs got themselves untangled and stood up, the Wildcats were coming over the top of the blasted dune. Yolanda looked for her guns and saw them sticking out of the dust near the top of the dune. She pulled out her sword instead.

The sword was a jet-black katana. Its metal reflected the pale, blue light emanating from the rafters above the Wastes, giving it an eerie green shine. Yolanda struck a fighting stance and glared at the Wildcats, daring them to move within range. Upon seeing Yolanda standing there with her powerful arms and legs, wicked sword, and death in her eyes, anyone but an Escher woman would have hesitated.

In fact, the younger Wildcats stopped at the top of the dune, but Vicksen, Themis, and several others ran down the dune and encircled the bounty hunters. Yolanda moved to put herself and Scabbs back-to-back while keeping her eyes on Vicksen. 'Too afraid to fight me woman to woman?' she asked, staring straight into the Wildcat leader's eyes. 'Worried you can't take me alone?'

‘No,’ said Vicksen smiling. ‘That’s exactly what I want, in fact.’ She snapped her fingers and said, ‘Now!’ The gangers surrounding Yolanda and Scabbs all fired at the same time. But there was no explosion, just a mass of sticky webs that hit them from all sides, gluing the two bounty hunters together and sticking them fast to the ground.

Vicksen walked up, grabbed Yolanda’s sword by the blade, and yanked it out of her webbed hands. ‘Just not here,’ she continued. ‘Not now. We’re going to do this in as public a place as possible.’

‘Why?’ whined Scabbs. ‘What do you want?’

‘She knows,’ said Vicksen. She was now staring deep into Yolanda’s eyes with a big smile on her face. ‘We never fought for control of the Wildcats, and until one of us is dead, the Wildcats can have no leader.’

‘But why me?’ asked Scabbs. ‘What have you got against me?’

‘You’re the reason she left in the first place,’ sneered Vicksen. ‘You and the wretched Kal Jerico. For that you will both die, once I am crowned the true leader of the Wildcats. But that must happen in front of an audience so the entire Hive will know that I have beaten the great Yolanda. So, you both get to live a little longer. Well, at least until we reach The Breath of Fresh Air. The courtyard will make a fine arena for our battle.’

‘Aren’t you worried about the enforcers?’ asked Scabbs.

‘What, me worry about men with weapons?’ sneered Vicksen. ‘Hardly.’

Bobo snuck up behind Dutt, who was crouched behind a rubbish pile in an alley across from the armourer’s place. He’d thought it over and over, and had decided that something wasn’t quite right. There was more to this mission than a simple R&R, and he hated working in the dark. It was time to compare notes.

He was amazed at how close Dutt had let him get. He could have killed him ten minutes ago if he’d wanted, but that was why Bobo worked for the Spire and Dutt worked for Nemo. The next part would be tricky, though. Dutt still had his pict-camera trained on the shop. If he turned and caught Bobo in the recorder’s field of vision, Nemo would have a record of this meeting.

He took another step forward, ready to drop to the ground and roll if Dutt should turn around. Before Bobo could take a second step, Dutt lifted a needler and pointed it right between Bobo’s eyes without even turning his head.

‘Impressive,’ said Bobo. He slid to the side a few steps, and Dutt tracked him with the needler. Nemo’s spy still hadn’t turned. ‘Very impressive. I’m not here to take you out. If I was, you would already be dead.’

Dutt turned, leaving the pict recorder on the pile, pointing at the shop. He spread his arms, palms up, although Bobo noticed that the barrel of the weapon never wavered. He wasn't sure what the shrug was supposed to suggest, so he just continued. 'I'm here to talk. There's something not right about this mission. So I thought – it sounds crazy now that I'm saying it, but it's been a crazy few days, huh? – I thought we should talk. You know, compare notes. Okay, if you don't say something soon, I'm just going to shoot you for spite.'

Bobo watched in fascination as Dutt raised his empty hand to his mouth. He opened up and reached inside with two fingers and his thumb. The fingers twisted slightly, and Bobo could swear he heard something click. When he brought his fingers back out, he was holding a tooth. Dutt reached down and jammed his hand into the rubbish heap up to the elbow, then brought his muck-encrusted arm back out, and spread his hand to show that it was empty.

'Now I can talk,' Dutt said. 'Nemo's subvocal implant. It transmits everything I say right back to Nemo. I had it modified, so I could remove it whenever I want.'

'Interesting boss you have there.'

'It's a living,' replied Dutt. 'I saw you at Noritake's.'

'Only because I wanted you to see me,' said Bobo. 'I saw you first.'

'Whatever.' Dutt glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Jerico was still in the shop. 'Say what you have to say. They'll be coming out soon.'

'How do you know?'

'Nemo's had the armourer bugged for ages,' said Dutt. 'It's one of Jerico's favourite haunts. Spill it. Why are you here?'

'I just got a bad feeling about this one. Too many big things happening all at once. There's the vampire, and now I hear that a Spyrer team is hanging round these parts and we're both watching Jerico for our respective masters. It seems that everyone knows that something big is about to go down, but nobody's telling us what it is or how far away from ground zero we need to be when it happens. And I don't know about you, but I hate working in the dark.'

He watched Dutt as he spoke, trying to pick up any clues from body language that would tell him how much the other spy knew. From his expression, Bobo was fairly certain Dutt was just as in the dark about the objectives of this mission as he was. That at least was comforting.

'So, what do you want to do, work together?' he asked.

The remark dripped with sarcasm. Bobo didn't need to read his face to figure that one out. 'Not work together so much as share information,' he said, matter-

of-factly, in an effort to disarm his fellow spy.

If it worked, Dutt didn't show it and he was better at hiding his emotions than Bobo thought. 'You first,' was all he said.

'Fine. I did seek permission to eliminate you, but I was denied,' he said. 'Either my boss doesn't care if Nemo gets there first, which I don't believe, or he's working with Nemo on this, which I can't believe.'

'Maybe there's another explanation,' said Dutt with a smirk. Bobo just stared at him, unable to think of anything. 'My boss happens to know that your boss, Hermod Kauderer, is the one who sent the Spyrers down here. We're just witnesses. They'll be doing all the heavy work.'

'Does my bo… does Kauderer know that Nemo knows?'

'Sorry, I'm done sharing,' he said as he reached into the refuse pile for his tooth. Before he pulled it back out, he cocked his head slightly. Bobo suspected he was listening to some transmission in his ear. He still hadn't pulled the tooth out of the trash.

'Wait,' said Bobo. 'What was that?'

Dutt left his arm in the pile of refuse and smiled at Bobo. 'You first.'

Bobo wondered what he had that Nemo might be interested in knowing. It came to him like a laser blast. 'You know the noble travelling with Jerico?' he asked. Dutt nodded. 'He has orders to eliminate any witnesses once the mission is completed, including Kal Jerico.'

Dutt couldn't hide his pleasure at that nugget of information. 'Well then, you might want to know that the vampire just took out an entire Van Saar gang at The Breath of Fresh Air,' he said. Bobo gave him a blank look, although he'd already guessed the rest. 'That's where your boss's Spyrers will be headed next.'

Kal was dumbstruck. 'There's a Spyrer unit chasing Armand as well? What in the Hive did he steal – the old man's brain?' Kal looked back and forth from Fewell to Valtin. Fewell continued hammering, obviously pretending he hadn't heard the part about stolen merchandise. Valtin, on the other hand, glanced at the ceiling and wouldn't look Jerico in the eyes.

He knows something, thought Kal, but he was wise enough to know Valtin wouldn't spill it here in front of Fewell. He turned back to Fewell, and made a big show of being upset. 'Great. Just great!' he said. 'Not only do I have to defeat a Spyrer-suited vampire, but I have to take on an entire team of Spyrers on the way.'

Fewell and Valtin just stared at him. Kal took a few deep breaths to try to show

that he was calming down, and then asked, ‘Any idea where I can find these Spyrers?’

Fewell shook his head, and continued tapping on the armour. Kal couldn’t tell if the armourer was buying his act or not.

‘I think I might know someone who can help us,’ said Valtin.

Bobo watched from behind Dutt as Jerico and Valtin left the armour shop. He let the rival spy, and his pict-camera, leave the alley first, and then stepped onto the street and simply followed his targets. Bobo had a very practiced saunter. He looked like any other person out for a walk, even when he was the only one on the street. It was a gift. His short stature, coupled with a calm self-confidence, was quite disarming and nobody ever suspected he could be capable of doing anything wrong.

This natural ability allowed Bobo to tail Jerico and Valtin back across the city to the docks. He wasn’t sure where they were going and wasn’t all that worried about it until they entered Madam Noritake’s. Bobo didn’t know if he should follow them or not, but he knew three secret ways out of the pleasure house and assumed Jerico knew of at least one of them.

He chanced it and slipped inside, ducking behind a large urn that always stood next to the door. Kal and Valtin were talking to Madam Noritake. She was a short woman with straight black hair that didn’t quite reach her shoulders. You wouldn’t call her pretty, but you also wouldn’t call her plain – at least not to her face or anywhere within ear shot. Madam Noritake could be a vindictive little woman.

Could they possibly be looking to score a little pleasure at a time like this? The vampire was in the city, the Spyrers were on their way, and these two were going to go off and have a little cuddle? Bobo had to get closer to hear what they were saying.

Both Kal and Valtin had their backs to the door, so he slipped out from behind the urn and dropped into a comfy chair in the little sitting area across from Noritake’s desk. He couldn’t see Madam Noritake, but he could hear her squeaky voice. ‘He’s not here now,’ she said.

‘Do you happen to know if Mr Bobo will return later today?’ asked Valtin.

A ringing began in Bobo’s ears as his heart pounded faster. They had come looking for him? What in the Hive was that about?

‘Maybe. Maybe not,’ said Noritake. ‘I’m not his mother. I just rent rooms. Ten credits gets you half an hour. You want a room while you wait?’

Bobo heard Kal say ‘Why ye–‘, but then Valtin cut in. ‘No, thank you. We’ll just wait down here.’

Bobo’s heart pounded even harder and faster. They would be coming toward him in mere moments. He glanced around for some escape and then caught sight of Jenn Strings, wearing her customary string outfit, coming down the stairs. She saw him and smiled. He motioned toward Jerico and made the talk signal with his other hand.

Jenn was a smart girl. That was one of the things Markel liked about her, along with that string outfit. She walked right up to Kal, flipped her long, blonde hair away from her face and pressed her lithe body against him. ‘Hi there,’ she said. ‘This is Madam Noritake’s House of Fun. Want to have some fun?’

Bobo didn’t look back. He took his chance and ducked back behind the urn and then out the door. From there, he made his way around to the alley and climbed hand over hand up the ventilation shaft to the roof. The panel at the top lifted off: one of the three secret exits. He’d never used it to actually break in, but a few moments later, Markel Bobo was walking down the stairs toward Madam Noritake’s desk.

‘I shall return later, madam,’ he said. ‘Please keep my room ready for me.’

Madam Noritake just stared at him. He could tell she didn’t have a clue as to where he had come from or how he got there. Best not to push it, he thought. She’s not the brightest bulb in the house. Besides, Valtin was already headed toward him. Jenn was still talking to Jerico. They were on the couch now, and her hair flips looked more like she was genuinely flirting and less like she was protecting his escape. He’d have to talk to her about that later.

Valtin spoke. ‘Mr Bobo, I believe?’

‘Yes,’ said Bobo. ‘Do I know you?’ His face remained calm, despite the pounding heart that was now finally quieting back down.

‘No, but I know you,’ said Valtin. ‘Or rather I know of you. We have a common acquaintance. A Mr Kauderer?’

‘Yes, I know Kauderer,’ replied Bobo. ‘Are you a friend of his?’

‘Not exactly,’ replied Valtin. He looked around the room and then dropped a hundred credit bond in Markel’s hand. ‘Is there somewhere we can talk privately? We need some information about another group of mutual acquaintances.’

Bobo looked at the bond. Perhaps this day was turning out alright after all. He suppressed the smile that endeavoured to cross his face. ‘We can speak in my room if you’d like.’

‘Drop her in the middle of the square,’ yelled Vicksen as they entered the courtyard in front of the Breath of Fresh Air. The large fan spinning in its housing above the square provided a cool breeze and the only sound other than Vicksen’s voice.

Vicksen’s auburn ponytail swung back and forth as she scanned the empty square. ‘Where in the Hive is everyone?’ she asked. ‘Lysanne, go into the Fresh Air and announce the battle. We need a crowd for this.’

As the young ganger ran off across the square, Vicksen tossed her shotgun to an Escher with black, spiked hair, named Brandia, and then unbuckled her bandolier and handed it along with her dagger to a juve standing nearby. She grabbed her chainsword from its sheath as the juve moved off. ‘Themis, drop Yolanda’s sword on the ground and then pat her down for hidden weapons.’

She walked toward the middle of the courtyard where Yolanda lay, bound hand and foot. ‘This is a sword battle,’ she said. ‘Me and my chainsword versus you and your little knife.’

‘That’s hardly fair!’ said Scabbs. Two Escher women, Kirsta and Suzeran, held the squirming little half-breed between them near the back wall. Scabbs looked pitiful and small compared to the tall Escher gangers. He barely came up to their breasts, and had no chance of breaking their hold on him. Vicksen smiled as she thought what this victory would mean to the gang.

‘It’s a katana,’ spat Yolanda. ‘I don’t need machinery to add power to my sword arm.’

But her insult fell on deaf ears, for Vicksen was looking at Lysanne, who had returned from the bar with a dour look on her face. ‘What’s wrong?’ asked Vicksen.

Lysanne cast her eyes down to the ground, which irritated Vicksen even more. ‘Look at me when you speak, girl!’ she roared. ‘You are a Wildcat. Act like one.’

‘Ma’am. Yes, ma’am.’ said Lysanne, now standing straight and tall and looking Vicksen in the eye. ‘The Fresh Air is closed, mistress.’

‘Closed?’ asked Vicksen. ‘How can that be?’

‘The door is locked and the lights are out,’ said Lysanne. A small pout played across her lips and she crossed her hands over her black-clad chest. ‘I’m sorry, ma’am.’

‘Don’t be sorry!’ screamed Vicksen. ‘Just go find me a crowd. Bang down doors if you have to. What the hell is wrong with this place?’ Vicksen stood in front of Yolanda and seethed. Her blue hair spikes vibrated above her bright red forehead.

‘Guess we’ll have to postpone our little group hug,’ said Yolanda with a smile.

Themis stepped over the prone and bound bounty hunter and grabbed her leader by the shoulders. ‘Get hold of yourself,’ she whispered. ‘This is your day. Control it. Don’t let it control you. We are your audience. Once the Wildcats know you’ve defeated Yolanda, everything will change.’

Vicksen took a deep breath to calm her temper. ‘Of course, you’re right, Themis,’ she said. She turned and looked at her gathered gang. ‘Today you will witness the turning of a new page in the Wildcat lore. Today we will close the door on the old rule and open the pathway to a better future. Today, Yolanda Catallus, former Wildcat leader shall fall in the field of battle to Vicksen Colteen, your present and future leader.’

The assembled crowd roared like a hungry mob as Vicksen finished her speech. ‘Cut her loose, Themis,’ she said. She pulled the cord on her chainsword and began circling, looking for an opening as Themis backed away from Yolanda. The former leader waved her katana back and forth in front of her. ‘After today, no one will even remember the great Yolanda,’ yelled Vicksen above the metallic whine of her chainsword. ‘You’re going to die with only your ‘Cats as witnesses.’

Unseen in an alcove high above, one other creature had been watching the events unfolding in the square below. The two buxom Escher women weaved and danced around each other, waving their weapons as the gathered Wildcats cheered from the sidelines, while Armand Helmawr, the Underhive Vampire, watched with the eye of a hungry predator. He grabbed hold of the ventilation shaft and started climbing down toward the fan to get a better look at the action.

Scabbs watched in horror as the battle began. He knew Yolanda was good. He even knew she was crazy enough to believe she could take on a chainsword-wielding Escher with nothing but her katana, but this was the leader of the Wildcats she was fighting. He had to do something to help, and do it fast.

Vicksen rushed forward as Yolanda’s sword dipped. The Wildcats leader swung her buzzing chainsword across at chest height, but Yolanda was no longer there, having dropped down and rolled forward, slicing at Colteen’s exposed legs. Vicksen sidestepped just in time, but Scabbs could see a rip in the leader’s pants and a tiny trickle of blood running down her inner thigh.

That round went to Yolanda, but all she got for her nifty move was a nick. Once Vicksen connected, Yolanda would lose more than a little leather and blood. Scabbs looked at the two Escher women holding him. Their biceps were larger

than *his* thighs. They each had him by a forearm and had wrapped their meaty arms around his skinny limbs, holding his elbows against their torsos. His wrists and ankles were bound tight. There didn't seem to be any escape.

Vicksen had backed off a little after her failed attack and was circling Yolanda again. 'What, no sharp retort now?' asked Yolanda. She reached out and ran her fingers along the tip of her katana and then licked the blood off her fingertips. 'I've tasted first blood, and it's sweet.'

'You'll be tasting your own blood when I rip out your intestines,' said Vicksen, holding her chainsword up high.

In that instant, Yolanda dashed in and jabbed the point of her blade into Vicksen's ribs. Vicksen screamed and swept her arm down, but Yolanda raced on past the Wildcat leader after her attack and was well behind Colteen before the chainsword even came close.

Kirsta and Suzeran groaned at Yolanda's deft move and Scabbs could feel their grip loosen slightly. Now he had a chance. For what the Escher women didn't know was that his skin flaked off easily. One good twist now and he'd be free. Of course, there was still the matter of the ropes on his ankles, but he spied Vicksen's shotgun and bandolier on the ground nearby. Lying atop the bandolier was a wicked, curved blade. He had a plan.

Yolanda's stab had caught Vicksen just below her leather half-vest. Blood streamed down her flat belly and spread across the top of her leather pants. She dabbed at the blood with her free hand and growled at Yolanda. 'That little toad sticker won't save you now.' She pulled a grenade off her vest and lobbed it over Yolanda's head, rushing in with her buzzing chainsaw to cut off the bounty hunter's escape route.

All of the Wildcats seemed to be holding their breaths, but Scabbs tensed for action. As soon as the grenade exploded, he yanked his arms up in the air, twisting them as Kirsta and Suzeran tried to hold on. Then he was free and running as best he could in his bonds. He half expected one of them to shoot him in the back, but when he glanced over his shoulder he knew he had much bigger troubles. They all did.

The vampire stood between Scabbs's former captors, holding the burly women up in the air by their hair. He slammed their heads together, and the resulting crack resounded through the square, getting everyone's attention.

Scabbs didn't question his amazing good luck in choosing just that moment to run. Living with Kal Jerico, he had almost come to expect it. So, of all the people in the square, he was the only one not taken by surprise; the only one still

moving as the vampire dropped his first two victims and moved toward the next ‘Cat in line.

6: CHAOS THEORY

‘We are about to enter Hive City, sir,’ Jonas said through his rig’s portavox unit. The Spyrer commander held up a hand to halt his fellow Spyrers as he made his report.

‘Excellent,’ replied Kauderer’s voice in his ear. ‘I have new information for you from my agent in the field. The most recent sighting has Armand somewhere near a bar called The Breath of Fresh Air. It is not far from your current location.’

‘I know the place, sir,’ replied Jonas. ‘We will find the renegade.’

‘Belay that order,’ snapped Kauderer. ‘I must still make my report to Lord Helmawr, and I do not want to have to include a Hive City riot in that report.’

‘Sir?’

‘You are to proceed with all due caution,’ ordered Kauderer. ‘We cannot afford any enforcer involvement. Remove your rigs before entering the City. This is still a covert operation. You must not cause any incidents inside Hive City. Neither the Enforcers nor the City Houses must be alerted to your presence.’

‘Remove our rigs, sir?’ asked Jonas. ‘That would be most unusual, these aren’t really the kind of thing that one just *removes*.’ He sounded indignant.

‘What’s the matter with you, Jonas?’ said Kauderer. ‘What are you, some kind of Green Hunter? Your rigs have been configured for this mission, and this mission alone. You might lack some of your customary power boosts, but I’m sure you’ll find the preparations I ordered have made your devices rather more flexible, than usual.’

Jonas snorted. He wasn’t convinced it was such a good idea and wasn’t going to let it rest quite so easily. ‘How are we to take down Armand without our rigs, sir?’

‘That has all been taken care of,’ replied Kauderer, curtly. ‘There’s a weapons stash in the city.’

‘Very well!’ said Jonas grudgingly. He turned to his squad and relayed the news. ‘Leoni, Grell,’ he called to the two Spyrers wearing Malcadon rigs. They had tubes running from their gauntlets to a large device on their backs that produced thick, viscous webbing. They saluted. ‘Climb into the rafters and use your webs to attach all of our gear away from prying eyes. We’re going into the city, in street gear.’

‘I’ll fly up there with them,’ said Chimone. Jonas thought that the Spyrer wearing the Yeld rig, was a whiny, little hive brat, but he’d been forced to accept her as part of the team due to her political connections.

‘No,’ said Jonas. ‘You will keep your rig. I want you to fly on ahead of us and then use your rig’s camo to stay out of sight until we need you.’

Chimone smiled. He hated giving her the plum assignment, but he had no choice. Without their rigs, they would be vulnerable. He needed eyes on the inside. Chimone flew off, but the rest of the squad just looked at him. ‘You heard your orders. Now move.’

‘You know where this Breath of Fresh Air is located?’ asked Valtin as they walked through the city. Even he could feel the change in the air now. The entire dome seemed deserted. It seemed everyone had heard about the vampire attack earlier.

‘Yeah,’ said Kal. ‘It’s not far.’

‘Not far by real reckoning or by Jerico reckoning?’ asked Valtin, remembering how long it had taken them to get to the armourer.

‘It’s right around the corner, okay?’ asked Kal. ‘Yeesh, everyone’s a critic. Okay, so I’m no pathfinder, but I have other skills and attributes.’ He squirmed and tried to scratch in between his shoulder blades. ‘Damn this spear,’ he cried. ‘The gems keep poking me in the back.’

They turned the corner and were met by an explosion that almost sent both of them to the ground. ‘I thought you said gang violence was rare in Hive City,’ cried Valtin.

‘Rare enough to make me think that my brother is probably involved. Come on!’

Kal sprinted into the square with Wotan padding along beside him. Valtin followed but stopped to stare at the scene, completely unprepared for the chaos of a gang battle.

In the square, Yolanda was rolling on the ground as shrapnel rained around her. A large Escher woman with spiky blue hair and a long red ponytail stood over

her with a chainsword. In the background, the rest of the Escher gang was running and screaming, and then the newcomers saw the reason. Their quarry, Armand.

Just as Scabbs was about to dive onto the weapon pile, he thought he saw Kal running into the courtyard. He dismissed it as wishful thinking and worked at grabbing the hilt of the knife with his teeth so he could hold the blade steady while cutting through the bonds at his wrists.

He glanced at Yolanda. She'd survived the explosion, but now Vicksen stood above her, slashing down with the buzzing chainsword. Yolanda rolled to the side but couldn't get away from the crazed Wildcat leader. All hell was breaking loose around them, but Vicksen still seemed intent on winning the duel. Scabbs gave up on the ropes and grabbed the shotgun. He hoped Vicksen had left a cartridge chambered because he couldn't cock it with his hands tied.

Scabbs fumbled with the weapon, trying to get a firm grip, aim and pull the trigger while bound. Luckily, his scabby arms moved a little within the bonds. Yolanda rolled back and forth beneath Vicksen as the gang leader slammed her sword down over and over again. As she raised the buzzing blade above her head for the next blow, Scabbs fired.

The shot hit the chainsword, knocking it out of her hands. It clattered on the ground and began spinning with the chain still buzzing. Yolanda rolled away, sweeping her legs through Vicksen's ankles, knocking the Wildcat leader to the ground.

As Yolanda rolled, Scabbs saw Kal again. The swarthy bounty hunter, a huge grin on his face, ran up to Yolanda, grabbed her unceremoniously around the waist and half-carried, half-dragged her over to Scabbs. Jerico fell next to Scabbs as he dropped her to the ground, flipped his wayward blond braids out of his eyes, and said, 'Are we having fun yet, kids?'

'What battle were you watching?' asked Scabbs as he finally cut himself loose from the bonds on his wrists.

Vicksen seethed as she watched Kal drag Yolanda away. 'Bring her back here, you interfering son of a–'

'Themis, Vicksen! Help!' called Lysanne.

Vicksen looked behind her and, for the first time, saw the carnage being wrought on her gang. Four girls were already on the ground, bleeding and broken behind a huge armoured beast of a man with burning red eyes, who was now advancing on Lysanne. She knew in an instant that it was the vampire.

‘What have I done?’ cried Vicksen. She looked down at her spinning chainsword lying on the floor and realised she had no weapon.

Themis opened fire with her heavy stubber. The recoil made the chains hanging from the epaulets on her shoulders rattle, but the hail of bullets had little effect on the vampire. Lysanne was rooted to the spot in fear and unable to move out of the way of the advancing vampire.

‘Grenade,’ called Themis to Vicksen.

The Escher leader didn’t think a single grenade would even faze the beast. She looked at Themis, about to argue, but saw that her second in command had unslung one of her chains and looped the end around her heavy stubber. Vicksen understood. She pulled a grenade off her vest and waited for Themis.

Themis swung the cannon around her head at the end of the chain once and then let it fly. Vicksen took aim and tossed the grenade, and then ran toward little Lysanne. Both weapons hit the vampire’s chest at the same time. As the grenade exploded, Vicksen jumped toward Lysanne, hitting her and pushing her to the ground.

A huge fireball erupted behind the two Escher women and bullets ricocheted around the courtyard as the heavy stubber’s ammo ignited. Vicksen held onto Lysanne as the two of them rolled away from the explosion.

When the smoke cleared, the vampire was still standing, but Vicksen could swear the fire in its eyes had dimmed a little, and it wasn’t moving – for the moment. She pulled Lysanne to her feet and pushed her away from the beast, but before she could follow, the vampire’s eyes regained their brilliance and it looked right at Vicksen.

‘I see you two found the vampire,’ said Kal as Valtin finally joined the bounty hunters. They were all huddling behind a stone bench near the edge of the courtyard.

‘More like he found us,’ said Yolanda. ‘So, what do we do now?’

‘I vote for the Sump Hole,’ said Scabbs. He’d draped Vicksen’s bandolier over his shoulder and hugged the shotgun to his chest.

‘Tempting,’ said Jerico. ‘But we can’t let the vampire get away.’

‘And we should help these poor women,’ added Valtin. The other three just stared at him.

‘I would agree,’ said Yolanda, ‘if they hadn’t just been trying to kill me.’

‘Look, we stay low and we stay alive,’ said Kal. ‘If we can help the Wildcats, great, but our lives come first and capturing the vampire comes second.’

‘How in the Hive are we supposed to do th–’

A huge explosion rocked the courtyard behind them. They all peeked over the bench to see a black cloud of smoke where the vampire had just been standing.

‘Now may be our chance,’ said Kal, but then the smoke cleared and the vampire moved in on Vicksen. ‘Maybe not,’ he added.

Lysanne hit the wall and rolled around. She’d never been so frightened in her life. That monster was huge, and those eyes. She wanted to close her eyes, but kept her resolve. She pulled out the new laspistol Themis had given her earlier that day. As the vampire advanced on Vicksen, she stepped out and shot at one of its glowing, red eyes.

The shot hit, but it didn’t penetrate and didn’t bounce off the mirrored surface either. It just seemed to get absorbed. She’d seen the same thing happen with the Spyrers at Dust Falls. She knew what was going to happen next.

‘Duck!’ yelled Lysanne.

Chimone sat on the ventilation shaft next to the fan and watched the battle, cloaked by the chameleon-like properties of her rig’s wings. She had seen no reason to interfere so far. Let the little gangers soften him up for us, she thought. Then we can follow him back to his lair and attack when his defences are down.

She’d pulled strings to join Jonas’s team to show everyone that a female could be as tough and as strong as any Helmawr male. In that respect, she had a lot in common with the Wildcats, but she felt no pity for them. They were gangers. They were outside the law and lived or died by their weapons and wits. Today they would likely all die. It was just that simple. Just like it had been back at Dust Falls. They were Hivers. They were hardly human after all.

A voice crackled in her ear. ‘Chimone, we’re coming in now. What’s the situation?’

‘There’s a contingent of Escher gangers between you and Armand,’ she reported. ‘Jerico and his cronies are huddled on the other side of the square. The rest of the Escher are rushing to help their leader.’

‘Lay down some cover fire for us in thirty seconds.’

‘Got it.’

Vicksen dove to the side just as the vampire’s red eyes emitted a laser blast at the Wildcat leader. The blast burned a ten-centimetre hole through the thick metal plates that made up the ground in the courtyard. That could have been Vicksen’s head, thought Lysanne. Or mine!

The Wildcat leader came back up and sprinted away from the beast. Lysanne was about to run as well, when she saw the flying Spyrer that had dropped Ashya down the Falls appear above the square and soar down toward the battle. As she glided over the heads of the Eschers, blasts from the Spyrer's twin lasers shot out in a rapid fire into the gang's ranks. Several Wildcats dropped. The rest scattered as the new threat entered the battle.

Hatred and vengeance surged inside Lysanne as she saw Ashya's killer, but she knew her little laspistol was no match for Spyrer armour. She needed something more powerful. She got an idea – a crazy, Yolanda type of idea – but someone had to do something, and Yolanda was still huddling with her new friends across the square.

Lysanne calculated the angle she needed and ran out into the square. 'Hey, beastie!' she yelled. 'Over here.' As she ran, Lysanne shot several laser blasts at the vampire's head. The black, mirrored surface drank in the power. The eyes flashed and Lysanne jumped high into the air.

The first blast hit the ground behind her. The second sizzled through the air just behind her as she reached the top of her arc. The laser beam burned a hole in the Wildcat's fluttering black top, before continuing on through the air, right into the body of the flying Spyrer.

Lysanne landed hard and her ankle crumpled under her as she fell to the ground in a heap. She looked up just in time to see the Spyrer, a hole burned clean through her chest, falling to the ground as well. But her moment of victory was short-lived. She could hear the vampire moving up behind her

Lysanne tried to stand, but screamed as she put weight on her shattered ankle. She fell back to the ground right in front of the vampire. Before he could reach her, another set of explosions rocked the square and four more gangers entered the battle.

The vampire fell back and Lysanne took advantage of the moment to crawl away, trying to get as much space between her and the vampire as possible. As she crawled, Lysanne got a look at the new gang and recognised one of them as the Spyrer leader who ordered Ashya's death. He wasn't wearing his rig anymore, but his face had been burned into her memory.

'What the hell's going on downhive?' bellowed Helmawr, as Hermod Kauderer walked into the darkened chamber. He seems to be spending all of his time in here lately, considered Kauderer. He had been told that the darkness helped regulate the man's moods, but there had been no evidence of that so far as he

could tell.

Kauderer nodded to the other advisors as he stepped into the glaring light in front of their master's desk.

'Well?' asked Helmawr. 'Report. I hear that work has all but stopped in Hive City. Explain yourself, Kauderer.'

Kauderer had also been informed that Helmawr was lucid but livid today. It was always a coin flip whether you would get the angry and efficient master or the forgetful and childlike one. But Kauderer had never seen Lord Helmawr quite this manic before. He decided to accommodate the old man as much as possible. He smiled at his lord, or at least tried to smile. On him a smile always looked more like a snake about to hiss than anything a warm-blooded animal could muster.

'Sire, the Hivers are afraid because Armand has been terrorising them,' replied Kauderer. Best to couch the lies in as much truth as possible. 'Once the matter has been handled, production will return to normal, and no one has linked the attacks to House Helmawr. Everyone believes the deaths have been caused by a mutant from the Hive bottom. They call him the Underhive Vampire, sire. There has been nothing to suggest any connection to House Helmawr.'

'That's not completely true, sire,' interjected Obidiah Clein. 'I have reports that describe Spyrer activity in the Underhive as well – Helmawr Spyrers to be exact. The entire place is turning into a war zone.'

Kauderer glared at Clein. Where was he getting his reports from, he wondered. Kauderer thought that perhaps he ought to put an agent on Clein as well. But first, a little misinformation to cloud the issue. 'It is not terribly surprising that some in the Hive have seen Armand's Spyrer rig for what it is, and were not fooled into thinking him some sort of monster,' he replied. 'But the prevailing story is still that an Underhive Vampire has come up from the Hive bottom to feed. Lacking any physical evidence, any other theory will soon be forgotten.'

He turned to Obidiah and spoke directly to the wily politician. 'And as for the Hive being a war zone, that is the common state for Hivers. Their reality is one of daily terror and death – a state you should become more familiar with very soon.'

The thinly veiled threat seemed to have an effect on Clein. Certainly the other advisors took note of it, for they all had taken this moment to stare at their shoes. Kauderer turned back toward the desk. 'The matter will be taken care of quite soon, my lord,' he stated. 'And rest assured there will be no physical evidence left behind to implicate this House.'

‘Be sure I do not hear otherwise,’ said Helmawr. The lights went out on his desk, leaving the advisors in a completely black room.

‘I recognise them,’ said Valtin as they all turned toward the new arrival. ‘Jonas, Cyklus, Leoni, and Grell. That’s the Spyrer team, minus their rigs.’

‘What, more relatives?’ asked Kal.

Valtin nodded.

‘Great. We’ll have the reunion later.’ Kal looked around. The Escher were regrouping around Vicksen in the middle of the square. Armand had one exit street blocked, but had stopped for the moment. The Spyrers now had the other exit street blocked, and were advancing.

‘Where in the Hive are the enforcers?’ asked Scabbs.

‘Holed up with the rest of Hive City,’ replied Kal. ‘Would you want to face that vampire if you didn’t have to?’

‘I have to and I don’t want to,’ whined Scabbs as he scratched at the red skin on his wrists.

‘Fine,’ said Jerico. ‘We’ll take out the Spyrers and get out. Let the Eschers deal with Arma… the vampire. Then we’ll come back when it’s calmed down and pick up the trail.’

Scabbs nodded. Yolanda looked briefly at Vicksen and then nodded as well. Valtin patted Kal on the shoulder and said, ‘I’ll meet you at Fewell’s later,’ and ran off toward Armand.

‘What in the Hive is he doing?’ asked Yolanda.

‘Being a fool,’ replied Kal.

‘Or a hero,’ added Scabbs as he pumped a shell into the shotgun.

‘Same thing,’ said Kal. He pulled out his laspistols and jumped over the stone bench, laser blasts leading the way. ‘Wotan, attack,’ he called back. The metal dog leaped out and quickly overtook his master, bounding toward the incoming Spyrers as Kal ran to keep up.

Vicksen and Themis stood back to back in the middle of the square. Both had re-armed with weapons from fallen Wildcats. Vicksen had a plasma gun while Themis had picked up a spare stubber and was loosing a hail of bullets at the vampire. A dozen Wildcats were on the ground, at least half of those from the last set of explosions. The rest, mostly juves, had fled before the second gang showed up.

‘Who in the Hive are they?’ asked Themis. She was keeping the vampire at bay with the constant stubber barrage, but her ammo wouldn’t last forever, and when

it ran out, Lysanne was its next victim.

'They look too clean to be Hivers,' said Vicksen. She shot an incoming grenade out of the air with a plasma bolt. The explosion sent the two women sprawling to the ground. 'Must be the Spyrers Lysanne told us about.'

'Then they must die,' said Themis as she scrambled back to her feet.

'Watch after Lysanne,' cried Vicksen.

Without Themis's constant rain of bullets holding it off, the vampire had regained its composure. It leapt the distance to the injured Wildcat before Themis could raise her weapon to fire. The vampire grabbed Lysanne by the waist and hoisted her up in the air. Holding her like a human shield, he advanced on the last two Wildcats.

Scabbs stayed behind the stone bench, pumping and firing the shotgun as fast as he could to provide covering fire as Kal, Yolanda, and Wotan charged into battle. Kal's twin lasguns fired in quick succession back and forth in his hands as he raced into the fray, and Yolanda followed close behind him, using the black-mirrored surface of her re-acquired katana to ward off incoming laser blasts.

The big brute holding the grenade launcher fired a shot toward Wotan, but the dog leapt to the side and the grenade sailed past, landing right in front of the bench. Scabbs kicked the bench over, falling backward at the same time, but the explosion still left the half-breed dazed and lacking cover.

Valtin stepped in front of the vampire as he advanced on the Wildcat leaders. 'Armand,' he said. 'It's time to end this.'

The muffled sound of maniacal laughing emanated from behind the mirrored helmet. 'Look,' said Armand. 'It's the nephew all grown up. How cute. Are you here to save these pitiful Hivers from the big bad vampire?'

'No, I'm here to take you back,' said Valtin, 'dead or alive.' He palmed a device in his pocket. It was nothing more than a little black box with a button and two antennae at the top.

'Back where?' said the muffled voice. 'Back to the tainted world of our fathers and their fathers before them? I think not.' He raised his armoured fist as if to strike Valtin dead on the spot.

Valtin was faster. He pulled the device out and pushed the button. Armand screamed and froze in place. His arm quivered as he tried to slam it down on top of Valtin's head, but moved only an inch at a time, as if he was forcing it through molasses.

'Neat device, huh?' asked Valtin. 'A small magnetic field drains the nearest

power cell. You're under your own power now, uncle!' Valtin pulled out a power maul and slammed it into Armand's shoulder, causing the screaming Helmawr to drop his Wildcat hostage. Valtin grabbed the injured girl by the forearm and thrust her toward Vicksen and Themis. 'You three should leave,' he said to them. 'This is my fight now.'

Obidiah Clein stopped at the exit from the secure room to scratch at his chin as if deep in thought over some critical matter. In truth, he was waiting for Hermod Kauderer to get a head start down the hall so he could follow him from a safe distance.

Following a spy – am I crazy? He asked himself. But Clein knew that Kauderer and Katerin had been conspiring. Years of service in this web of intrigue had fine-tuned his ability to read people and their motives. Kauderer was a blank slate. The spy knew well how to hide his emotions and motives, but the military man was much easier to read. He'd been nervous at the meetings lately and giving Kauderer quick, sideways glances. Plus their constant bickering had all but stopped since the Armand business had begun.

He decided he'd waited long enough and sauntered through the antechamber out into the connecting hallway. There were no windows or doors here. They were too deep inside the palace to get natural light, and this hallway only existed as access to the secure room. But Kauderer had already disappeared, somehow. Colouri, the guardian of the coffers, Chancellor of the Spire Prong, Croag, the lawyer, and even Katerin were all there, walking in a loose bunch, ahead of him, but Kauderer was nowhere to be seen.

Clein decided to follow Katerin instead. He'd be easier to tail, and the two of them had to be meeting somewhere. Clein vowed to put someone on Kauderer, but he didn't know who he could trust in the palace.

As they all climbed toward their respective offices in the upper levels of the Spire, a buzzing in Clein's ear gave him a start. The others looked at him, but he just glared back. His ear buzzed again, and Obidiah knew he had to hurry. He pushed his way through the group and then jumped two steps at a time the rest of the way up the steep staircase.

'Forgot another meeting,' he called back.

Once safe in his office, Obidiah locked the door and sat at his desk. He touched a series of switches on his desk that erected a security screen around the office and opened a direct channel to the person who buzzed him.

'What took you so long?' asked Nemo.

‘Excuse me,’ said Clein into the vox. ‘We were meeting with Lord Helmawr about the Armand situation.’

‘Fine,’ said Nemo. ‘But if I should ever be forced to buzz three times, our relationship will be terminated.’

Clein appreciated the significance of Nemo’s choice of words as well as his intonation. ‘Understood.’

‘Report.’

‘Kauderer and Katerin still run the palace for all intents and purposes,’ said Clein. ‘Only now, they seem to be working together.’

‘That is not good,’ said Nemo. ‘You must break up their alliance somehow. Together they are too powerful.’

‘I have tried,’ replied Clein. I know Kauderer sent the Spyrers down into the Hive against Helmawr’s orders, but I have no proof. I think I can get Katerin to crack, but I will need leverage in order to give him a final push.’

‘Then find proof and start pushing,’ said Nemo. ‘This is too important. Once I have the item, Lord Helmawr will no longer be an obstacle, but working together these two could find a way to keep the House from crumbling around him. They must be out of the picture before then.’

Kal dodged under Jonas’s power sword and feinted with his sabre toward the Spyrer’s thigh. Jonas bit on the feint and Kal brought the hilt up hard on his opponent’s chin, knocking him back a step.

‘You can’t dodge my sword for long, Jerico,’ spat Jonas as he rubbed his sore chin.

‘I can the way you swing it,’ Kal replied. He had to admit that Jonas had pretty good stamina. They’d been dancing for several minutes now, and Kal had gotten in several good hits, but the Spyrer hadn’t slowed a step.

He glanced at Yolanda, who was taking on the brute with the grenade launcher. She’d cut off the end of his weapon with her katana and the muscle-bound Spyrer had dropped it in favour of a power axe. Kal didn’t know what bothered him more: how Yolanda got her sword so sharp or where these Spyrers had gotten such good weapons.

At least he didn’t have to worry about Wotan. Kal’s dog had his opponent, a dark-haired and dark-skinned man that Jonas had called Grell, on the ground fighting for his life. Wotan stood on Grell’s chest, trying to get his metal jaws around his fleshy neck. The Spyrer had one hand on Wotan’s upper jaw and the other on the lower jaw, but he was losing ground fast.

Kal had lost sight of the female, but Scabbs was firing the shotgun at something, so he assumed he would at least get some warning if she came up behind him. Besides, Jerico didn't have time to worry about anything except the power sword shimmering in Jonas's hands. If it did connect, the family reunion would get cut short by exactly one family member.

'Get Lysanne to safety,' said Vicksen. 'Break down the door to the Fresh Air if you have to.' Sweat glistened on her cheeks, neck and cleavage. She swiped at the blue spiked hair, which had gone limp and kept getting in her eyes, but it just stuck to her forehead, so she gave up.

'Where are you going?' asked Themis. She cocked her heavy stubber and nestled it in the crook of one arm and then reached down and pulled Lysanne to her feet, supporting the injured Wildcat with her free arm.

'I'm going to finish what we came here to do,' growled Vicksen. 'I'm going to kill Yolanda Catallus.' The newcomer was keeping the vampire busy and Kal's people were fighting the Spyrers. Now was her only chance to get to Yolanda.

She ran across the square, scooping up her chainsword. Ahead, she saw Yolanda standing toe to toe with a huge brute of a Spyrer. He had a barrel chest and a wide, round face topped by short-cropped, brown hair. The epitome of a jar head. They were wrestling, each one holding the other's wrist just below their respective weapons.

The muscles in Yolanda's arms and legs rippled as she used all her force to try to push the brute away, but Vicksen could tell that even as strong as the bounty hunter was, the brute would wear her down eventually. He simply had more mass to throw into the equation.

They twisted and turned in their clench, bringing Yolanda around to face the oncoming Vicksen. The Wildcat leader made a snap decision and fired her plasma pistol at the brute. A ball of highly charged plasma slammed into the Spyrer's back and exploded, sending both combatants sprawling to the ground.

Vicksen was mildly upset that the blast hadn't killed the Spyrer, but there would be plenty of time for that later. His armour lay in pieces and the power axe had gone flying out of his grasp. Vicksen ran up and gave him a swift kick to the head, and then turned to the prone Yolanda.

'Get up,' she yelled. 'It's time to finish this.' Vicksen tossed her plasma pistol to the ground and revved up her chainsword.

Valtin turned back to Armand, who seemed to be trying to retreat but was moving in slow motion. The younger Helmawr raised his power maul over his

head and slammed it down on top of Armand's helmet. The mirrored dome cracked slightly. He brought the maul around for another blow, but Armand was able to turn enough that the weapon just glanced off the side of his head, ripping out several of his feeding tubes.

Armand turned his torso and swung his arms around in a slow arc. Valtin easily stepped back out of reach. Then, ducking under the massive arms of the vampire rig, he swung the maul. Blue energy swirled around the legs of the power suit as the maul struck, chipping and breaking the interlocking plates of armour. Armand's knees buckled and he fell to the ground.

'It's over, Uncle,' said Valtin. He jumped on top of the fallen vampire. 'Now I will kill you as you killed my father.'

'Kill me and you'll never find what I took from Stiv,' Armand wheezed, his voice barely audible through the cracked helmet.

'You think I care about that?' demanded Valtin. 'This is for my father.' He slammed the maul down on Armand's chest. The power coursed through the armour, cracking several more metal plates. 'You are a blight on House Helmawr, and you must be removed before you bring down the entire House.' Valtin could see the hole in the armour from Armand's earlier battle in the courtyard. He aimed his next shot at that weak point.

'I am but a symptom of the sickness,' said Armand, his voice oddly calm now. 'The whole House stinks of decay and disease. I am the fever that will root out the evil virus within and burn it with holy fire. Only then will the House be cleansed. Only then can I rest.'

'Too bad you won't live long enough to see that day come,' Valtin replied.

He swung the maul down toward the tiny hole in Armand's armour, but the weapon was halted in mid-swing. Valtin looked down. Armand had grabbed hold of the shaft with one hand. The arm of his rig coursed with energy from the maul.

'Wrong, nephew,' said Armand. 'You won't live to see it.' He grabbed the power cell draining device from Valtin's other hand and threw it against the wall of the Fresh Air, and then stood, still holding onto the young Helmawr's arm. 'By the way, thank you for the borrowed power.'

Kal dodged and weaved, trying to find an opening for his sabre, but Jonas had grown a little more conservative since the sock to his jaw. Kal had to admit that the Spyrer leader was well-trained. When he concentrated on defence, Jonas was nearly flawless. He was going to need more time to get the better of his well-

trained opponent.

Next to them, Wotan had gotten past Grell's flailing arms and had his jaws around the struggling Spyrer's neck. Grell screamed, 'Help! Jonas. Help!.'

Jonas turned toward his comrade and Kal, seeing the opening, moved in. He grabbed the leader by the wrist and slammed the pommel of his sabre on the back of his hand. Jonas dropped his sword. Spinning around, Jerico kicked Jonas in the gut, sending him flying. He then turned to his faithful robot companion. 'Wotan, sit!' he commanded. But the dog continued to apply pressure to Grell's exposed neck. 'Damn!' cursed Kal. 'Wotan! Obey!'

Kal heard a sickening crunch of metal jaw on bone. He reacted instantly, diving at Wotan and pulling him off the prone Spyrer. Grell screamed again as Kal and Wotan tumbled to the ground. By the time Kal got himself untangled from Wotan's scrabbling legs, he was flat on his back and looking up at an extremely upset Grell.

Blood trickled down the front of Grell's shirt from four matching puncture wounds on either side of his neck. He held a plasma pistol pointed at Kal's head. 'Good-bye, cousin!' said Grell.

Jerico looked to the side. He'd dropped his sabre when he tackled Wotan, and it was well out of reach. He raised his hands in protest. 'But I just saved your life!'

'Bit of a mistake for you, then, wouldn't you say?' said Grell as he pulled the trigger.

A blur of motion passed Jerico as he rolled to the side. Grell screamed and Kal heard him fall to the ground just before the plasma ball exploded somewhere behind him. Kal rolled to a crouch and looked back toward Grell. Wotan sat atop the Spyrer, bits of flesh and bone hanging from his mouth. Grell's neck was gone and his head lolled at an angle that made Kal a little queasy.

Being sick wouldn't bring Grell back and there was still Jonas to deal with. Time was running short. The enforcers wouldn't stay away forever. The Spyrer leader, still looking a little dazed from landing on his head, crawled toward his power sword. 'Wotan!' called Kal. 'Fetch!' The dog leapt off Grell's body and scooped up Jonas's sword in his still bloody mouth.

Kal stood and faced Jonas. 'Time's up,' he said. 'Rules change.' Standing with his legs apart and slightly bent, he raised his sabre into attack position, and curled his free arm up over his head. Once again, his positioning was perfect. The wind from the fan across the courtyard blew his long leather coat around his legs as he struck the pose.

'Nice move,' said Jonas. 'But killing me won't save cousin Valtin!' He pointed

behind Kal.

The bounty hunter knew it was a trick, but when one of the Escher women screamed, ‘Help him! Somebody help!’ Kal had to turn and look. As soon as he did, Jonas barrelled into him and they both went sprawling on the ground. In that instant, Kal saw Armand jump onto the ventilation shaft above the fan and disappear into the darkness, carrying Valtin over his shoulder.

7: BAD BLOOD

Kal and Jonas wrestled on the ground in the square outside The Breath of Fresh Air. They rolled back and forth as both men tried to gain an advantage over the other. Jonas had obviously been trained, because he knew moves that Kal had never seen before. He locked his legs around Kal's ankles to take away the bounty hunter's leverage and then snaked a hand under Kal's armpit, grabbed him by the hair at the nape of his neck, and flipped him over onto his back.

In an instant, Jonas had pinned Jerico. Sitting on his chest he pummelled the bounty hunter's face with rock-hard fists. Kal began to laugh in between the hits. First a chuckle, then a couple of snorts, followed by a near-hysterical fit that ended in a series of hacking coughs as he fought for air with the Spyrer sitting on his chest.

Jonas paused, holding his fist in the air as he stared at Kal's smiling face. 'What in the Hive are you laughing about?' he asked. 'You enjoy pain that much?'

Kal continued laughing as he spoke, 'Ha – I just thought of something funny – ha ha, that's all.'

'What?' growled Jonas. 'What's so damned funny?

'You – hoo hoo – stopping hitting me long enough so I could say: Wotan! Attack!' The last two words were barked loud and clear.

Jonas realised his mistake and swung his fist down toward Kal's face one last time, but it was too late. Wotan slammed into Jonas from the side, sending the Spyrer sprawling to the ground again. Kal rolled the other way, got his knees under him, and hopped to his feet. Wotan had landed on top of Jonas and was snapping at the Spyrer leader's neck with his massive metal jaws.

Kal felt his sore jaw and considered letting Wotan have his fun, but Jonas had called Valtin 'cousin', meaning he was yet another long lost relative. Besides, now that they knew the Underhive vampire was Armand in a Spyrer rig, Kal needed as much firepower as possible to get his bounty, and save his nephew.

‘Wotan! Sit!’ he commanded. ‘Guard!’ The oversized dog plopped his metal rump down on Jonas’s legs, but kept his front legs on the Spyrer’s chest. Jonas squirmed under the weight, causing Wotan to growl, which sounded like the buzzing of a chainsword, and chomp his teeth, which looked like a sump rat-trap snapping shut.

Kal looked around. Armand was gone, but the fighting in the courtyard continued. Yolanda and Vicksen were dancing around one another, waving their swords, while Scabbs was leading the last Spyrer on a wild Scabbs chase around the square. The oversized jar-head Spyrer was just coming around next to Yolanda, while the last two Wildcats huddled by the door to the Fresh Air.

This had to stop. If Kal was going to rescue Valtin and put an end to this Underhive Vampire nonsense, he would need a lot of help. To hell with working alone. Dad would just have to understand that sometimes you had to improvise; sometimes you had to go with plan W.

‘Everybody!’ he called. ‘I need your attention! Listen up! Hey! Everybody!’

It was no use. Kal walked over to where he’d dropped his lasguns, picked them up, twirled them in both hands once, twice, three times, and then struck his pose – legs splayed wide and arms outstretched to either side. Somehow the fan across the square knew to speed up and send his coattails flying behind him.

He shot twice with his left hand and twice with his right hand in quick succession.

‘Hey!’

‘Ow!’

‘Yikes!’

‘What the–?’

Four perfect shots had disarmed the last four combatants. ‘Now that I have your attention, I would like to propose a truce!’

‘Now that’s an interesting development,’ said Dutt.

Bobo nodded. The two spies were sitting on either side of a window inside one of the abandoned shops on the square. With this entire sector of the city practically shut down due to the vampire scare, the spies pretty much had the run of the district. It kind of took the fun out of it for Markel, who had insisted on entering the shop through the ventilation shaft while Dutt just picked the lock and walked in.

They’d given up all pretext of skulking around each other and had decided to work together for the time being. Dutt just had to watch where he pointed the

pict camera and he could only speak freely if he removed the transmitter tooth.

'He's got to realise that Jonas will kill him and the others once they recover the item,' remarked Bobo. He munched on some synthnuts that Jenn had packed for him before he left Madam Noritake's. They still had to talk about her flirting with Jerico, but the food took the edge off of that concern for now.

Dutt grabbed a handful of nuts and munched on them. 'Undoubtedly,' he said through the nuts. It was almost unintelligible, which Bobo realised was exactly what he had been going for.

'Plus, he's going against orders,' continued Bobo. 'Kal was supposed to do this alone. Now he's not only bringing in his friends, but a rival gang, and the Spyrer unit sent to kill him and take the item back.'

'You know what you always say, Nemo,' said Dutt, speaking both to Bobo and to his master, 'Kal Jerico is freaking nuts. This just goes to prove it.'

'They've stopped arguing and are going into the Breath of Fresh Air, well, breaking in.' Bobo looked at Dutt. 'Nemo wouldn't happen to have the Fresh Air bugged, would he?'

Dutt just smiled and nodded.

Markel sat back and tossed a fist full of synthnuts into his mouth. This day hadn't turned out so bad after all, and it had been fun working with Dutt. A spy's life was usually pretty solitary. You might get a little female comfort now and again, but you never made friends; at least not the type you could talk to about work. It was a shame he'd have to kill Dutt before this was over.

Kal entered the Breath of Fresh Air after the jar-head, Cyklus, busted through the door. 'You didn't have to do that,' he said. 'I've got a key.'

'And where did you get a key from?' asked a voice from behind the bar. 'I never gave you no key.'

'Squatz!' called Kal. 'I'm glad to see you alive.' He walked up to the bar and peered over the top. 'You can come out now. It's safe.'

Squatz climbed onto the step behind the bar and looked at the assemblage in his bar. 'Safe, am I?' he asked. 'With a broken door, three rotten Spyrers in my bar, a blood feud brewing in my front room between two Wildcat leaders, and a vampire on the loose?'

Kal thought for a moment, 'Well, yes,' he said. 'Because now I'm here.'

'Well that makes it all right than, doesn't it,' said Squatz. 'Two things, though. First, you're going to pay for that door.'

'And second?'

‘Hand over the key!’

Kal dropped the key on the bar. ‘Bring a tray of House Special when you get a chance,’ he said, dropping a small pile of credits on the bar. He turned back toward the motley crew he had brought into the bar.

‘It’ll stunt your growth,’ said Squatz.

‘You should know,’ replied Kal over his shoulder.

It was an interesting scene in the front room. Vicksen and her last two Wildcats stood against one wall, weapons pointed at the Spyrers and at Yolanda. The three Spyrers stood against a second wall, pointing their weapons at the Wildcats and at Kal. Scabbs and Yolanda had taken a seat in the middle, their weapons on the table within easy reach. Wotan sat by the door, wagging his metal tail, which threatened to knock a hole in the wall.

‘Now, isn’t this more comfortable?’ asked Kal. The gangers all glared at him. ‘Okay, listen,’ he started again, pulling his lasguns out and pointing one at each group. All six gangers levelled their own weapons at Kal. ‘I’m not asking us all to be friends, but we will have to work together to stop Ar… the vampire.’

‘We care nothing for your so-called vampire,’ spat Vicksen. ‘It’s a Spyrer like these three, and they can all die for all I care.’

‘Look,’ said Kal. ‘Yolanda tells me you want clear rulership over the Wildcats. If you work with us to get the vampire, she will publicly bow to your superior battle skills and declare you the rightful leader.’

‘I’ll do what?’ asked Yolanda. Kal waved his pistol at her and shook his head.

‘’We’ll never work with them,’ cried Lysanne, pointing at the Spyrers. She was leaning against the Escher named Themis, and Kal could see she was in a great deal of pain. But there was still a fire in her eyes. ‘They killed Ashya, Tor, Tay, and half a dozen other ‘Cats.’

‘Fine,’ replied Kal. ‘You can work with Scabbs. Yolanda will work with Jonas’s people. We all need to pull together if we’re going to defeat Armand.’ He looked at Vicksen when he said the name. ‘Yes, he is a Spyrer… or was, anyway. But right now, he’s a menace to Hive City and the Underhive, and it’s up to us to stop him.’

Jonas shook his head. ‘You talk nobly, Jerico, but we all know why you’re doing this – bounty, pure and simple. Helmawr is paying you handsomely to retrieve the item Armand stole, and you’re planning to use us to help make you rich.’

‘That was true up until about ten minutes ago,’ said Kal. ‘But then I saw my nephew pay the price for doing the job I should have been doing.’ He tossed his

weapons on the table and began pacing. ‘I have family I never even knew about. You’re my cousin or nephew as well, as are these two, I guess.’

Jonas nodded.

‘Well, family never really meant much to me. My mother abandoned me when I was just a baby and it wasn’t until a couple of years ago that I found out that Lord Helmawr was my father. Scabbs and Yolanda are the closest I have to family and we take care of each other. Well, now it’s time for me to take care of my real family. I’m going to save Valtin, and when we find Armand, you can take the item back to Helmawr. That was your mission, anyway wasn’t it? The old man is good at covering his bases, huh?’

‘You expect me to believe that you want nothing out of this but a warm, fuzzy feeling for helping out your nephew?’

‘That plus the two thousand credit bounty on the vampire’s head. That will belong to the three of us.’ He sat down with Yolanda and Scabbs and took a long sip of his House Special. It burned his throat.

The room fell silent. All the weapons still pointed at Kal – which he figured was better than firing at him, or each other – but they were beginning to drop lower and lower.

Vicksen was the first to speak. ‘What do you want us to do?’ she asked.

Kal looked at Jonas, who nodded. ‘Your terms are acceptable. We will allow you to help us locate and neutralise Armand.’

‘Excellent!’ Kal smiled. ‘Squatz! Another round of House Special. My cousin Jonas is buying this time.’

Jonas looked like he was about to argue, but dug into his pocket and tossed some credits on the table instead.

Kal’s smile grew even larger, but before he could continue, Lysanne moaned and slipped to the floor. Vicksen put her weapons away and motioned to Themis to help her get the injured ‘Cat to the table. ‘Before we go anywhere,’ said Vicksen, ‘we need to do something about Lysanne’s ankle.’

Kal looked at Jonas. ‘I’m certain you didn’t leave home without a medi-pack,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you get it out and help our partners deal with their wounded?’

Jonas motioned to Leoni, who produced the medi-pack from her gear. She set it up on the table and began scanning Lysanne’s ankle. Lysanne glared at the Spyrer, but with Themis supporting her she relaxed and let Leoni do her work.

Satisfied that the truce would hold up for now at least, Kal picked up his pistols, twirled them, and slammed them home into his holsters. ‘Well now,

here's what we need to do next,' he said. 'First we need to find Armand. Scabbs will take Wotan and the two Wildcats back into the square to search for clues. Second, we need more firepower for when we do find Armand. Yolanda, you go with…' He pointed vaguely at the Spyrers.

'Cyklus and Leoni,' said Jonas.

'Go with Cyklus and Leoni to get all the rigs and bring them back here,' finished Kal.

'And what will you be doing?' asked Vicksen and Jonas together.

'I need to sit and think,' said Kal. 'And I do my best thinking in a bar with friendly company. I'd prefer to be in the Sump Hole with Scabbs and Yolanda, but you two and this place will just have to do.'

'Thanks,' said Squatz. 'If it's all the same to you, you can all go to the Sump Hole. In fact, any sump hole will do.'

Valtin's head pounded with a steady rhythm that felt like a spike driving deeper and deeper into his eyes. At first he thought the drumming was his own heart, driving blood and pain into his brain with every beat, but after a time he began to realise that the pounding was external. There was a banging sound outside his head that went along with the vibrations pounding in his brain.

Of course, pain meant that he was alive, which came as a bit of a surprise. The next step, he decided, was to open his eyes and find out why. When he slid his eyelids open, precious little light seeped in, which was good, for he feared that bright light would make his head explode with even more pain. What little light there was came from work lamps that seemed to be attached to railings by the wall.

Where was he? That was what Valtin really wanted to know, as well as the nagging question of why he was alive. He was afraid to broach that other question, though, because he was still a little worried that the answer might be that he wasn't alive at all. Had it not been for his first brief glimpse of Hive City earlier, Valtin could easily have believed it was hell.

He couldn't move, so his field of vision was pretty narrow. There was the wall, which looked slightly curved. It was difficult to tell because of the intertwined mass of pipes, conduits, cables, and wires attached to the wall. There was also a floor, although to call it a floor gave it more credit than it really deserved. It was no more than metal mesh laid across support beams. In fact, looking down through the floor at the jumble of pipes disappearing into the darkness, made Valtin feel like he was floating. Or falling. The sudden vertigo caused his

stomach to heave. Very little came up, though, as he hadn't eaten since leaving the Spire.

As Valtin's body shook with dry heaves, new pains flared around his wrists and ankles. His mind seemed a little less cloudy now with the rush of adrenalin that the retching brought with it and he realised the reason he couldn't move was that he was bound hand and foot; trussed up like a calf on its way to slaughter.

He also realised that the banging had ceased, although that did little to lessen the pain in his head. A moment later a pair of bare feet and two hairy legs came into his view. He rolled over a little to get a better look, wincing at the cutting pain in his wrists and ankles. Towering above him was Armand, naked, carrying a large dagger.

He certainly looked the part of an Underhive monster. His wild hair, all matted and tangled, grabbed at his sweaty neck and shoulders. Fresh cuts covered his filth-covered, half-naked body, some of which looked quite deep. Blood trickled down his stomach from an open wound and Valtin could see blood on the tip of the dagger in his hand.

'Good,' said Armand. 'You're awake – and alive. I was worried, worried, worried. Your blood will stay fresher if you're alive. Good. Good.'

Armand's eyes glowed with almost the same intensity as the artificial eyes in his Spyrer suit.

'Where are we?' asked Valtin. His voice was raspy and hoarse, and the effort of talking made him cough, which brought on another spell of dry heaves.

'High up,' said Armand. 'Very high up. Don't fall. Not as high as dear old father, though. His fall will be much greater. Much greater indeed.'

He's gone completely insane, thought Valtin. I'm being held prisoner by an insane man who drinks blood.

He decided to try again, anyway. 'Why are we here?' he asked.

Armand laughed. It was not the laugh of a man enjoying a joke, but of a man on the edge, a man driven to the brink of hysteria by some horrible personal demons. 'That is the question,' he said, finally. 'We're here to serve. We're here for the greater glory of House Helmawr, the unholy House of Helmawr!'

'I mean,' started Valtin again, his throat finally clear enough to speak more than just a few words. 'Why are we here now? What are you going to do with me?'

'Why, feed off your blood, of course, dear nephew,' he said, a smile blooming on his face. 'I have much more work to do, but your uncle, the other uncle, wants to stop me, so I need time. Time. Time to sleep. To rest. To fix my rig, which you broke. Such a bad boy you are, nephew. But you'll be good inside

me. Good noble blood. Better than that wretched Hive scum blood. Even the Goliaths have no strength in their blood… blood… blood…'

He plopped onto the mesh floor and looked right through Valtin, as if the young Helmawr wasn't even there. 'Bad blood. That's the problem you see,' he continued, but he was now speaking to himself. Valtin was sure Armand didn't even realise he was there anymore.

'Tainted. Yes, tainted, that's the word. All of House Helmawr. Tainted by evil. Tainted by all that we've done. Can't get rid of the evil. New blood for old blood. New in, old out. Still tainted. Got the proof. Every evil deed. Every stain on the House from Hell. Ripped the proof right out of the chamber pot. So much evil. So many dead. So much ruined. All for the greater good.'

He looked back at Valtin again. 'That's why we're here. The greater good. But the taint won't wash away. Can't be cut out. Can't be drained away. Goes much deeper. Right down to the soul. How do you cleanse the soul of a House? How do you cleanse the deeds of the past?'

And then he was silent. Valtin stared at his uncle. His other uncle. Wild hair and dirt didn't hide the square jaw and high cheeks; the marks of Helmawr nobility that Armand, Valtin, and Jerico all shared.

Valtin wondered what it was that had finally driven him totally and murderously insane, what House secrets the wayward son had ripped from the chamberlain's head. Then, as he lay there, he noticed that Armand had fallen asleep. Sitting not three metres away, Armand slept, holding his dagger in his lap, blood trickling down his chest and mixing with dirty sweat. A lone tear hung on his noble Helmawr chin.

'This is where they fought,' said Lysanne. 'Kal's friend and the vampire.' She stood with one leg slightly bent, obviously not trusting her full weight on the injured ankle just yet.

'You sure?' asked Scabbs.

'Do you call her a liar?' accused Themis. She towered over the scabby bounty hunter, glaring at him.

Scabbs shrunk back slightly. 'No,' he said. 'I just… It was chaotic out here. I'm just, you know, making sure she remembers everything.' He turned and started searching the ground. 'Yeesh,' he grumbled. 'She's as bad as Yolanda.'

'I heard that.'

Scabbs turned with a sheepish look on his face, but then tripped over Wotan. Both women began laughing. 'You're a big help,' he said to Kal's dog. 'Why

don’t you go bite her knee?’ He got up and started searching again.

‘What are we looking for?’ asked Lysanne.

‘I don’t really know,’ replied Scabbs. ‘Clues. Anything unusual that might help us figure out why the vampire kidnapped what’s-his-name.’

‘The nobleman used some sort of device on the vampire’s rig,’ said Lysanne. ‘Turned it off or something.’

‘That would have been good to know,’ said Scabbs. He stopped and scratched at his face as he stared at the young Wildcat. The sarcasm seemed to be lost on her. ‘What happened to it?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry. I was scared.’

‘That’s okay,’ said Scabbs, softening a little. She wasn’t much older than a teenager after all. ‘I’m scared all the time.’ She smiled at him, and he almost tripped over Wotan again. ‘See if you can find that device. I’m sure Kal will want to see it.’

‘This is pointless,’ said Themis. She was standing over a fallen Wildcat. ‘We should be putting our companions to rest, not helping Kal Jerico bag his bounty.’

Scabbs was examining a piece of black metal he found on the ground and only half-heard what Themis had said. ‘That’s fine,’ he said absently as he looked at the odd metal. ‘Have a good time.’

Scabbs was fairly certain it was part of Armand’s Spyrer rig, but it almost looked like a large fish scale. It was rounded and bulged in the middle. Part of it was scorched and there was hole the size of a credit chip in the middle. He turned it over and found blood smeared on the inside.

When he looked up again, Themis and Lysanne were pulling Wildcat bodies into the middle of the square. ‘What in the Hive are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Taking care of our sisters,’ said Lysanne. ‘Like you said we could.’

‘I did?’ Scabbs scratched his head, causing a cascade of dead skin to rain down on his shoulder. ‘When did I do that?’

‘Just now!’ yelled Themis. ‘Don’t you even listen to yourself?’

‘Fine!’ said Scabbs. ‘Whatever. Wotan and I will search the square.’ He moved around toward the fan, looking for any more clues as to where Armand might have gone. He found Valtin’s power maul just below the ventilation shafts. It was dead. He also found another body.

‘Hey!’ he called out. ‘I found another Wildca–’ He looked again. The body was of a male; Van Saar by the look of the clothes and hair. ‘Never mind,’ he called back. ‘Now, what is this all about?’ he wondered. He checked the pockets for loose credits and palmed the ganger’s weapon, a beat-up laspistol. ‘Hmmph.

Guess I can leave it here,' he said. 'Let Kal sort it out later.'

'Hey!' called Lysanne.

Scabbs looked up. There was a big bonfire in the middle of the square. Black smoke rolled up from the pile of bodies. Luckily for Scabbs, he was underneath the fan and the smell was being blown away from him. Lysanne was running toward him.

'I found the gadget,' she said as she came up to him. 'Valtin's gadget. I found it. I found it.' Lysanne threw her arms around Scabbs and hugged him.

The stunned bounty hunter had no idea at all how to respond. 'Thanks,' was all he could think to say.

'Derindi!' screamed a voice. 'Answer me, you worthless pile of hive scum!'

He heard the voice, but it sounded like it was very far away, as if it was part of a dream. The voice seemed to echo in his head. Perhaps it was a dream.

'Derindi!' screamed the voice again. 'Answer me now or the last thing you see in this world will be Seek and Destroy!'

Well, that was an odd thing to say. It must have been part of his dream. He was the sultan of a desert planet; a hot, dry, sandy desert planet and he was on a pilgrimage. This must have been the voice of his god telling him to seek and destroy the lord's enemies.

Seek and Destroy. Very odd. But also somewhat familiar. He had heard those words somewhere recently. Where had he heard those names? Names? They *were* names. Seek and Destroy – the twins who worked for Nemo! Nemo. The voice was Nemo. Oh crap!

Derindi awoke with a start, hearing only the last part of Nemo's next message in his ear. '…one last chance. I can find you wherever you hide, you little weasel.'

He tried to speak but his mouth was bone dry and full of dust. All that came out was a raspy wheeze. Derindi sat up. He was covered in hive dust and itched all over, and something seemed to be crawling up his leg inside his pants. He tried to ignore the itch and the dread of what might be inside his clothes and concentrate on talking. He spat out as much dust as he could and then swallowed the rest in an effort to get some saliva moving.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'm here. Yes. Don't hurt me. I'm here. Yes. What do you need?'

'Okay,' said Nemo. 'Just shut up already and report. What have you been doing?'

Derindi wasn't sure which order he should follow. He took a guess and decided to keep talking. 'I, uh, I was knocked out during a battle with the Wildcats, sir.' He started. He wasn't sure how much of the truth he should really tell. 'I'm sorry, sir. I, um, lost Scabbs and Yolanda.'

'Yes, yes,' said Nemo in his ear. 'I know. They are in the Breath of Fresh Air with Jerico and the Wildcats. Get over there and don't let them out of your sight again. Bring me the item they are all after and you will be a very rich man.'

'Yes, sir,' said Derindi. 'Thank you, sir. Right away. Thank yo–' The creepy crawly reached his crotch and bit down hard.

'Derindi!'

'Yes, sir?' he squeaked, as he slapped at the bug in his pants.

'Shut up!'

'Yes, sir.'

Later, after cleaning most of the dust and bugs out of his clothes, Derindi started walking toward the nearest dome entrance. It wasn't far, though he grumbled silently to himself the entire way there, staring at the white dust as he kicked it with every step. He happened to look up just as he reached the final rise in the dunes and saw several people standing near the entrance.

One of them looked familiar. Tall, leggy, spiked hair waving above her forehead and a katana sheathed at her waist. Yolanda. She was staring up into the struts above the Wastes. Derindi pulled out his pict camera and zoomed in. There were two people up there on grapnel lines, cutting something big out of some webbing.

'Nemo, are you getting this?' he asked so quietly he thought the transmitter might not pick it up.

'Yes, Derindi,' came the instant reply. 'Good work. Those are Helmawr's Spyrers. They're retrieving their rigs. Follow them and Yolanda.'

It didn't take the Spyrers long to get the rigs down. There were four separate rigs. The Spyrers donned two of them and looked like they planned to carry the other two. Yolanda argued with them for a few minutes, pulling her katana half way out of its sheath at one point. Finally, the female Spryer tossed her hands in the air and handed one of the spares to Yolanda. The male Spyrer carried the other and all three re-entered the dome.

Derindi ran the rest of the way to the entrance. He stuck his head in to make sure they had moved on, and then slipped inside and ran down the access tunnel to catch up.

Yolanda was amazed at how comfortable she felt in the Spyrer rig. She had expected to feel claustrophobic and clumsy in the metal suit, but it felt no more binding than a tight set of clothes, which she was quite used to wearing. The rig's hydraulics responded to her muscle commands as well as, if not better than, her own arms and legs.

Ordinarily, no mere Hiver could wear a Spyrer rig. Each was carefully crafted to match its wearer's own size and requirements, and its operation was based on a variety of control systems so sensitive that only its original occupant could stand any chance of figuring them out. Still, Yolanda was no mere Hiver. She had once been a Catallus, not that she considered herself such anymore. Nonetheless, she had in her youth been fitted for a Spyrer herself and, more importantly, had received the basic subcutaneous grafts. Perhaps it was this preparation that now paid off unexpectedly.

By the time they returned to the square, Scabbs and the Wildcats had gone back inside the Fresh Air to show Kal and their leaders what they had found. Cyklus dropped Jonas's rig off and the three of them went back out to see if they could follow Armand's trail.

Yolanda and Leoni wore identical rigs. She had called it a Malcadon rig. Apparently, twin bulbs on each wrist could shoot out iron-hard and very sticky webbing. Armour plates and spines protected the web-producing hardware on her back. The pistons and hydraulics in the arms and legs gave her excellent mobility.

She and Leoni had no trouble at all climbing up to the fan housing. Cyklus was able to lumber his way up to the fan as well, but it was obvious his rig was made for power and defence, not mobility. There was no way he'd be able to scale the vertical ventilation shaft, which was where Armand had taken Valtin.

'I'll stay here and guard you,' he said. The missile launchers that encircled his wrists spun, bringing a new missile into firing position on each arm.

'Impressive,' said Yolanda. 'Very cool!' She looked at Leoni. 'How do I fire my web spinners?'

'No way,' said Leoni. 'I showed you how to climb and jump. That's all you'll need for this excursion. No weapons. I'll spin us some rope for climbing. You just follow me, and try not to fall.'

Yolanda watched as Leoni shot the webs high up onto the shaft. She just seemed to point her hands and the webs came out, but there was something odd about how she held her fingers. Must be a switch or sensor on the palm, thought Yolanda. She decided to experiment later while Leoni wasn't watching.

As the web hardened, it started to look like steel cable. Leoni grabbed hold of it with both gloved hands, braced herself against the ventilation shaft and climbed the web rope. She scooted her legs up the metal ductwork as she pulled her body up the rope. It almost looked like she was walking up the side of the shaft.

Yolanda let her get a fair way up before grabbing the rope. She didn't want to let the Spyrer get out of sight. But she did want the rope to stop swaying. And she wanted at least a little warning should Leoni lose her grip and plummet.

It took them several minutes to scale the entire shaft. It went quite a way up and Leoni had to shoot new strands several times during their ascent. They eventually reached a catwalk attached to the roof of the dome. When Yolanda pulled herself up over the lip she could see Leoni bending over some dark object off to the side. It was a body; Van Saar by the look of it, and as white as the dust in the Wastes.

Leoni looked up. 'What in the Hive happened to him?'

'Armand,' said Yolanda. She recognised the pale colouring and sunken cheeks. 'Check his neck. Do you see puncture marks?'

Leoni pulled the dead ganger's collar down, showing two red holes in his neck. 'What the–? He really is a vampire?'

'He drains the blood of his victims,' said Yolanda, matter- of-factly. 'We don't know what he does with it, but I doubt he's filling a pool.'

'Well, he went this way from the ventilation shaft once today,' said Leoni. 'It's a good bet he followed the same path with cousin Valtin.'

They trotted down the catwalk for some distance until they found another body. 'Van Saar again,' said Yolanda. 'He's been feeding more and more each day. I doubt Valtin has much time left.'

They ran on, but found no more bodies, and the catwalk ended not too far past the second one. They backtracked to the second body, checking above, below and to the sides of the catwalk as they went. Just before they got back to the body, Yolanda noticed something familiar along the ceiling some way out from the catwalk. All of the pipes, conduits and ductwork in the area converged on one spot, which from her vantage point just looked like a large dark spot on the ceiling.

'Is there a torch on this rig anywhere?' asked Yolanda. She leaned out a little to get a better look.

'No,' replied Leoni. 'But I've got photo contacts. What do you see?'

'Check out that dark spot right there,' said Yolanda, pointing at the convergence point. 'What is it?'

Leoni followed Yolanda's finger out toward the ceiling. 'It's an access shaft, I think,' she said. 'Must angle back toward us. I can't actually see into it, but all the pipes turn and run into the opening.'

'That's what I was afraid of,' said Yolanda. 'Armand's gone. He used one of those shafts to escape from Glory Hole. He could be anywhere in the Hive by now.'

Kal sat at the table and thought, with a bottle of Squatz's House Special in one hand and his lasgun in the other. He spun the weapon idly as he considered the evidence that had been brought in. Bodies of Van Saar (from a battle Squatz had witnessed earlier), information about two utility access tunnels Armand had used for his escapes, reports of attacks up and down the Hive; nearly two dozen in just a few days in many different domes. He was like a ghost, or a vampire with bat wings, able to fly off into the night without trace.

It all connected somehow, but there was still a piece missing from the puzzle. What wasn't he seeing? Where was the missing piece? Where had Armand taken Valtin?

Kal looked at the items Scabbs and the Wildcats had brought in. They were arrayed on the table in front of him. There was a broken and bloody piece of Armand's armour, Valtin's power maul, which was completely drained of power, and the device his nephew had used to incapacitate the Spyrer rig, which now lay in several pieces.

An argument had broken out by the bar. Again.

'He's dead already,' said Leoni. 'We just regroup and wait for the next set of bodies to show up.'

'Typical noble reaction to Hiver deaths,' spat Vicksen. 'Follow the trail of dead gangers to your precious brother.'

'Yeah, and you can kill a few yourself along the way, just for sport,' added Themis.

'We're just saving you the trouble of killing each other,' said Cyklus. He ducked as a bottle whipped past his head. A second one smashed on the front of his rig.

'Look,' said Jonas, stepping in between Cyklus and the Wildcats. 'It's our cousin he's taken hostage.'

'But it's our family lying dead in the square at his – and *your* – hands,' Vicksen retorted. She stood inches from Jonas, her blue hair waving above her head as she stared down the Spyrer leader.

‘You’d better do something, Jerico,’ said Lysanne.

He looked up at the young Wildcat and suddenly remembered something she had said. ‘Lysanne, right?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’ She nodded her head.

‘You were closest to the vampire when Valtin showed up, right?’

She nodded again.

‘You said, he pushed the button and the vampire stopped moving.’

‘He – your nephew – said something about draining the power cell.’

‘So, how did Armand get enough power back to defeat Valtin and carry him off?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

Kal spun his weapon and thought. Drained the cell. He looked at the drained power maul. ‘Lysanne, this is important. Did you ever see the vampire absorb anything?

‘Absorb?’

‘You know, suck up – not like blood – power, energy.’

She nodded her head, excitedly. ‘Yes. Yes. That’s how I killed that flying Spyrer. I shot the vampire and he reflected the blast at her. It was cool!’

The whole bar went silent. Kal looked up. Vicksen and Jonas were still standing toe-to-toe, but both had stopped shouting at each other.

‘You killed Chimone?’ yelled Jonas. ‘Why you little bitch.’

Vicksen slapped him hard across the face. ‘Your bitch deserved it. She killed several of my girls.’

Kal jumped out of his chair and rushed between the two leaders. ‘Ladies,’ he said. ‘Both of you are pretty. Now, stow it. We can worry about who killed whom later. I know where Armand has taken Valtin, and I’m sure he’s still alive. But we have to hurry.’

8: SHAFTED AGAIN

‘Might I have a moment of your time, captain?’ asked Obidiah Clein. He stood in the doorway to Katerin’s office, a wan smile on his doughy face.

Katerin spread his hands apart to indicate the pile of paperwork cluttering his desk. ‘I am quite busy, Clein,’ he said. ‘Can this wait? All these extra meetings in the secure room have put me way behind on requisitions for the month. If I don’t sign them, the royal guard goes hungry. And believe me, you don’t want hungry guards.’

‘I’m sorry?’ said Clein. His eyebrows wrinkled in confusion.

‘Sorry,’ said Katerin. ‘Old military saying. Hungry soldiers make for angry villagers.’

‘Oh. I see.’ But it was obvious to Katerin that the young political officer didn’t see. ‘It is a matter of some importance. I think the men will get by for five minutes without their papers signed.’

Katerin pushed the pile of papers to the side. ‘Of course, Obidiah. I’m always available for one of our lord’s advisors.’ He actually kept most of the sarcasm out of his voice.

Clein gave another little half-smile and then slipped inside the door, closing it after him. ‘Can we speak privately?’

‘You did close the door,’ commented Katerin.

‘I mean,’ said Clein, his smile having disappeared, ‘is this room secure?’

‘Ah. Yes. Just one moment.’ Katerin reached under his desk and touched a switch. Before returning his hand to the desk top, he hit a second switch as well. ‘That should do it,’ he said. A bead of perspiration formed on the top of his head. He hated this cloak and dagger stuff.

Clein pushed the papers back toward the centre of the desk and sat on the edge, forcing Katerin to look up at the short advisor. ‘I have evidence that Hermod Kauderer sent Spyrers into Hive City to murder Lord Helmawr’s son.’

‘Is that right?’ asked Katerin. He tried to look innocent, but the bead of sweat on his brow was already snaking its way toward his bushy eyebrows while other beads blossomed up top.

‘And further,’ continued Clein. ‘I have reason to believe that you are working with Kauderer in a conspiracy to seize power in the house.’

‘I – we, that is – I never intended…’

‘Do you deny it?’ asked Clein. He leaned forward, further invading Katerin’s personal space.

The captain grabbed his handkerchief from the desk and dabbed at the sweat, which was now streaming down his head into his eyebrows and beard. He took a breath before answering. ‘What is your proof?’ he asked.

There was only the briefest hesitation before Clein answered. ‘That shouldn’t concern you right now,’ he said. ‘What should concern you is how you can get yourself out of this jam.’

The room fell silent for a long moment. ‘I’m listening,’ Katerin prompted finally.

‘If you played an unwitting role,’ said Clein, ‘then you might be saved the embarrassment and dishonour of losing your commission if you were to come clean immediately and help me expose this conspiracy. There’s no telling how deep it runs.’

Clein leaned back away from Katerin and let the wan little smile cross his face again. The captain was amazed at the transparency of the political officer’s interrogation tactics. After years of bantering with Kauderer, who was a master at eliciting information, these amateur attempts seemed as obvious as if Clein had come in with a cattle prod and a whip.

Still, he dabbed at the continuing flow of sweat before answering. ‘What would I have to do?’

Clein slipped off the desk and took a seat on the chair. Katerin knew this was supposed to make him feel like they were equals again, working together to right the horrible wrong. ‘Help me gather evidence, more evidence against Kauderer. Perhaps record your conversations with him.’

‘Then we’ll turn the evidence over to Lord Helmawr?’

‘Yes,’ said Clein. Again there was the slightest hesitation. ‘We’ll put all the evidence together, yours and mine, and present it to him.’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ said Katerin. ‘Recording Kauderer won’t be easy, and could be dangerous. He is a master spy after all.’

‘Yes, but he trusts you,’ said Clein. ‘At least as much as he trusts anyone. You’ll

be fine.'

Yes I will, thought Katerin. But I have my fears about you. He let a worried smile cross his face as he got up and shook Clein's hand. After the little man left, Captain Katerin closed the door and returned to his desk. He wiped his forehead and then heard a panel open behind him.

'You heard everything?' he asked.

'Yes I did,' said Kauderer, as he stepped into the office. 'Very interesting.'

Katerin looked up at the spy who'd been in his closet. 'He knows what we're doing.'

Kauderer came around the desk and stared at the door. 'But has no evidence yet.' He turned to look at the sweating Captain of the Guard. 'You did well. I honestly thought he had you worried.'

'I was, a little,' admitted Katerin. 'At first, but the man is an amateur.'

'Still it is good to worry,' said Kauderer. 'We need to act quickly.'

Now he smiled at the captain, but Katerin could never read the man's hawkish face, so couldn't be sure if it was genuine compassion or an act to get his cooperation. At this point, it didn't really matter.

Katerin sighed. 'What do you need me to do?'

'How do you know Valtin's not dead?' asked Yolanda. She sat at the bar, still wearing the Spyrer rig. She'd crushed three bottles of House Special in her gloved hand before getting the hang of controlling the rig's enhanced grip. Good job she hadn't had to contend with any intimate itches in the meantime, she thought to herself.

'It's simple, really,' said Kal. He paced the length of the bar as he explained, pausing at critical junctures for dramatic effect. With Kal it was always fifty per cent substance and fifty per cent performance.

'How many Hivers has Armand killed and drained?' he asked as he paced. He didn't wait for an answer. 'Two dozen, perhaps more now with the Van Saar? And how many has he dragged off? A few to drain in a less public place or to hide away and keep his secret safe.'

'So?' interjected Jonas. 'He's dragged some off, just like he dragged Valtin off.'

'Not exactly just like Valtin,' said Kal. 'Every single body he dragged off was already dead, and all were found within several hundred metres of where he killed them, drained and left to rot.'

He paused to let it all sink in, but the group seemed less than impressed by his oration. 'But where is Valtin's body?' He must have carried it out of the dome

with him. Why would he continue to carry Valtin's dead body when he could have easily drained him on the catwalk and left him with the other Van Saar bodies?'

Again, he was met with blank stares. Even Scabbs looked bored. He sat at the table, tinkering with Valtin's gadget and absentmindedly picking at the scabs on his arms.

'Quit the theatrics, Kal, and get to the point,' said Yolanda. She grabbed at her bottle, but accidentally spun a web around it instead.

Kal threw his hands up into the air in desperation. 'Armand carried Valtin out of Hive City even though we weren't chasing after him. He could have easily drained him before leaving, but opted to carry him instead.'

'Why?' asked Vicksen.

'Aha!' cried Kal. 'Exactly. Why would he do that? That is the question we need to ask ourselves…'

'Kal!' pleaded Yolanda.

'Because Armand's rig malfunctioned,' he said. 'Or, and this is the more interesting notion, Valtin somehow drained its power cell with that gizmo.' He pointed at the table just as Scabbs pulled two of the pieces apart. 'Try to fix it, Scabbs, not break it even more. We may need it.'

'Okay, fine,' said Jonas. 'Cousin Valtin is alive and well…'

'Until Armand can recharge the rig's power cell,' finished Kal.

'So how does that help us find him?'

'It doesn't,' said Kal.

'Then why in the Hive are we sitting here listening to you prattle on?'

'Because I do know where he went,' said Kal. 'I think Armand has a base of operations in the Underhive. That's where he's gone to recharge. That's where he's taken Valtin; probably for a snack later on. And that's where we'll most likely find the item.'

'Where is it?' asked Jonas.

Kal looked at the Spyrer and smiled. 'As soon as that gadget is working again, I'll take us all there.'

'Helmawr's rump!' exclaimed Dutt. 'Tell us where he is!' He slammed his fist down on the window sill. 'I can't believe the luck of that bounty hunter. There's no way he knows we're listening. I could have gotten the jump on them all.'

Bobo just sat and smiled. For the moment, Jerico's luck was his luck. 'He doesn't trust the Spyrers any more than he trusts Nemo,' he said. 'Looks like it'll

be a rat race all the way to the end, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Gets the blood moving, doesn't it?'

The little spy popped another handful of synthnuts into his mouth and stared through the window at The Breath of Fresh Air across the courtyard. With his photo contacts, he could peer into the dimly lit bar well enough to see the bodies moving around the front room. While Dutt sat and fumed about missed opportunities, Bobo enjoyed his synthnuts and waited for Jerico's uneasy coalition to get on the move.

Over the next half-hour, Bobo watched Scabbs working at the table. He couldn't tell what the little half-breed was doing at this distance, but he could hear him muttering and swearing through Nemo's hidden voxbug. The rest of the crew alternated between silent drinking and heated arguments over such trivial matters as life and death.

As he watched, Bobo noticed some movement at the other end of the square. He refocused his photo contacts and took a closer look. 'What in the–?' He looked again and started to laugh.

'What's so funny?' asked Dutt.

Bobo pointed and continued to laugh. He could hardly breathe, let alone speak, at the moment. Dutt stared at the spot where Bobo pointed with a puzzled expression for a moment and then broke out laughing as well.

In an alley at the far corner of the square, Derindi attempted to climb a water pipe attached to the building. There must have been decent hand and foot holds down low, but once he got about halfway he kept slipping as he tried to scramble up to the roof. The two spies watched in amazement as the snitch clawed his way up the side of the building.

'Pretty determined, isn't he?' asked Dutt.

'I wonder what he's doing here?' mused Bobo. He grabbed some more synthnuts and watched the show. The little weasel was far more entertaining than Jerico and his crew at the moment.

Dutt was oddly silent. Bobo glanced at him. 'He's working for Nemo? Why in the world would Nemo use that bumbling idiot?'

Bobo could see Dutt working through some inner turmoil. Finally, he removed his transmitter tooth and pocketed it. 'Okay, we're working together, right? Nemo told him to keep an eye on Jerico, but he was just supposed to be a diversion. We all assumed he'd get caught as soon as he started, which would allow me to work in secrecy. Funny thing is, he's pretty good at staying hidden.'

'Most snitches are,' agreed Bobo. 'At least the ones who live long enough to

snitch on anybody.'

They both turned to watch Derindi again. He had gotten one hand on the lip of the roof, but had lost his footing and was just hanging there by his fingers while his legs flailed and kicked at the building.

'Now you owe me something,' said Dutt. 'I shared with you, you need to reciprocate.'

Bobo thought about it. 'Hmm,' he said. 'That was pretty trivial, but okay. I'll give you a nugget. Of course, you're going to owe me back after this one.'

'I'll be the judge of that,' said Dutt. He chuckled and pointed at Derindi. The snitch had both hands on the edge of the roof and had just slammed his forehead against the wall.

'Nemo's man inside House Helmawr is not what he appears.'

Bobo let the statement sit there in the silence that filled the room. It was a fishing expedition, pure and simple, but he didn't want to push too hard. Dutt was good, and if he tried to set the bait too soon, he'd lose him for sure. He'd wiggle it in front of him again later. He knew Nemo must have a man on the inside. Finding out who would not just mean a promotion, it might just answer some of the nagging questions he had about this whole mission.

Instead, he stared intently at Derindi, who had gotten one leg over the edge and finally pulled himself onto the roof. At that moment, the two spies heard Scabbs say, 'I got it!' In less than a minute, the gang of nine emerged from the Fresh Air, with Wotan the metal dog nipping at the Spyrer legs as they strode across the courtyard.

'Looks like we're on the move again,' said Bobo.

He glanced one last time at Derindi, zooming his contacts in to see the weasel's face. Along with his other talents, Bobo was a pretty good lip reader. Derindi, seeing Kal and company crossing the square, swore profusely and then headed toward the water pipe to climb down again. Bobo just laughed.

Valtin sat with his back up against the pipes. His head had cleared a little and Armand had been kind enough to prop him up, so now he could see more of his surroundings. He suspected that the only reason Armand had moved him was to keep an eye on his hostage.

Valtin sat on what appeared to be a service lift in an enormous utility access shaft. Pipes of all sizes lined the walls of the shaft, disappearing into the darkness above him and past the mesh floor below. He could just barely see the far side of the shaft in the dim light of the work lamps, which he could now tell

were wired to the railings of the lift platform.

His ankles were bound tight with copper wire which dug into his skin every time he moved. His wrists were bound behind his back, and from the pain he felt, Valtin was sure Armand had used copper wire for that task as well.

The lift sat just outside an alcove or access tunnel. The back of the tunnel was pitch black, so he couldn't tell if it ended or not. Armand paced back and forth near the mouth of the passage, which he had lit with a few extra work lamps. At first, Valtin wasn't sure what the elder Helmawr was doing, but then he saw Armand holding part of his rig.

Tubes ran off the top and flopped around on the ground as Armand twisted it back and forth, as if looking for something. He finally found what he needed, and then grabbed a tool from a box at his feet. He worked the tool for several minutes and then dropped it back in the box and set the hunk of rig aside.

He came toward Valtin carrying a thick, grey disc about the size of a dinner plate. Valtin immediately recognised the object. It was the power cell for Armand's rig that he'd drained during the battle. Valtin pulled his knees up, hoping to get a chance to kick the cell out of Armand's hands, but his uncle never got that close.

He stopped at the edge of the lift, next to one of the work lamps. Casually, with the calm air that only the truly crazy attain, Armand yanked the lamp from its housing and tossed it over the edge of the lift, leaving nothing but bare wires. Valtin counted the time it took before the lamp hit bottom, but while he heard it bang against the walls, the clattering simply continued to grow fainter and fainter until he simply couldn't hear it anymore. It was a long way to the bottom.

Valtin looked back at Armand. It was hard to tell what he was doing now because of the missing light, but it seemed like he was trying to connect the live wires to the power cell. Valtin could see power jumping from the ends of the wires to Armand's fingertips, but there was no recognition of pain on his face. Once he finished hotwiring his power cell, Armand set it down on the handrail and turned to go back into the access tunnel.

They hadn't talked since Armand's manic rant about the tainted Helmawr blood. Valtin wondered if he could get any useful information out of his crazed uncle. He cleared his throat and said, 'Um.'

Armand twirled around and stared at Valtin, his eyes wide open in an honest look of surprise, as if he had no idea anyone else was there with him in the shaft. 'Nephew!' he said. 'Good to see you again. Don't worry. Supper won't be long now.' He then turned and disappeared into the darkness at the back of the

passage.

Hermod Kauderer sat at his desk trying to determine the best course of action against Obidiah Clein. The hawkish Kauderer kept a spartan and tidy office. He had no personal effects, no books or bookcases, no files or filing cabinets; not even any desk drawers. He kept everything he needed in plain sight, and placed in positions precise to within a millimetre at all times. It would be next to impossible to hide anything in Kauderer's office that he could not spot at once and remove.

He had no pict terminal either, or any other device of any kind in the office (at least not visible to the naked eye). He distrusted any communication device that left a trace or record. Nor did he use paper and pen. Kauderer committed everything to memory and transmitted all messages verbally. He never left a paper trail and he could never get caught by means of eavesdropping in his own office, as it was well shielded from external listening devices at all times.

Kauderer did his best thinking at the desk. With no distractions calling for his attention, he could devote one hundred per cent of his quite abundant brain power to whatever task he set before himself, which at the moment was one Obidiah Clein. He could simply kill the odious little man in his sleep, but that was bound to bring repercussions from any number of sources. You didn't just kill one of Lord Helmawr's advisors and hope to walk away clean.

That, of course, was what currently kept Clein at bay as well. Clein needed hard evidence against Kauderer before he could move. He was trying to use Katerin to get that evidence, which would ultimately fail. The problem with Clein, thought Kauderer, is that he's too stuck in the real world. Why look for evidence when you can create it instead?

An idea began to form in Kauderer's mind. Evidence could point in any direction if handled properly, and it could find its way into any number of hands as well. An odd series of knocks at his door broke the intrigue master's concentration. He played back the sequence in his mind and translated the coded message. It was time.

Captain Katerin had set up a meeting with Clein, ostensibly to discuss how to gather the evidence against Kauderer. They were now in Katerin's office, which would give Hermod fifteen to twenty minutes of uninterrupted time in Clein's office, more than enough for a professional intrigue operative such as he.

He left his office and strode through the palace, making sure to be seen by a number of high-ranking officials on his way to the lower levels and the secure

room. However, upon entering the antechamber – the darkest room in the entire palace – he made a slight detour to the side wall. He tapped a code into a pad concealed in the wall and entered a secret passage that opened before him.

Hermod now had complete access to almost the entire palace. He had the map of the secret passageways committed to memory, so it was a simple matter to make his way up to Clein's office and enter, the same way he had accessed Katerin's office earlier. Kauderer could have entered the passage from his office, but now had an irrefutable alibi should he need one. He was meeting with Lord Helmawr, whom he knew to be napping in his office at the moment.

Clein's office was a mess. Kauderer had no idea how he could find anything in the clutter. Papers were strewn everywhere on every single horizontal surface. His desk was covered in a mound of papers, books and file folders. Messages were pasted on the walls, chairs and even on his pict monitor. The bookcases were stacked two and three volumes deep and crammed into every single pocket of space on every shelf. Boxes filled with even more books were heaped in every corner, some of which had fallen over and then been pushed out of the way to make a path from the desk to the door.

When Kauderer opened the panel access to Clein's office, a stack of boxes nearly fell over on him. He had to prop it up and sidle through the opening, and then close the panel behind him lest the boxes spill into the secret passage. He looked at the office and realised that fifteen minutes wouldn't be nearly enough.

'First things first,' he said, as he donned a pair of skintight gloves. He entered a few commands on Clein's control panel, sending a brief message that would appear on Katerin's monitor. It said, simply, 'stall.' A few more commands gave Kauderer complete access to all of Clein's files. He checked Clein's daily itinerary for the past week. Oddly, the file was empty. He checked the contacts file. Again, empty.

Was he covering his tracks? Kauderer glanced down at the mess on the desk. A scrap of paper sat on the top of the pile. It read: 'Meet Kat, Re. Kau' with a time and date. The time was now. The other scraps of paper had similar notes. Messages from subordinates, notes about calls, meeting schedules; they were all written on pieces of paper and then pasted on the walls or left lying on the desk.

'How does the man function?' Kauderer muttered. If Clein had kept his records in some kind of legible order like any normal person, it would have been a simple matter of accessing the files and comparing schedules to itineraries to find holes in his day, or combing through his data for hidden files or messages.

In an odd way, he and Clein were alike. Kauderer kept all of his information in

his head to ensure against just this kind of data mining. Clein seemed to do it because he was a slob, or perhaps he was the classic absent-minded professor, spending too much time researching and too little learning how to function in the real world. Kauderer had to remind himself that up until just a few days ago, Clein was a junior political officer, toiling away in near obscurity.

'I just have to think like Clein,' Kauderer said to himself. He picked up a pile of folders from the man's chair and sat at the desk. He looked at the folders, assuming they would be the most recent additions to the mess. They all seemed to deal with political issues with other houses. It looked like he was getting himself up to speed on the current political climate in the Spire. He sat the folders on the floor.

Kauderer needed to think, but the clutter made it difficult for his ordered mind to concentrate. Clein was working for someone. There was no other way such a junior official could have risen so far so fast, unless he had gotten outside help. But from the look of this office, Clein was no spy, at least not a professional. That meant he would think like an amateur. He wouldn't hide his biggest secrets in plain sight where nobody would think to look. He would hide them in dark corners which were like beacons to thieves and agents alike.

He scanned the office again, this time looking not for items within the clutter, but at the structure of the clutter itself. When he saw it, Kauderer felt like kicking himself for not noticing the incongruity earlier. One pile of boxes in the back corner of the room, quite close to the desk, had been very purposefully stacked to look like a haphazard pile. But it was obvious to Kauderer's practiced eye that the boxes had been arranged in such a way that they could be moved without upsetting the pile.

He rose from the chair, replaced the folders to within millimetres of where they had been originally, carefully moved the chair back to its original position, and then stepped over a pile of books to get to the stack of boxes. He slid it out and looked at the floor. One of the tiles had minute scratch marks on the edge from where Clein had prised it up.

Kauderer pushed on the opposite edge and the tile flipped up. The floor below had been cut away, allowing access to the space between the floor joists. Kauderer reached in and pulled out a box. Inside the box he found about a dozen canisters used for sending messages via the Hive tube system.

'Perfect,' said Kauderer. He pocketed a single canister and then replaced the box, the tile, and the stack of boxes. He checked the room to make sure he had left no mark of his scrutiny, then opened the access panel and left Clein's office.

‘We should be able to gain access just up ahead,’ said Jerico. They were trotting down a large utility tunnel, like many that ran beneath and between the Hive City domes. Pipes carrying everything from power and water to message canisters and effluvium ran along one side of the tunnel. The one-metre diameter pipes were stacked five high and three deep on large metal racks.

The walkway next to the racks was only wide enough for the gang to walk two abreast. Cyklus actually had difficulty getting through some of the narrower sections in his bulky rig. Light came from circular lamps hanging from the ceiling, but these were spaced about ten metres apart, giving the tunnel eerie pools of light all along its length.

‘That’s what you said half an hour ago,’ commented Vicksen.

‘And half an hour before that as well,’ added Jonas.

The entrances to these utility tunnels were hidden in the dark recesses of the sewers and locked at all times. Only maintenance workers were supposed to have access to the maze of tunnels, but maintenance personnel are notoriously underpaid and easily bribed, so most bounty hunters and many of the more prominent gang leaders all had keys and had mapped out the sections of the tunnels they used most often.

Kal had a map of the entire complex of utility tunnels under Hive City. It had cost him the credits of five bounties to get it, but it had paid off five times that amount over the years, in bounties he never would have been able to collect without the map.

Unfortunately, they had come into the tunnels through a different entrance than the one marked on Kal’s map. It had been thirty minutes before he had realised his mistake and another thirty before he had asked Scabbs for help, but now Jerico was confident that they were near their objective; confident enough to finally tell his ersatz gang where they were headed.

‘This time is different,’ Kal said with a smile on his face. ‘Scabbs has figured out where he went wrong–’

‘Where *I* went wrong–’ began Scabbs.

Kal continued. ‘And you are all about to see something the likes of which very few alive today in the Hive have seen.’ They had come to a spot in the tunnel where the pipes made a ninety-degree turn toward the wall, plunging through the wall and leaving a gap in the bank of pipes. The pipes seemed to emerge again from the wall five metres further on, where they once again turned and continued running down the tunnel under the pools of light as far as the eye could see.

Kal turned and scanned the bare section of wall. There was a double door set

into the concrete wall, but it had no knobs nor any visible lock. Kal found what he was looking for on the far side of the door: a small panel set between two of the pipes coming out of the wall. Opening the panel revealed a key pad. Kal grabbed the map back from Scabbs and folded and unfolded it, looking for the access number.

'Where in the Hive are we?' asked Jonas. 'Tell us now or I'll kill you, take that map from your dead hands, and open the door myself.'

Every member of the group was nodding in agreement after this statement, even Scabbs and Yolanda, so Kal thought it best to finally reveal what he had figured out. 'The vampire, my own brother Armand Helmawr, has had unparalleled access to all levels of the Hive,' he said. 'There's only one way he could have gotten everywhere he's been in the last few days…'

Kal had found the code and tapped it into the panel. The doors slid apart, disappearing into the tunnel wall with a slight hiss. Beyond was utter darkness. Kal flicked on a torch and beamed its light through the door. The pipes from the tunnel could be seen intersecting other pipes that ran up and down in a huge vertical shaft. The torch light just barely licked the far wall of the shaft some fifteen metres away from the door.

'He followed the utility pipes,' finished Kal. He tossed the map to Scabbs, pulled a credit from his pants and flipped it into the shaft. The gangers listened to the credit bang its way down the shaft. It never hit bottom.

'He's in the shaft,' said Yolanda.

Kal nodded.

'You don't suppose he might have heard all that banging just now?'

Kal gave Yolanda a sheepish grin. 'Oops!'

'Up or down,' said Vicksen.

Kal just looked at her, his eyebrows creased in puzzlement.

'Is the vampire up or down from here?' she asked again.

Kal shrugged.

'Up,' said Yolanda. They all looked at her. She pushed a few wayward strands of hair out of her eyes. 'He took Valtin up through that utility access tunnel at the top of the dome. Plus he seems to have a penchant for heights.'

'Comes from too many years living in the Spire,' said Kal, nodding his head. 'Okay. Up it is.'

Lysanne stepped up to the doorway and peered into the shaft. 'Um, how do we get there?' she asked. 'Hey, there's a couple of buttons here on the inside wall.'

'That would be for the service lift,' said Scabbs. He smiled at her and pointed at

the map in his hands. ‘It says so right here. Go ahead and push the up button.’

‘No.’ said Kal. Everyone froze. ‘Armand would surely hear the lift moving. We have to climb. There should be ladders on either side of the door as well.’

The entire group groaned.

A little way down the tunnel, there was another groan, unheard by Kal and his merry band.

‘Looks like your day just went into the sump,’ said Bobo.

Dutt nodded in the shadows. ‘I have to go up there,’ he said. It was almost a question, as though he were pleading with Nemo through their link. If he was, the answer wasn’t good. ‘Crap!’

‘Lucky for me, the Spyrers are working on my side,’ said Bobo. ‘I can just sit back and wait to make sure they have the item when they come back down.’ He decided to take another shot at getting the informant’s name. ‘You don’t have that luxury. I mean you can’t rely on what’s his name up in the palace to hand it over to Nemo.’

‘Clein or…?’ asked Dutt, and then immediately clamped his hand over his mouth.

‘Yeah, Clein,’ said Bobo as smoothly as possible. He recognised the name and knew Kauderer would definitely be interested in this bit of news. He palmed a dagger while talking, just in case Dutt tried anything after letting the name slip. ‘Like I said, he’s only out for himself. You know how political officers are, they’re… well, political. You can’t trust ’em.’

Bobo smiled again, keeping a watchful but relaxed eye on his counterpart. He decided to change the subject. ‘Buck up,’ he said. ‘Maybe it won’t be that long a climb.’

Dutt remained silent. Bobo noticed a tenseness about the other spy’s shoulders and elbows, as if he was preparing to strike. The Helmawr spy slipped the point of the blade in his palm into the crease between his middle and ring fingers and prepared to jab it into Dutt’s neck. The anxious silence continued for several heartbeats, but was then broken by a shuffling sound echoing down the tunnel.

Dutt and Bobo dropped to their stomachs at the same moment and rolled under the racks of pipes. A moment later, Derindi tiptoed past them, doing his best to move silently, but failing miserably. Bobo stifled a snigger. Once the snitch was out of earshot, he looked at Dutt, whose face was no more than a metre from his own, and said, ‘Maybe you won’t have to follow them after all.’

Both spies heard a sharp metallic sound like bones breaking. It was Wotan

barking. Of course, thought Bobo, the dog couldn't climb up the shaft. 'It's Jerico's dog,' he said. 'There's no way Derindi will be able to get past it.'

'Not without help,' said Dutt. He slid out from under the pipes and dashed down the tunnel.

Bobo wanted to go help. He enjoyed Dutt's companionship, and was just starting to get some good information out of him, but he knew he should take the opportunity to check in and send the name of the spy inside House Helmawr. He pulled out a small tablet and typed out a quick message, his fingers practically flying across the tiny keys.

He hit 'encode and send' just as Dutt returned. He slipped out from his hiding spot and stood up. Down the tunnel, steam erupted from a hot water main and he could hear the dog yelp, which sounded a little like metal scraping against metal.

'Derindi got away okay, then?' he asked.

Dutt nodded again. 'Derindi is on his way up the shaft,' he replied, telling both Bobo and Nemo at the same time.

Bobo smiled and pocketed the dagger. The diversion had eased the tension between them. 'You know you'll need more than a little steam to get the item away from Jerico – or the Spyrers – when they come back down.'

Dutt nodded, but remained silent this time. Something in his eyes told Bobo that he and Nemo already had a plan in place for when the time came. Now Bobo needed a plan as well.

Kauderer had been working on the canister for several hours when a signal alerted him to an incoming message. He ignored the signal for the moment. He was at a critical juncture with the canister. He'd attached leads to both ends. One set of wires led to a digital readout. The other set was connected to an input pad. He nearly had the password decrypted and would only have a few precious moments to key the sequence into the pad, before the sensors within the canister detected the worm working its way through the data and triggered any number of booby traps inside.

There it was! Kauderer deftly typed the complex set of digits and symbols into the pad and the canister snapped open. He sat back and shook his hands to release the tension and then smiled. He still had not figured out what message to send to Clein's employer. It would have to be a fairly vague message as he didn't know the name of his contact, but too vague a message would give the game away just as much.

He'd almost forgotten about the message when the signal buzzed again.

Kauderer disconnected the leads from the canister, picked it up along with his code-breaking equipment, and stepped to the back of his office. He depressed three switches that were camouflaged as part of the decor on his wall and a section of wall opened up, revealing a pict phone, a terminal and a bank of monitors.

A light on the terminal blinked. He waited for it to repeat to make sure he'd gotten the correct pattern and then keyed in the corresponding code to accept and decrypt the incoming message.

'How timely,' said Kauderer. He deleted the message and then erased all traces that a message had even been received. Thoughts flew through his mind as he closed his monitor station and returned to the desk, with the open canister still in his hand. Clein was working for Nemo. That much he could have guessed, but confirmation was always a necessity in a high stakes game like this one. Bobo also had knowledge of a possible second agent in the palace. That knowledge might prove quite useful in the endgame. The last bit of the message had been even more intriguing. An idea crystallised in Kauderer's brain and he sat down to craft a message for the canister.

Seek and Destroy stood in the doorway to Nemo's control room, waiting for orders. Nemo could see them out of the corner of his eye but had not acknowledged their presence yet. He'd found you could learn a lot about people by watching the way they handled the stress of torture; and for Seek and Destroy, waiting was the worst torture he could ever devise.

So he continued to check his monitors and issue commands, via his network of inner ear transmitters, to his agents throughout the Underhive, all the while watching Seek and Destroy get more and more agitated. With his eyes hidden behind the mirrored mask, he knew they couldn't even tell if he knew of their presence.

Nemo watched as they debated without words whether or not to speak and, if so, who should do the speaking. One (he thought it was Seek, but it was almost impossible to tell, and didn't really matter) pointed at Nemo and then pointed at his brother. The other shook his head and pointed back at the first.

This was obviously taken as some sort of an attack or an affront because the first one punched the second in the arm. This elicited a swift kick to the shins, which in turn brought a chokehold, which then quickly escalated into a wrestling brawl on Nemo's floor.

The master spy let the fight go on for several minutes to see if they would come

to their senses or perhaps work it out themselves. They didn't, and it looked like the fight might go on forever. As soon as one got away, the other ran him down and it started all over again. It was truly amazing to watch; all the more amazing because neither one seemed to do any permanent damage to the other.

When the fight got a little too close to Nemo's chair, he finally spoke up. 'Boys,' he said in a soft, but stern voice. 'Stop. Now!' He'd learned long ago that yelling never worked with the twins. A quiet reminder of who held the power worked so much better. Fear was an excellent motivational technique.

The twins snapped back to attention as quickly as possible, but one accidentally stepped on the other as they got off the floor, which brought a quick jab to the kidneys once they were both standing. Nemo could see retribution brewing in the other's eyes, but they stood still, for the moment at least.

'It is time to get into the game,' said Nemo. 'You know what to do?'

'Yes sir,' they said in unison.

'Excellent.' He handed them a data pad. 'This map will lead you to utility access tunnel E2S. Gather our new friends and proceed there. I will monitor the situation from here and give you final instructions when all is ready.'

They saluted, turned and walked toward the door. At least three more punches were thrown before they made it into the next room. Nemo sighed. Luckily, they were just added muscle. The others he had hired would do the delicate work.

He was just about to get back to Derindi's monitor when the whoosh sound from above indicated an incoming message canister. Nemo held out his hand and snatched the canister from the air as soon as it dropped from the tube. He checked the ID indent. It was from Clein.

'Well, this should be interesting,' he said, glancing at the message he'd just received from Dutt. 'Yes, this should prove most interesting indeed.'

9: THE PRICE OF REDEMPTION

‘Good. You’re awake,’ said Armand. He stood over the bound Valtin once again. ‘I was worried I might have drained too much blood. I wasn’t exactly in my right mind earlier.’

Armand wore his Spyrer rig, but the helmet hung on his back, attached to the suit by tubes that connected at various spots around the collar. Valtin looked up at him, a questioning look in his eyes. He tried to sit up, but couldn’t. ‘I feel weak,’ he said.

That’s to be expected,’ said Armand. ‘You’ve lost a lot of blood. Although I guess I wouldn’t say you actually lost it.’

‘You seem to be feeling… better,’ Valtin’s breathing was shallow.

Armand had cleaned up a little once his head had cleared. It had been days since he’d gotten a decent transfusion, and his mania had left little time for personal grooming. His wild hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and he’d managed to scrape several days worth of growth from his face, opting to leave a budding goatee, mostly because of the difficulty of shaving around his mouth with nothing but a dagger.

He looked down at Valtin, who now looked much worse than when they had first met in the square. Armand was worried that his nephew might die from massive blood loss, which would be a shame because he planned to live off Valtin for quite some time. ‘You mean, I’m not a raving lunatic anymore? A side effect of the process, I’m afraid, but with you here to sustain me, I shouldn’t get that bad again.’

Valtin looked even more confused than before. ‘Ahh, youth,’ said Armand. He kneeled in front of his pale, weak nephew. ‘You’ll begin to understand after you’ve lived as long as I have.’

‘You’re not that much older than I.’

Armand laughed. ‘How old do you think I am?’

‘Forty,’ said Valtin. ‘Perhaps forty-five.’

‘Try doubling that,’ said Armand, still laughing, but then the laughter died off as the joke really was on him. ‘I’ll be ninety-two next month, if I can survive that long on the crap that passes for blood down here.’

‘How?’

‘Rejuvenation therapy, of course, you idiot. How young are you anyway?’ Armand didn’t wait for an answer. ‘We are the wealthiest family on the planet. Don’t you think we can afford to keep ourselves alive?’ He stood and started pacing around the edge of the lift, his metal boots clanging on the mesh flooring. ‘Gene therapy, blood transfusions, organ replacements – you name it, I’ve had it. Father too, and even a few of his most trusted aides.’

‘Why?’

‘To live forever, of course,’ said Armand. ‘To rule forever.’ He felt some of his mania returning and took a deep breath to calm his nervous metabolism. ‘Father is over four hundred years old, did you know that? He has ruled the family for centuries, ruled Hive Primus for centuries. And I am the heir apparent, so I get to live forever as well – or at least until father chooses another heir apparent. As long as I stay in the Spire, and don’t piss off Father too much, I am immortal.’

‘Then why did you leave?’

‘I had to, don’t you see?’ Armand stopped pacing and stared at Valtin. Emotions coursed through his body along with the fresh vigour of Valtin’s blood. He was elated and depressed at the same time. Clear in purpose, but troubled by doubts of ever affecting any real change in the status quo. He didn’t know why he was even telling his nephew all of this. Perhaps it was his subconscious telling him that it was time to pass the burden on to someone stronger. Perhaps he just needed to finally cleanse his soul.

‘I had to leave because that place, that House, was killing me.’ He slumped to the floor of the lift, his knees tucked up tight against his chest. ‘I might live forever, but I would end up dead inside, my life purchased on the blood, sweat and tears of others.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Valtin.

‘And I hope that you never will,’ replied Armand. ‘Father calls me “troubled”, but troubled isn’t the half of it. I have seen the devil, Valtin. I see him every day in the mirror and I see him sitting on the throne of Hive Primus. We are tainted, Father and I. Our very blood is tainted by every foul act this family has performed in the name of power; in the name of eternity. There is no hell, you see. Just the Spire.’

‘Then fix it,’ said Valtin. ‘Restore the family’s soul.’

‘It’s too late for me,’ replied Armand. ‘Far too late. My life is inextricably tied to the evil now. I can’t last a day without a transfusion. I can’t seem to last a scavving hour down here on the waste-polluted blood of these Hivers. But I can bring an end to the root of all evil, if I only have enough time.’

Armand jumped to his feet and disappeared into the tunnel next to the lift. When he returned, he was carrying the item that had half the Hive searching for him. ‘I can take him down, Valtin. I can bring Father to his knees with this.’ He held up the object to show Valtin. It was not much bigger than a grapefruit and slightly oblong, with a short tail coming off the narrow end.

‘What is that?’ asked Valtin. Armand could tell by the horrified look in his nephew’s face that he had already guessed.

‘It’s the Royal Chamberlain’s brain.’

‘But it’s mostly metal.’

Armand held the brain up to look at it. ‘Why yes it is,’ he said. The brain was dull grey with an array of tiny steel wires poking out from all sides. The tail, the brain stem, was housed in an accordion-like, metal tube that twisted and turned like a snake. The stem ended in an intricate set of prongs. ‘This is just the housing, of course. What’s left of old Stiv’s brain, along with a series of cogitae valves, is held safely inside.’

‘The chamberlain was a servitor?’

‘No, just mostly augmetic pieces after all these years,’ replied Armand. He held the brain in his palm and raised it up to his face, trying to imagine Stiv’s face surrounding the five-pound hunk of metal and tissue. ‘Father once told me that Stiv had been with him from the beginning. The only aide he trusted with all of his secrets. And they are all in here. Every dirty deal he ever made. Every enemy – and quite a few “friends” of the family – he ever had killed. Every single credit he ever bilked from the other Houses and failed to report to the tax inspectors. It’s all in here.’

‘If that fell into the wrong hands… ’

‘It would mean the end of Gerontius Helmawr,’ finished Armand.

‘And the entire house,’ added Valtin.

‘Perhaps,’ conceded Armand. He looked at his nephew, lying on the mesh floor of the lift, pale and weak like a baby. ‘But that is the price of redemption.’

‘You won’t live long enough for redemption,’ said Kal Jerico as he pulled himself up onto the lift.

‘Ah, brother,’ said Armand. ‘So good to see you again. And you brought the cousins and a few playthings. Looks like a party.’

‘It’s your going away party, brother,’ said Jerico.

‘Playthings?’ added a female voice behind Valtin. He thought it sounded like the Escher leader from the fight in the square, but he couldn’t see her.

Valtin couldn’t see Jerico from his vantage point either, but he saw movement out of the corner of his eyes and noticed Yolanda, wearing a Malcadon Spyrer rig, pulling herself up onto the lift behind his homicidal uncle.

Valtin felt momentary relief that Kal had found him while he was still alive, and seemed to have brought a small army with him. More and more boots clanked on the metal mesh floor of the lift, but then Armand grabbed him by the collar of his leather coat and lifted Valtin up, holding him like a shield as he retreated toward the tunnel.

Valtin could now see everyone except Yolanda, and he hoped that Armand hadn’t noticed the rigged-up amazon woman behind him.

‘Watch your aim everyone or House Helmawr loses one of its youngest sons,’ said Armand as he waved Valtin’s body around in front of him.

‘He’s of no value to us,’ said Jonas. ‘Cyklus, blast that traitor.’

‘No!’ yelled Kal. He spread his hands and took two steps toward Armand. ‘We can all get out of this alive. Armand, just give Jonas what you stole from your father and everyone goes their separate ways. Nobody else needs to die today.’

‘That wasn’t the deal, Jerico!’ yelled the leader of the Wildcats. ‘He has to pay for the deaths of my girls!’

She rushed toward Armand, firing her shotgun as she ran. Armand swung Valtin’s body toward the charging Escher. His feet smacked into the barrel of her weapon. It discharged, shooting the young Helmawr in the foot. He screamed in pain.

He heard a clatter beneath him and looked down to see the chamberlain’s brain rolling around on the mesh. When he looked back up, Armand had grabbed the Wildcat leader by the neck. He snapped it with a quick flick of his wrist and then threw her body toward Cyklus.

The brute reacted, shooting a missile from his wrist, which exploded upon impact, blowing the dead Wildcat’s body apart. The other two Escher women screamed and readied their weapons. Cyklus re-aimed his wrist rockets. They were now aimed right at Valtin’s head.

Kal jumped into the middle of the stand-off. ‘Wait!’ he called out. ‘Just wait a moment, everyone.’ He took another step toward Armand, his arms still splayed

wide. He kept talking, inching forward with every sentence. ‘This is senseless. None of us wants to die today. Let’s talk this out.’

Valtin thought he saw Kal’s eyes dart to a point behind Armand as he continued to talk. ‘You have something we want.’

‘But you have nothing I want,’ spat Armand. He slammed the helmet down on his head. It latched automatically.

‘How about freedom?’ asked Kal. Valtin noticed that the fingers on Kal’s left hand were no longer splayed. There were only three fingers out, then two, then one, then none.

Kal lunged forward. At the same time Valtin heard a noise behind him. He turned to see Yolanda spraying Armand with the web shooter from her borrowed rig. In a moment, Armand’s arms were held fast against the body of his rig. Kal slammed into Valtin, grabbing him around the waist and pulling him from Armand’s grasp. They both fell to the floor of the lift and rolled. Pain shot up Valtin’s arms and legs from the wire bindings.

As Jerico and Valtin rolled to a stop near the tunnel, all hell broke loose behind them. Cyklus shot off two more missiles, which did little more than break Armand free of the webbing. Armand then rushed at Cyklus, who continued to fire missiles wildly. One of them exploded on Leoni’s chest and another sent Yolanda diving for cover as Kal pulled his nephew into the tunnel and propped him against the wall.

When the smoke cleared, Valtin could see that cousin Leoni’s face and part of her skull had been destroyed by the blast. The rig stood for a moment and then crumpled to the floor of the lift in a heap. Yolanda lay sprawled near the edge of the platform. Valtin couldn’t tell if she was alive or dead.

Armand grappled with Cyklus as the Escher women and Scabbs shot at him from behind. Armand went down on one knee and leaned back, pulling Cyklus off balance. As the big brute fell forward, Armand stepped in and lifted him over his head. Cyklus screamed and shot off two more missiles, forcing everyone else to dive for cover. Armand stood and ran toward the edge of the lift platform. At the last second, he heaved Cyklus and his massive rig over the rail. Missiles shot up the shaft, exploding well overhead as Cyklus fell into the blackness.

Kal pulled out his sabre and cut the wire bindings around Valtin’s wrists and ankles. Relief spread through his aching joints, but his foot had gone numb where he’d been shot. Kal then stood and turned toward Armand, who was surveying the carnage he’d wreaked.

‘You whelps have no hope to defeat me!’ came the bellowing voice from inside

the domed helmet. ‘I was ripping Underhive mutants in half with my bare hands before any of you were even born.’

‘Kal, wait,’ said Valtin. ‘You can kill him. Armand has a weakness even he doesn’t know about.’

‘What is it?’ asked Kal.

Before Valtin could answer, he saw Jonas rise and face off with Armand. ‘I’m no Underhive mutant, you treacherous scum. See if you can rip me in half.’ He stepped in and swung his monomolecular sword at Armand, who blocked it with his armour-plated arm. The sword bounced off the armour, but took one of the overlapping plates with it.

Armand raised his hand over his head and brought a fist down toward Jonas’s unprotected head. Jonas got his shield up just in time, but the shield was made to reflect energy attacks, not physical ones. The force of the blow crushed through the reflective crystals and shattered the shield around Jonas’s forearm.

Kal seemed to remember something. ‘Scabbs, now!’ he yelled. ‘The device. What are you waiting for?’

Valtin glanced at Scabbs, who had his power cell disruptor in his hand. He pointed it toward the combatants and pushed the button just as Valtin screamed, ‘No!’

Jonas’s rig stopped moving. He had been between Scabbs and Armand, and the disruptor’s field would seek out the closest power source. Armand grabbed Jonas by the arm, just below his now useless sword, and twisted. The armour and the arm inside snapped. He then casually tossed the Spyrer leader to the side and advanced on Scabbs.

‘Quickly,’ said Kal, ‘What’s his weakness?’

‘His armour has a small crack that runs all the way through,’ Valtin said. ‘Middle of the chest, but it’s tiny…’ Kal was already running off and didn’t hear the rest. ‘…only about the size of your thumb.’

Armand reached Scabbs before Kal. He grabbed the scabby little man around the waist and threw him over the edge of platform. ‘Noooo!’ yelled Kal as he charged in.

Hermod Kauderer sat on the edge of Gerontius Helmawr’s desk in the secure room. He could see the appeal that this little slice of rebellion had for Kal Jerico. Sitting on a person’s desk was belittling yet playful. Normally Kauderer disdained playful, but he was in an odd mood. He even allowed a little smile to escape his lips, but just for a moment.

Of course, he would never sit on the Helmawr's desk if he were actually in the room. The ruler of the House was currently napping again. This time in the privacy of his own chambers. The stress of this Armand business had taken a toll on his health these past few days, and he had spent an inordinate amount of time asleep. Kauderer suspected that the palace doctors were keeping him drugged, as high stress tended to exacerbate his memory loss.

Kauderer sat on the desk in the dark room all alone, waiting. Everything was in motion. The message had been sent to Nemo. All of Clein's incoming messages were being monitored and Kauderer had also made sure that the return canister from Nemo had been routed to him first. He now held that canister in his hands and waited.

Finally, he heard voices in the antechamber. Two voices. Captain Katerin and Obidiah Clein. As they walked into the dark room, Kauderer reached out and flipped a switch, turning on the lamps that lined the large desk. Clein stopped for a moment in the shadows, looked back at Katerin, who had shut the door behind them, and then walked forward into the light, a large smile plastered on his face.

'Kauderer,' he said. 'You're already here. Excellent.' Kauderer sat right in front of one of the lamps, which forced Clein to stare into the light if he wanted to look Kauderer in the eye.

'Clein. Captain.' Kauderer nodded to both, keeping his face completely impassive.

'Captain Katerin felt it best we meet here,' continued Clein, squinting as he stared into the light. 'We're all professionals. No sense in this affair going public. A simple resignation will certainly suffice.'

'I couldn't agree more,' said Kauderer. He stood to gain just a little more height advantage over Clein. He stared down his hawkish nose at the political officer. 'Although I do have one or two extra demands.'

Clein chuckled, but Kauderer could tell it was a somewhat nervous laughter. 'You don't understand, my dear Hermod. I don't see how you are in a position to demand anything. Captain Katerin here has you on tape confessing the whole sordid affair. I've heard the evidence myself.'

Kauderer paced around to the other side of the desk and sat in Helmawr's chair. 'No, I'm afraid it is you who doesn't understand,' said Kauderer. 'You will be the one resigning.'

Clein shuffled his feet nervously. Kauderer could tell that this meeting was not going anything at all like Clein had thought it would. 'But the tape…'

'Erased itself as you listened to it,' finished Kauderer. 'Did you honestly think it

would be that easy?'

Clein looked at Katerin, who wasn't sweating at all, for once. The captain shrugged his shoulders and said, 'I told you it would be difficult to tape him.'

'Now you will listen to me, you odious little man,' said Kauderer.

'I will not!' he said and turned on his heels.

As he strode into the darkness, Katerin called after him. 'That door is locked and guarded on the outside by four of my best and most loyal men.'

Kauderer stood behind the desk. 'Nemo can't help you now,' he said. 'You can't even get a message to him from in here.'

Clein stopped walking. A moment later Kauderer could hear his footsteps getting louder. He returned to the light. His shoulders sagged and he stared at the floor. 'Fine,' he said. 'You both got me. Well done. I'll resign and leave quietly. I'm sure neither of you want another scandal on top of the Armand debacle.'

'Oh, you'll do that and much more,' Kauderer stated. 'You see, I believe Nemo has another mole inside the palace. Before you leave, you're going to help us uncover your fellow spy.'

'But Nemo will… he'll kill me!' he stammered. 'I don't even know who the other spy is. This is the first I've even heard of it.'

Katerin clapped the dejected Clein on the back. 'From what I know of Nemo,' he said, 'he'll kill you just for failing.'

'Besides,' added Kauderer. He walked back around the desk and stared down at Clein. 'You have no choice.'

'What do you mean?' Clein asked. He looked up at Kauderer and then over at Katerin. 'What do you mean, I have no choice?'

'I took the liberty of sending Nemo a message earlier today,' said the intrigue master, 'using one of your special canisters.'

'You did what? How? How did you…?'

'Because I am who I am and you are who you are,' replied Kauderer. 'Now be quiet.' He paced in front of the desk as he spoke. 'The message itself was quite simple. All it said was: *Believe I have been compromised. Kauderer closing in. Please advise.*'

'Oh, dear lord,' said Clein.

'Yes, it is quite elegant, isn't it?' said the intelligence officer. 'Nemo, as our dear captain mentioned, doesn't tolerate failure, and obviously can't afford to let you get captured…'

'He is going to kill me.'

Katerin nodded. 'Most likely through the other agent he already has in place.

‘Assuming there is one,’ said Clein.

‘I don’t need to assume any longer,’ said Kauderer. He stopped in front of Clein and tossed him the canister. ‘Here is the reply to your last message. Go ahead and open it. I’ve already read it.’

Clein looked like he was about to ask how, but then decided not to. He tapped the code on the canister and snapped it open. He pulled out the neatly folded note and read it aloud. ‘Stay put. Help is on the way. You will be taken care of.’

‘So,’ said Kauderer, pacing again. ‘As I see it, you can help us locate the other agent before he kills you, or we can let him kill you and find him that way. As I said, you really have no choice.’

‘You can’t protect me.’

‘The good captain and I will do everything in our power to keep you alive, even if we have to send you into hiding afterward.’

Clein looked at the two men, and said, simply, ‘But what if one of you is the other agent?’

A long silence filled the dark room. ‘Then, Mister Clein, you are royally scavved.’

Yolanda was dazed. She’d hit her head on the rail of the platform when that idiot Cyklus’s missile exploded beside her. She was just coming around when she heard Kal scream. She looked up and saw Jerico rushing toward Armand. At the same moment, a blur fell past her. She thought she heard Scabbs’s voice scream, ‘Help!’

Yolanda’s mind snapped to attention. She rolled over and peered over the edge of the lift and saw Scabbs falling down the shaft. Before she could react, his body had fallen out of the meagre light provided by the work lamps. She lunged forward and let her torso drop over the edge as she aimed her web shooters into the darkness. She could still hear him screaming.

She shot two streams of webbing down the shaft. At first, the webs just sprayed into the darkness, not impacting anything. Yolanda weaved her arms around in figure eights as she pressed her thighs and toes into the mesh floor of the lift to keep from slipping. Seconds seemed like minutes, but she kept spraying.

Finally, one of the web streams contacted something. She immediately aimed the second shooter at the same spot. It stuck as well. As the webs hardened, Yolanda continued spraying, but also looped the strands around her wrists. When she stopped, she had two long ropes of steel-strength webbing connected to the ends of her arms by what looked like huge balls of glue where her hands used to

be.

Then the lines went taut, pulling Yolanda's legs over the edge of the lift.

'Scav me!' she cried as her knees slipped past the edge.

Lysanne crept over to where Themis lay motionless on the floor of the lift. She tried not to think about the squishy bits on the wire mesh under her hands and knees. Vicksen was dead. Two of the Spyrers were dead. Now Scabbs had been thrown down the shaft. She sniffled and wiped her eyes and nose with her forearm. She just wanted to crawl away into a dark hole and forget this day had ever happened.

She reached Themis and took a breath before turning her over, afraid of what she might find. At first she was relieved; Themis's eyes were open and her lips were moving, but as she tried to speak, Lysanne knew something was wrong. Her voice was barely more than a whisper. 'I'm here,' Lysanne said. 'What's wrong?' She leaned over and put her ear next to the elder Wildcat's lips.

'Missile… lodged in… ribs,' she wheezed. 'Can't… breathe.'

Lysanne pulled open Themis's long, leather coat and saw the blood. Her vest was coated in red, the leather glistening in the lamplight. The tailfin of one of Cyklus's arm rockets stuck out a few centimetres, just below her left breast. It must have been a dud or the firing mechanism had jammed when it struck her ribs. Either way, it hadn't gone off.

'What should I do?' asked Lysanne. 'I don't know what to do!' She sniffled again. Her hands began to shake from the stress and she couldn't concentrate.

'Pull… yourself… together,' whispered Themis. 'You can… do this.'

'Do what?' Lysanne sniffled.

'Remove the… missile.'

'There's so much blood,' she said. 'What do I do about the blood?'

'One thing… at a… time.' She coughed and blood flowed out of the wound around the tailfin. 'Hurry!'

Lysanne reached out tentatively with both hands and grabbed the missile by two fins. She gave it a little tug. It didn't move. She pulled a little harder. The blood began to flow, but the missile stayed stuck. She looked at Themis for help. The new Wildcat leader had passed out. Blood trickled from her lips down her cheek.

Kal slammed into Armand's stomach, leading with his shoulder, but it barely moved the elder Helmawr an inch. Jerico let his momentum spin him around the side of Armand, just as his brother's armoured fists swung down toward his head. He danced back out of reach and flipped his blond braids out of his eyes.

‘Did that make you feel better?’ asked Armand.

‘A little,’ said Kal. ‘You’re going to pay for Scabbs and everyone else you’ve murdered.’

‘Why do you care about them?’ asked Armand. ‘They’re insects compared to us. You have noble blood running through your veins, yet you choose to cavort with Hive trash.’

He rushed at Kal, swinging his gloved fist at the bounty hunter’s head. Kal ducked under the blow and slashed at Armand with his sabre. It skidded off the armour plates. He dove into a forward roll as Armand’s follow-up punch came down at him. Jerico popped back up to his feet, and the two men began to circle each other.

‘They’re good, hard-working people,’ said Kal. He searched Armand’s Spyrer rig for the hole Valtin had mentioned as they talked.

‘Ha. They’re hardly people at all,’ said Armand. His red eyes flared beneath the dome. ‘You forget. I’ve tasted them. The Hivers are fouled by pollution and waste.’

‘But they are proud of their heritage,’ said Kal. He found the hole. It was right over Armand’s heart. In his vampire rig, Armand was at least a head taller than Kal and it would be a tough shot. Kal would only get one chance. He needed to keep his brother talking while he looked for the right opportunity to strike.

‘They work hard to make the Hive what it is,’ he said. ‘Hivers live and die in the filth, always striving for a better life for themselves and their families. They are the true nobles. They have nobility of heart, and mind, and spirit. Not some worthless birthright and fancy armour.’

‘And there it is,’ said Armand. He chuckled. ‘The birthright. That’s what we’re fighting for, isn’t it?’ Armand stopped circling the lift and leaned back against the rail. ‘Father offered to give you back your birthright if you brought me in.’

Kal could feel the red eyes of the rig staring at him. ‘Hah! I’m right. I knew it,’ shouted Armand. He clapped his hands and then rested them on the rail behind him. ‘All that talk about nobility and purpose? What a load of sump waste. You’re doing this for the money and the power. You’re no better than Father.’ Armand howled with laughter, bending his head back as it escaped his helmet.

Lysanne gritted her teeth as she pressed the tip of the dagger against Themis’s skin. She knew what she had to do, and Themis had little time left. She pushed the dagger into the skin next to the protruding tailfin and cut through to the ribs. Dropping the knife, she pushed her hand through the enlarged hole and felt

around inside the elder Escher's chest cavity for the tip of the missile.

Before starting, she had ripped off the hem of her black robes. She took a piece of the cloth and packed it in around the wound to hold back the bleeding. Her probing fingers found the missile cone, which was lodged between two ribs. She pushed her thumb and forefinger in between the ribs and tried to pry them apart. The missile moved slightly as she applied the pressure, so she grabbed the tailfin with her free hand and pulled.

The missile slipped right out of the wound, which immediately began to fill up with blood again. Lysanne threw the missile over the edge of the lift and turned back to Themis. As she stuffed her ersatz bandages into the wound, an explosion from below rocked the platform.

Yolanda hung upside down beneath the lift, her feet clasped around the bottom rail of the platform. With her hands encased in webbing she could do nothing but hang on at this point. She could feel the web ropes moving, as if someone was climbing up the webbing. After a few minutes, she finally saw Scabbs emerge into the dim light surrounding the lift. He climbed, hand over hand, toward her.

'Good to see you again,' she said.

'Just hanging around… waiting for me… were you?' He asked in between breaths.

'Very funny. Just climb onto the lift and pull me up.'

'At least your pants didn't fall down,' said Scabbs. They both chuckled, remembering the similar predicament Scabbs and Kal found themselves in no more than three days ago. Scabbs grabbed hold of Yolanda's shoulders and began to pull himself up toward the platform.

Before he could reach the bottom rail, an explosion on the far side of the shaft rocked the lift. Yolanda lost her foothold and they both plummeted back into the darkness. Yolanda didn't know if she could activate the web shooters with her hands encased, but it was their only hope.

She clenched her fingers inside the webbing and pointed her hands at the walls rushing by. Nothing happened. She pressed harder and a line of web sprayed out and fastened to the wall. She stuck her other hand into the stream and let it harden around the bulb of webbing already there. The webbing hardened, and Yolanda and Scabbs swung toward the wall of the shaft

They slammed into the wall hard, but the web line held and Scabbs, who had been hugging Yolanda during the fall, held on around her neck. They ended up face to face, Yolanda's amazon body pressing the much smaller Scabbs against

the wall. He smiled.

'If you try to kiss me, I'll let you fall,' she said.

'I'm smiling because we landed next to the ladder,' said Scabbs. 'Roll off of me, and I'll get us out of here.'

Yolanda rocked back and forth until she finally turned them around. Scabbs reached out and grabbed a rung of the ladder and dragged them toward it.

As Armand laughed, Kal rushed. Now was his chance. He leapt through the air, his sabre held high, ready to be driven home through the hole in Armand's armour. Kal swung his arm forward just as the missile exploded beneath the lift. Staggered by the explosion, Armand fell to his knees.

Kal sailed over the domed head of Armand, toward the edge of the lift. He waved his arms wildly, but knew he would never be able to stop before flying head first off the lift and plummeting down the shaft.

At the last moment, Armand's hand whipped out and grabbed Kal by the wrist. Jerico's legs and torso spun around and slammed into the rail. Armand stood and lifted his little brother off the ground by the arm. Kal could swear he saw a smile beneath the mirrored helmet.

Jerico reached for the sabre with his free hand. Armand shook his head. 'No. No. No,' he roared. He squeezed Jerico's wrist hard, forcing the bounty hunter to drop the sword. 'Now what should I do with you?' he asked. 'Should I throw you back down into your beloved Hive or keep you here and make sure your noble blood doesn't go to waste?'

Derindi pulled himself over the edge of the lift and dropped onto the mesh floor, wheezing. His arms and legs ached. His chest felt like someone was standing on it and he could feel his heart pounding all the way up to his ears. 'I made it!' he said. 'I can't believe I made it.'

'Excellent. Tell me what you see.' The voice was in his ear. Nemo had obviously been monitoring his channel the entire time.

Derindi raised his head and looked around. 'Jerico is fighting some black-armoured monster…'

'That would be Armand, the vampire.'

'…It looks like Jerico is losing. The vampire is holding him off the ground by the arm.'

'Excellent. What else? Do you see the item?'

Derindi had no idea what the item looked like or even what it was. He decided to describe everything. 'There's two Escher women. Looks like one is killing the

other. I don't see Scabbs or Yolanda, but I heard a lot of people fall in the darkness as I was climbing. There's two dead Spyrers. No, one of them just moved, but he looks pretty bad. And some guy is sitting in a tunnel next to the lift.'

'Nothing else? What about that tunnel?'

'I can't see into the tunnel from here. There's a lot of junk on the lift. Some of it looks like guts. Wait a minute, I do see a small object near the tunnel.'

'Describe it.'

Derindi crawled closer to the tunnel. He was breathing a little better, but he could barely move his arms or legs. 'It looks like a metal rat, kind of like a toy I used to have.'

'Idiot, tell me what it looks like, not about your childhood toys.'

'It's kind of roundish, maybe ten centimetres long, with a metal tail. You know, like little round segments all linked together so it can wiggle around. Oh, and I can see little metal wires coming off the body, all over, like hair.'

'That's it!' said Nemo. 'It must be. Has anyone seen you?'

Derindi shook his head, and then remembered that Nemo couldn't see him. 'No,' he said.

'Get it and go before anyone else does. Bring it to me right away!'

Derindi grabbed the Chamberlain's brain, stashed it in his pouch, and crawled back to the steps. He sighed. 'Going down should be easier, right?' he said to himself.

This time there was no answer in his ear.

'You know,' said Armand, 'All of this exercise has left me feeling a little drained.' He lifted Jerico's arm higher into the air, bringing them face to face. The strain on Kal's shoulder was almost unbearable. It felt like his arm would rip out of its socket at any moment and spikes of pain shot through his arm, chest, and back.

'Aren't you afraid I've been tainted by the Underhive atmosphere?' he asked 'I'm sure I'm carrying any number of diseases. I touched Scabbs's face the other day.'

Armand brought his other arm up toward Kal's neck. Long needles extended from the tips of his first two fingers. The ends glistened as beads of clear liquid grew on the needles. 'These inject an anti-coagulating agent and a sedative into your blood stream before drawing out your blood.'

'So, you're more of a mosquito than a vampire,' said Kal. 'Father must be so

proud.' Jerico tried to pull away from the needles, but he couldn't get free from Armand's grasp, and he was now too far away to even kick him effectively.

As he squirmed, Kal got a good look at the hole in Armand's armour. He could almost reach it with his free hand. He needed a weapon, but his sabre was on the floor, and lasguns were useless against Armand. The energy would get sucked into his mirrored helmet.

'Proud enough to make me heir apparent,' said Armand. The needles moved back and forth in the air as Kal squirmed. 'What did he ever give you?'

The spear. How could he have forgotten about the spear? It had been on his back so long now that he'd finally gotten used to the constant scraping and banging every time he moved. 'As a matter of fact, Dad gave me a birthday present not too long ago,' he said. 'Want to see it?'

Kal reached over his head, grabbed the spear and pulled it out. Armand reached for the weapon. Jerico whipped the spear down toward Armand's chest. Armand's arm stopped and his body went rigid. The spear slammed into the armour. It was a perfect shot, sliding through the hole in the armour. Gems scraped off of the shaft as Kal drove the spear deep into his brother's chest, impaling his heart and lungs.

'How do you think it's going up there?' asked Bobo. They stood at the door to the shaft, peering into the darkness. Wotan had wandered off a while earlier and hadn't yet come back. Bobo was a little worried that the steam had fried the robot dog's brain, but then again, Kal Jerico would never know how it happened.

Dutt hadn't answered yet, so Bobo glanced at his companion. The tilt of Dutt's head told him that the other spy was getting instructions or new information via his inner ear receiver. While that was obviously a very useful piece of equipment, Bobo preferred the old-fashioned, non-body-intrusive methods of communicating.

'I understand,' said Dutt. 'I'll be ready.'

So, it was instructions. 'Care to share?' asked Bobo. 'Don't forget you owe me.'

Dutt considered. He pulled the tooth out of his mouth and looked for a spot to hide it.

'Here, I'll hold it,' said Bobo, extending his hand. 'It hasn't picked up my voice from inside your mouth, so it should be safe in my hand.'

Dutt dropped the tooth in Bobo's hand. 'Well, it turns out your last bit of gossip was dead on accurate, so sure. It won't matter soon anyway.'

‘Go on,’ said Bobo. ‘I’m dying to find out what happened up there.’

‘Well, things did not go well for Kal Jerico and crew,’ he gloated, a huge smile plastered on his face. ‘It looks like Armand killed most of them, and Jerico’s next. And would you believe it, that little snitch actually found the item and lifted it from underneath their noses in the middle of the battle. He’s on his way down right now. In fact, you might want to leave. Nemo’s muscle will be here soon to help me escort the weasel back to Nemo.

‘I can take care of myself,’ said Bobo. ‘Besides, I’m still holding out hope that Jerico will come through and save the day, like he always does.’

‘I’m serious,’ said Dutt. ‘These guys are a couple of wild thugs, from what I hear.’

‘You don’t even know them?’ asked Bobo. ‘How do you know they’re so bad?’

‘I know them by reputation,’ said Dutt. ‘They’re a pair of twins named Seek and Destroy. Plus Nemo’s sending some hired help from out of town. If these guys see you, they’ll kill you.’

‘Not if they think I’m you,’ said Bobo. The dagger flashed across Dutt’s throat in an instant, severing his vocal cords and slicing open his jugular. Dutt’s eyes went wide in pain and surprise as a torrent of blood poured down his neck and onto his shirt. A moment later he slumped to the ground. Bobo gave the body a little shove with the heel of his soft leather boot, pushing Dutt over the lip of the shaft.

He looked down at the tooth and thought about dropping it down the shaft as well, but decided to keep it and stuffed it into a deep pocket in his trousers. ‘You never know when that might be useful,’ he said.

The only thing left to do was wait. His next move would depend on who arrived first, the twins or Derindi.

10: END GAME

‘A little help here!’ Kal called out. Armand was dead, but the Spyrer rig had powered down just as he delivered the death blow, and now Kal was stuck. The joints of Armand’s power armour seemed to have locked into place, leaving him suspended off the floor of the lift, and he couldn’t get his arm free of the dead man’s grip.

‘Help me!’ cried Lysanne. ‘She’s dying. I can’t stop the blood. Someone help me.’

Kal tried to turn around to see who was alive and who was dead. He heard two pairs of feet run across the mesh flooring. ‘I’ve got Kal,’ said Yolanda from behind him. ‘Get the Spyrer medi-pack and help the girl.’

‘I hope you’re not talking to me,’ said Kal.

‘No,’ said Yolanda. She was right behind him. ‘Scabbs, hurry!’

‘Good,’ replied Kal. ‘Because I’m just going to hang around here for now, if that’s okay with you.’

‘Shut up and let me get you down.’

Then it dawned on him, what she had just said. ‘Scabbs? Scabbs is alive?’

‘Of course he is,’ she said. She climbed onto the railing beside Armand. ‘Who do you think powered this guy down?’

Kal regained his composure. ‘Well if he was alive all this time…’ he twisted around to find the scabby little sidekick. ‘…then what took him so long? I was fighting a vampire for you while you were, what, having a smoke?’

‘We were a little busy,’ said Yolanda. She grabbed Armand’s fingers with one hand and his thumb with the other. As she pulled, Kal could see the pistons in her rig pumping.

‘Wait!’ he said, just as Armand’s hand opened up and he fell to the floor of the lift in a heap.

‘Kal!’ called a weak voice from behind him.

‘What now?’ asked Kal. He stood up and looked across the lift. Valtin was leaning against the side of the service tunnel. He took a step forward and fell to his knees.

‘Kal,’ he called. ‘He took the brain. You have to hurry. He took the brain.’

‘What in the Hive?’ said Kal as he rushed to his nephew’s side. Scabbs kneeled next to the young Wildcat, using the medi-pack on Themis. Kal smiled at his friend and gave him a thumbs-up as he ran past.

He slid to his knees as he reached Valtin and grabbed the young Helmawr around the shoulders. Valtin kept saying, ‘He took the brain. Hurry. He took the brain… ’

Valtin’s face was as white as the sheets in the comfy bed Kal had shared with Candi, Sandi and Brandi not so many hours ago. He laid his nephew back down on the floor of the lift. ‘Hold on, Valtin, we’ll take care of you.’ He glanced back at Scabbs. ‘When you’re done there, Scabbs, Valtin needs help.’

‘It can’t wait,’ said Valtin. ‘The item we were sent to find. It was the brain of the Royal Chamberlain. We have to get it back. He took it.’

‘Who?’ asked Kal. ‘Who took it?’

‘A weaselly-looking man with a bandage over one ear took it while you were fighting Armand. I tried to stop him. I’m just so weak. We can’t let it fall into… the information inside is too–’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Kal, ‘I won’t let anyone hurt the family. Not anymore. Not even Father.’ He laid Valtin’s head down on the mesh floor and stood.

‘Kal! Somebody! Help!’

‘What now?’ asked Kal. He looked around. Jonas was lying on the floor. His rig had lost power as well and he couldn’t move. ‘Scabbs, Yolanda. Help Jonas with his rig. I’ve got to go see a man about a thing.’

‘Sure thing, boss,’ she said with only the slightest hint of sarcasm. ‘Here, you might want these.’ She tossed his sabre and the spear toward him. He caught them both and slipped them into their respective sheaths with a little flourish and then ran toward the ladder.

Bobo heard someone climbing down the ladder. He slipped back down the tunnel and watched to make sure it was Derindi. When the snitch emerged from the shaft, Bobo trotted down the corridor toward him.

The little weasel turned at the sound and started backing away. ‘What?’ he asked. ‘What do you want? Who are you?’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Bobo. ‘Nemo sent me. My name is Dutt. I’m supposed to

take you back to the… master.' He almost choked on the last word, but Derindi didn't seem to notice.

'Nemo didn't say anything about an escort,' whined Derindi. He continued backing away down the tunnel.

'It's okay,' said Bobo. He moved forward slowly. He didn't want to spook the snitch. Running wasn't Bobo's forte. 'Nemo had me watching your back all day. I saw you on the roof outside the Fresh Air. I ruptured the steam pipe to get Jerico's dog off your rump, for Helmawr's sake.'

'That was you?'

'Yeah, now come on. There's not much time.' Bobo was telling the truth about that. Nemo's real men could show up at any moment, and he was a little worried that Armand might fly down the shaft once he was finished with Jerico's crew. He led Derindi down the tunnel away from Hive City.

'Where are we going?' asked Derindi. 'I came from that direction.' He pointed back past the shaft entrance.

'Yeah, this is a shortcut,' said Bobo. 'Follow me. It's not far.' If he could just get Derindi out of sight of the shaft entrance to make sure they couldn't be seen and weren't being followed, Bobo would gut the little snitch and take the item. Then it would be off to Noritake's to send a secure message to Kauderer and spend a little quality time with Jenn.

But nothing about this mission could ever be easy. He heard a low growl ahead of him that sounded frighteningly like the buzzing of a chainsword. Up ahead, sitting in one of the pools of light, was Wotan. He growled again as he got off his haunches and stalked his way down the tunnel toward them.

'Maybe we should turn around and go the long way,' said Derindi, backing away from the metallic hound.

'That wouldn't be my first choice,' said Bobo. He backed away as well, though. It really was the only choice. He just hoped they could get out of the tunnels before the twins showed up.

'Then what?'

Bobo turned and dashed off. 'Run!' he yelled. Wotan barked, and Bobo could hear the dog's steel paws scraping the concrete floor behind him. Bobo pumped his legs as fast as he could, but the spy was quite a bit shy of two metres tall, and Derindi, as short as he was, soon passed him.

Bobo kept running. The barks and scrapes got closer and closer. They had almost made it back to the shaft. They could possibly climb down and look for another access point, but Bobo knew he would never make it there in time, and

he couldn't afford to let Derindi get away. Time to let the dog do his work for him.

Bobo dove to the ground as Wotan nipped at his heels. He curled his shoulder under him as he fell, and rolled to the side underneath the banks of pipes lining the tunnel. He kept rolling until he hit the wall before looking back. Wotan sniffed at the pipes and then turned and ran after Derindi.

Bobo crawled beneath the pipes down the tunnel as fast as he could, which was nearly as fast as he could run. Being short had some advantages, especially for a spy. Any second, he expected to hear Wotan tear into Derindi. He had to find some way to lure the dog away or get the item from the snitch before the metallic hound destroyed everything.

But instead of snarls and screams, he heard laser blasts and cheers from down the tunnel. Wotan ran off back down the tunnel again as blasts hit the floor and pipes around him.

'Yes! I hit him!' yelled one voice.

'No, you did not. I hit him!' yelled a second voice.

'Why you!'

'I'll kill you!'

Then there was the sound of fighting. Bobo had no idea what in the Hive was going on, so he crawled out to the edge of the pipes and looked. Two Orlock gangers wearing leather vests over coloured shirts, one red and the other blue, rolled around on the concrete floor, clawing and hitting at each other. Three other people stood back and watched. The shortest of those three, a stocky man with huge arms, a plump, red face, and combat boots, held Derindi by the collar.

Bobo recognised the short one. It was Hern, the bounty hunter, which meant the other two were Lebow and Gorgh. The three bounty hunters from Dead End Pass always worked together. Lebow wore a shiny, black, collared shirt open down to his chest. He had a large cigar tucked into the corner of his mouth. Gorgh wore what looked like a thick, red sweater. The material looked odd until Bobo realized the sweater was woven from thin leather strips. He'd just taken the stopper off a flask and was watching the fight with a smile on his face.

Bobo realised that the two matched gangers fighting on the ground like only brothers can, had to be the twins, Seek and Destroy. He was too late. Nemo's men had gotten to Derindi. But Bobo wasn't ready to give up just yet. He pulled himself out from under the pipes, brushed off his pants, and walked up to the group. Lebow and Gorgh both whipped pistols out of their holsters as he approached. Hern carried no visible weapons, but smiled in a way that said,

‘Move another inch and you die!’

Bobo put his hands in the air and smiled. ‘Relax, men. Name’s Dutt. K W Dutt. I work for Nemo. Hold onto that one, Hern. He’s worth more than what Nemo’s paying all three of you for this job.’ The mercenaries didn’t waver at all. Bobo looked at the twins. The red one had the blue one in a chokehold, while his brother tried to claw his eyes out. ‘Seek! Destroy! Stop that nonsense.’ Bobo had brothers as well, and that’s how his mother always spoke to them when they got like this. ‘We have a mission here.’

The twins paused and looked up at Dutt. ‘Who are you?’ they asked at the same time. Lebow and Gorgh clicked the safeties off their weapons and took a step forward.

Great, thought Bobo. I’m going to die because these two idiots were too busy killing each other to listen to me. ‘Whoa, whoa!’ he said. ‘I’m Dutt. Nemo’s agent. Didn’t he tell you I would be here to help you escort Derindi?’

‘Dutt?’ asked one.

‘Oh yeah,’ said the other. ‘The spy.’ The boys got up and straightened their shirts and vests. The one who’d been in the chokehold poked his brother in the ribs with an elbow as he dusted off. The one in red slapped his brother in the head, knocking off his blue bandana as he resettled his dark glasses over his eyes.

‘Right,’ said Bobo. ‘The spy. And you’re Seek and Destroy. The twins.’

‘I’m Seek,’ said the one in blue. ‘He’s Destroy.’

‘And don’t call us “the twins” – ever!’ said Destroy.

‘Fine,’ said Bobo. What did it matter? They were identical, right down to the colour-coded clothes and the bandana-covered, bald heads. If they wanted to be treated as individuals, they should at least dress differently, aside from the colour.

Bobo turned to Derindi. He’d gained everyone’s trust for the moment. It was time to make his move, before everything fell apart again. ‘Let’s get going,’ he said, ‘but maybe you’d better give the item to me, Derindi. After that dog attack, I’m worried about its safety.’

Derindi had cocked his head to the side, as if listening to something that nobody else could hear. ‘Dutt,’ he said. ‘Short, kind of wiry. A little squirrely looking, to tell you the truth.’

‘What in the Hive is he babbling about?’ asked Seek.

Bobo took a step back, knowing all too well what was coming next. Damn Nemo and his implants.

‘That’s not Dutt,’ said Derindi.

Lebow and Gorgh whipped their weapons up again.

‘Then who in the Hive are you?’ asked Seek.

‘That’s what I’d like to know,’ said a voice from behind them.

Bobo turned to see Kal Jerico standing by the entrance to the shaft. ‘Who in the Hive are you people, and what are you doing with my snitch?’

Scabbs carried the medi-pack over to Valtin and set it down. ‘How are you doing?’ he asked.

‘I’ve had better days,’ said Valtin. A weak smile flitted across his pale face. He could barely keep his eyes open.

‘I need to get your coat off,’ said Scabbs.

Valtin tried to rise, but couldn’t. Scabbs reached down and pulled Valtin’s leather coat off one arm. The skin was clammy and cold. He attached the leads from the medi-pack near his patient’s shoulder. After flipping a few switches to account for the different mass and sex of his new patient, Scabbs sat back and scratched at some dry skin on his neck while the medi-pack analysed Valtin’s condition.

He looked around while he waited. Lysanne sat with Themis over to the side. He’d been able to stabilise the elder Wildcat, but she’d still need a real medicae to repair that nasty wound once they got out of this scav-forsaken shaft. Lysanne had hugged him again when he’d told her Themis would live.

As he looked at Lysanne, who sat holding Themis’s head in her lap, Scabbs wondered if they could ever… Nah, he thought. They lived in different worlds. More likely she’d go rogue one day and they’d have to hunt her down for the bounty.

Near the Wildcats, Yolanda worked on getting Jonas out of his dead rig. She was having some trouble with his mangled monomolecular sword, from the looks of it. Jonas sat and glared at her, waiting to get free.

Leoni’s remains lay opposite the Wildcats. Scabbs tried to avoid looking at it or at Armand’s body. He was always a little squeamish around corpses. Perhaps because he’d seen too many of them rising back up. He glanced back at Valtin. ‘What should we do with Armand and Leoni?’ he asked.

‘Jonas and I will take them back to the Spire for a royal cremation.’

‘Huh,’ said Scabbs. ‘Down here we normally just chuck bodies into a waste pool. Usually does a pretty good job of cremating the remains.’

He peered into the nearby tunnel. The work lights on the lift illuminated some

of it. He could see racks of tools and spools of copper wire hanging on the walls. ‘What is that; some sort of maintenance tunnel?’

Valtin turned his head to look. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘But Armand spent a lot of time in there. You should take a look to see if there are any more bodies back there.’

‘Yeah,’ said Scabbs as he picked at an old sore on his arm. ‘I’ll get right on that.’ He stared at the copper and tools. ‘Still, that stuff sure would bring a lot of credits.’

‘I’m sure those items are for official use only.’

‘Right, well I’ll only sell them to official people, then.’ Scabbs was about to get up and go take a look when the medi-pack beeped. He read the display. ‘Anaemic,’ he said. ‘Well, I could have told you that.’ There were other instructions on the screen. He pulled out a syringe with a tube that extended from the side of the pack and jabbed it into Valtin’s arm. A clear solution snaked its way through the tube.

‘Looks like that’s going to take a while,’ he said, and then stood to go into the tunnel. A hand on his shoulder made Scabbs jump. He swivelled, half-expecting to see the vampire, risen from grave. But it was just Jonas, free from his rig at last.

‘How’s my cousin doing?’ asked Jonas. He draped his good arm around Scabbs’s shoulder as if they were old friends. It was just a little creepy.

Scabbs looked at Jonas and then down at Valtin. ‘It’s too early to tell, but this medi-pack of yours is pretty good, so I think he’ll be fine.’

Jonas just nodded. He tightened his grip, giving Scabbs a slight twinge in his shoulder, and then pulled Scabbs hard against him. ‘So, Scabbs,’ he said. ‘Can I call you Scabbs?’

Scabbs nodded. He was starting to get worried now.

‘What was that device you used to ruin my rig?’

‘I, uh, I mean I was aiming for Armand. I’m sorr–’

‘It was a power cell disruptor,’ said Valtin. His voice was sounding stronger already. ‘Father gave it to me. He thought it might come in handy against Armand.’

Jonas smiled and eased his grip on Scabbs’s shoulder a little. ‘Pretty nifty device,’ he said. I’ve never heard of anything like that.’

‘It’s actually a prototype,’ said Valtin. ‘Father “acquired” it from a Van Saar tech with dubious morals.’

‘Interesting. Can I see it?’

‘Well I don’t… ’

Scabbs pulled the device out of his pocket, desperate to do anything to get out of Jonas’s grasp. ‘Here it is,’ he said.

Jonas released his hold on Scabbs and plucked the device from his hand. ‘Thank you very much,’ he said. ‘Honestly, I don’t know how Jerico stays alive with you by his side.’ He punched Scabbs in the nose, knocking him to the floor with the blow. He then pointed the device at Yolanda and pushed the button.

‘Now to complete my orders,’ said the Spyrer leader. He dropped the device and pulled out his plasma pistol, aiming it at Scabbs first. ‘Rule one: leave no witnesses.’

Scabbs closed his eyes. He heard the plasma pistol fire, and then heard something hit the floor. What happened? Did he kill Valtin first? He snuck one eye open and screamed. Jonas’s body lay on the floor, blood and guts oozing out of a hole in his chest and running through the metal mesh.

Scabbs sat up and looked around. Lysanne smiled at him as she slipped her own plasma pistol back into the folds of her black robe. ‘I never liked him,’ she said.

Scabbs smiled back at her. Maybe they weren’t that different after all, he thought.

‘These are Nemo’s men, Jerico,’ said Derindi, ‘and they’re on my side. You can’t intimidate me this time. I’m more than just a snitch.’ He quivered as he spoke, and Kal couldn’t help but notice that he was being held by a bounty hunter already.

Kal rested his hands on his holsters. ‘Yeah, you’re a thief, now,’ he said. ‘And I want my property back.’

‘You’re playing some mighty long odds, Jerico,’ said Derindi. ‘Those two are called Seek and Destroy. They’re Nemo’s personal guards.’

‘And we got our own bounty hunters,’ said Seek. ‘The best Nemo’s money could buy.’

‘Hey, Hern,’ said Jerico. ‘How’s it going? Gorgh, Lebow?’

‘Hey,’ said Hern.

‘Good.’

‘Fine.’

‘That’s my property you got there, Hern,’ said Kal. ‘Not the snitch, just an item he’s carrying. Call it a family heirloom.’

Gorgh and Lebow lowered their weapons. ‘Wait a scavving minute,’ said Destroy. ‘You work for us. Kill him and let’s go.’

‘Sorry kid,’ said Lebow. ‘A bounty is one thing, but property is property. We can’t take what belongs to another bounty hunter.’

‘It’s not right,’ said Hern. He released Derindi and stepped back.

‘Against the code,’ said Gorgh, holstering his weapon. ‘You’re on your own.’

The three bounty hunters melted into the darkness down the tunnel.

‘Come back here!’ yelled Seek at the retreating mercenaries. ‘You three are dead, do you hear me? Dead!’

He turned to face Kal, who now had his weapons drawn.

‘Now give me back my snitch,’ he said, pointing one lasgun at Seek and the other at Destroy. ‘And you two boys won’t get hurt.’

‘Wrong word,’ said Bobo, who was standing beside Kal.

‘We’re not boys!’ roared Seek. He threw open his leather vest, pulled out twin blue-plated autopistols from his shoulder holsters, and began firing as he ran toward Derindi. Bullets ricocheted off the pipes and floor.

Destroy lifted a flamer hanging at his side and pulled the trigger, sending a sheet of fire toward Kal and Bobo. Kal fired his lasguns as he leapt to the ground and rolled out from under the line of fire. When he came back up, he couldn’t see Bobo any longer, or much of anything except the gout of flame coming from Destroy’s weapon, which he sprayed back and forth across the tunnel.

As the flame came at him again, Kal retreated down the tunnel toward the shaft. He thought, briefly, about taking his chances on the ladder, but didn’t relish the thought of fighting while suspended above a three-kilometre drop. Several more bullets zipped over his head and Kal fired several laser blasts back.

Where had Bobo gone? He could use some help about now. He fired a few more shots, trying to blast the flamer, but hitting nothing as far as he could tell. Then, from behind him, Kal heard a sharp, metallic bark. His prayers had been answered, assuming he had been praying to a robotic canine god. Kal looked over his shoulder as he continued to shoot and back away from the flame. He finally saw Wotan bounding toward him.

The dog looked ready to leap on his master again, which would have been deadly considering the current circumstances, so Kal called out to his metallic friend. ‘Wotan,’ he yelled. ‘Fetch the gun!’

Wotan ran past Kal, right into the gout of flame. Kal hoped his dog was fireproof. He delayed his shot, waiting to see if Wotan would come through for him. He heard a growl and a bark, and then more growling. Then he heard Destroy. ‘Let go, you rusty mutt!’ he yelled.

The flames died away as Wotan wrenched the flamer from the ganger’s hands.

The dog shook his head back and forth as if he were trying to rip meat from a carcass, and then let go of the flamer. It flew straight through the doorway and down the shaft.

'My flamer!' called Destroy. 'I'll kill that dog.' He lunged for Wotan and grabbed the metallic hound around the collar, trying to wrestle him to the ground. Kal couldn't believe his eyes. He looked up at Seek, who was also staring in disbelief at his brother. Seek looked up and he and Kal locked eyes.

They both raised their weapons at the same time, but Kal was just a bit faster and a much better shot than Seek had proven to be. He fired a lasblast from each of his weapons, hitting Seek in both hands simultaneously. The Orlock ganger dropped his pistols and stuck his laser-burned fingers in his mouth.

Kal kept his weapons trained on Seek, but glanced back at Destroy. He had somehow managed to get himself underneath Wotan. The dog was just standing there, seemingly paying no attention to the enraged ganger, even as Destroy pulled on his neck and kicked at his back legs. 'Wotan,' said Kal. 'Sit!' The dog sat down on top of Destroy, pinning him to the floor and winning the wrestling match in a single move.

'I've got him, Kal,' said Bobo. He walked back down the tunnel, dragging Derindi behind him by his one good ear. Bobo held up the snitch's satchel. 'And I've got what you came for right in here.'

'I'll take that, if you don't mind.' The voice had come from behind Kal.

Kal knew that voice. Kal hated that voice. Every time he heard it, bad things happened to him. Bad things that usually included getting hit. A lot. Or getting shot at. A lot. 'Hello, Nemo,' he said, without turning around.

'If you would be so kind as to drop your weapons, Jerico,' said Nemo. Kal felt the barrel of a large calibre gun press into his back. 'Then I won't be forced to shoot you.'

Kal dropped his lasguns at his feet.

'Now kick them into the shaft.'

'But…' The barrel pushed a little harder into his back. He kicked both guns over the edge, and winced as he heard them bang their way down the shaft.

'Now, Mr Bobo, I believe it is?'

'Yeah?' Bobo still held Derindi by the ear in one hand and the satchel in the other.

'Whatever did you do with my spy?'

'Kal's guns should be hitting him in the head any minute now,' said Bobo.

'Pity,' said Nemo. 'Ah well, I knew this operation would be expensive. If you

would be so kind as to give that satchel to Mr Derindi, then we'll leave you to your fun.'

'What about us, boss?' asked Seek. His voice was somewhat muffled from the fingers stuck in his mouth.

There was a pause. 'You get the most important job, boys – covering my escape.'

'Thanks boss. You can count on us.'

'I'm sure I can,' said Nemo. 'Now, Mr Bobo!'

Bobo pulled Derindi to his feet by the ear and hit him in the chest with the satchel. He stepped aside to let Derindi pass, and then looked right at Kal and winked. Jerico didn't know what Bobo had planned, but was ready for anything. Plan W always worked, right?

As Derindi walked past Bobo, he dropped to the ground and spun around, sweeping Derindi's legs out from under him with a swift kick to the shins. Kal stomped on Nemo's foot and slammed his elbow into the master spy's midsection. Derindi pitched forward and lost his grasp on the satchel, which went flying into the air toward Kal and Nemo.

Kal only had a second, not nearly enough time to catch the satchel and escape from Nemo's blast, so he grabbed the spear off his back, chucked it at the incoming satchel, and dived to the ground. The spear ripped through the satchel and hit something metallic inside. The force of the gem-encrusted missile drove the satchel off course. It and the spear sailed through the opening and down the shaft.

Kal rolled forward and came up running, zigzagging down the tunnel. An explosive slug from Nemo's bolt pistol whizzed past his ear. He kicked Destroy in the head as he went by and called Wotan. 'Bobo, come on!' he yelled as he and the dog ran past the spy.

Bobo pulled something out of his pocket, leaned down, and jammed it into Derindi's ear. The next moment, Kal heard Nemo and Derindi screaming in pain. The bolts from Nemo's gun stopped flying and the three of them ran off into the darkness.

'What in the Hive did you do?' asked Kal as they ran.

'Feedback loop,' said Bobo. 'I jammed one of Nemo's transmitters into Derindi's ear, up against his receiver implant. The sound cycles through the system over and over until it creates an awful screeching noise.'

'I'm glad you're on my side.'

Bobo smiled.

Several hours later, Kal and Valtin sat on the couch in Madam Noritake's sitting room. Kal had a cigar in one hand and a bottle of Squatz's House Special he'd liberated from the Fresh Air in the other. Valtin looked much better, but had opted to pass on the libations due to his recent blood loss.

Scabbs and Lysanne sat in a loveseat across the room. Kal avoided looking at them and hoped they were simply swapping war stories, for the thought of anyone swapping anything else with Scabbs just turned his stomach. Bobo sat in a comfy chair next to a fake fireplace, with the pretty young girl Kal had met earlier sitting on his lap.

Yolanda had taken Themis to the medicae and hadn't come back yet. Kal wasn't worried. Yolanda was a big girl, in every sense of the word.

'I want to give you something, nephew,' Kal said in between puffs.

'You gave me my life,' said Valtin. 'That's more than enough.'

'Call it an early birthday present, then' said Kal. He handed Valtin a data cartridge. 'Or an insurance policy.'

'For who, you or me?'

'Both of us, really,' said Kal. 'Something to make sure that keeping you alive doesn't become a full time job.'

Valtin turned the cartridge over and over, but Kal knew there were no markings. 'What's on it?'

Kal took a long puff from his cigar, held the smoke inside for a moment, and then blew a large smoke ring that floated off toward Scabbs and Lysanne. 'I'm not sure. Scabbs found it in that maintenance tunnel next to the lift. Said it came out of a terminal that had a web-like network of wire leads plugged into it. I think Armand had been duplicating the contents of the Chamberlain's brain. If so, whatever he found is probably stored on that cartridge.'

Valtin stared at the cartridge in silence and then handed it back to Kal. 'I can't take this,' he said. 'You take it. Give it to Grandfather, so you can get paid.'

'I don't want the money,' Kal replied before whispering, 'I can't believe I just said that,' under his breath. He pushed Valtin's hand away. 'And I don't want my father or anyone else to have that cartridge either. It's too dangerous. You have to take it.'

Valtin sighed and nodded his head. He tucked the cartridge away inside his coat. 'Why me?' he asked.

'It's family business,' said Kal. 'It should stay in the family, and you're the only family member I trust – besides myself.' He smiled and took another puff from his cigar.

‘But what about the money?’ asked Valtin. ‘I can probably get Grandfather to at least give you some of it.’

Kal exhaled, blowing an arrow of smoke through the expanding ring. ‘Nah,’ said Kal. ‘I’d just blow it on women and booze, and I’ve got more than enough credits for that already. You could get me another spear, though. I lost the last one.’

EPILOGUE:

BUSINESS AS USUAL

Valtin sat at the desk in his new office. He wore a neatly-pressed white suit with a royal blue silk tie. The torn leather jacket he'd worn on his recent adventure hung on a brass coat rack by the door. Sunlight streamed in from a bank of windows behind his chair, shining right in the face of his visitor, Hermod Kauderer. Kauderer had to squint to keep the sun out of his eyes. Valtin knew of the man's preference for standing at meetings, and had chosen the time carefully to make sure the sun was at the right height for maximum discomfort.

'It's been quite an eventful week,' said Valtin. 'Stiv's death, Armand's rampage through the Underhive, rogue Spyrers unit destroying several sections of Hive City, and you, Hermod, uncovering not one but two spies within the palace.'

'Just doing my duty to our Lord Helmawr,' said Kauderer. He tried to look down his hawkish nose at Valtin, but, with his eyes nearly shut, he looked more like a mole than a bird of prey.

'And yet I can't help but think that had you done your job a little more efficiently, we wouldn't have had spies in the palace in the first place,' said Valtin. 'Senior advisors at that. Right under your nose, as it were.'

'Excuse me?' asked Kauderer.

'And a bad job, letting Colouri and Clein kill each other like that,' he added. 'Bit of a bungled operation there, wouldn't you say?'

‘I don’t know that I would go that far…’

Valtin opened a folder on his desk and spread out several sheets of paper that were all densely covered with notes. ‘And now I have quite a lot of political fallout to deal with on account of the horrible way you handled this entire mess.’

‘Now see here,’ said Kauderer. ‘You may be the new senior political officer… ’

‘*And* Lord Chamberlain,’ added Valtin.

‘… but you simply cannot talk to me in this manner.’

‘Oh, but I can,’ said Valtin. He stood and stared the master of intrigue in the eye. ‘I know who it was that sent that Spyrer team down into the Hive. I also know they had special orders to be completed once their primary mission had been achieved.’

Kauderer was getting flustered. He sat in the chair and looked up at Valtin. ‘How could you know…?’

Valtin smiled. ‘I have friends in low places.’

‘That means nothing,’ said Kauderer. ‘You may be Helmawr’s grandson, but you’re not the heir apparent. As advisors, we are still equals.’

‘You never seem to tire of being wrong, do you, Hermod?’ Valtin’s smile grew as he looked down at Kauderer. ‘Lord Helmawr and I had a long talk after I got back. I am the heir apparent, and I will be taking an active role in the running of this family from now on. So, your future within House Helmawr depends completely on keeping me happy.’

‘How? What do you have on the old man?’

Valtin sat down and pressed his fingertips together in a steeple. ‘Let’s jut say I have access to the information needed for the job,’ he said. ‘And don’t get any funny ideas. I keep my data stored in a much safer location than poor Stiv ever did, and if anything should ever happen to me, that information will find its way into the hands of one of my relatives, an uncle with whom I recently spent some “quality” time.’

Kal sat at his usual table in the Sump Hole, with his big boots propped up on the table, a busty, if not terribly clean, barmaid on his lap, a bottle of Wildsnake in his hand and his two partners arguing across the table. After one of the craziest weeks since the last time he’d been hauled up into the Spire, it felt good to be home.

A dull roar permeated the bar, making every conversation at every table as private as if the people were talking in their own homes. More private, probably, since a bug planted in the Sump Hole wouldn’t get much more than snippets of

conversation.

'I say we should have kept it,' said Scabbs.

'They needed it more than we did,' replied Yolanda.

'But I could have worn it,' said Scabbs. 'You know, for protection and power.'

'Aw, you never would have figured it out,' said Yolanda. She grabbed her bottle of Wildsnake and downed it in one go. She bit the snake in two and spat half of it at Scabbs. It wasn't Yolanda's normal method of dealing with the 'Snake, but spitting seemed suddenly more appealing with Scabbs involved. 'It's a complex machine, and you're, well, you.'

Scabbs wiped the snake off his forehead, causing a cascade of dead skin to fall on his shoulders.

'What in the Hive are you two arguing about?' asked Kal.

'Yolanda gave the last working Spyrer rig to those two Wildcats!' whined Scabbs. 'I wanted to keep it.'

'They needed it,' Yolanda said to Kal. 'The vampire and that unit wiped out all but the two of them. The creds they can get from breaking that thing down and selling it for tech will more than rebuild the gang.'

'Okay,' said Scabbs. 'I guess it's the least we can do for Lysanne, after she saved our lives. At least we've got that cartridge. It's got to be worth something.'

'I gave it to Valtin.'

'You what?' asked Yolanda and Scabbs at the same time.

'He needed it more,' said Kal. He stroked the barmaid's arm aimlessly as he spoke. 'Besides, if we had kept it, Nemo would still be after us.'

Scabbs scratched his chin. Amazingly, nothing fell off his face afterward. 'Well, that's true,' he said. 'At least we got the bounty on the vampire.'

'I had to spend most of that on new lasguns,' said Kal. Yolanda stared at him. 'They're scavving sweet guns,' he added. 'Pearl-handled, wood grip, laser sights. Just gorgeous.'

'You mean we're broke?'

'Not quite, but we're going to need work soon enough,' said Kal. He took a drink of his Wildsnake and shifted a little in his seat to make himself and the barmaid a little more comfortable. 'Maybe you should go check the Wanted posters, Scabbs.'

'I sure wish you hadn't thrown away that spear,' said Scabbs. 'That thing must have been worth a fortune.'

Kal remembered something. 'Say, some of the gems on that spear scraped off when I killed Arma… the vampire. Did either of you pick those up?

Scabbs's face sported its normal blank stare, but Yolanda looked sheepish. 'Yolanda?'

She reached into her special hiding place and pulled out a few small gems, and reluctantly scooted them across the table. Suddenly she looked a lot less cold.

'I could have sworn more fell on the floor than that,' said Kal.

Yolanda brushed her blonde spikes out of her eyes. 'I might have given a few to the Wildcats, you know, to help them rebuild.'

The table fell silent. Kal stared at his drink, stewing about the lost gems.

'Do you regret losing out on all that Spire money?' asked Yolanda, finally.

'What?' said Kal. He put his arms around the barmaid. 'And give up all of this?'

Just then, a huge Van Saar ganger pushed his way through the crowd up to their table. 'What are you doing with my sister?' he bellowed. He broke a bottle of Wildsnake over Kal's head.

Kal jumped up, dumping the barmaid on the floor in the process. 'Your sister?' he said. 'I thought she was my sister.' He threw a punch that knocked the ganger onto the next table, and then jumped on top of him.

The table broke, and all of the drinks went flying. The owner of one of the drinks grabbed Kal and punched him in the gut. 'Now, this is the life for me!' Kal yelled as he kicked his new assailant in the groin.

CARDINAL CRIMSON

PROLOGUE:

END OF THE WAR

Jobe Francks placed his two metre, ninety kilogram body square in the doorframe, blocking the only exit. It was a shabby, rundown building. More crumbling stone and dusty mortar than anything else. But it did have one luxury – a single access point.

In the Underhive, finding a building that hadn't had a hole blown through the side, back, or roof was definitely a luxury. He and Syris had stumbled into this luxurious abode three years earlier while running from members of the New Saviours gang. As they hid in a dark corner, listening to the heavy footsteps of their Cawdor rivals pounding the streets outside, they both knew they had found a new home, a hideout for their own gang, the Saviours of Humanity.

'You're not going anywhere until we talk this out,' said Francks. 'What you're considering is insanity. It's got to be a trap, and you know it.'

'If you know it's a trap, then it's not really a trap… at least not a very good one.' Syris smiled his normal, lopsided grin as he threw an arm around Francks's shoulder. 'Lieutenant,' he said. 'Everything will be fine. You stay here and guard the hideout.' He swept his other arm out in a grand arc, gesturing at the crumbling, five-room structure as if it were a palace.

Several juves sat at a table, trying desperately to concentrate on the weapons Francks had them cleaning, rather than the confrontation between their leaders

across the room. The rest of the gang members were either sleeping in the crowded siderooms or on patrol in the streets around the hideout.

'You're in charge until I return. Don't give them an inch, you hear me? Stay here, keep your head and everything will be fine.'

Francks stared deep into the cloudy, grey eyes of his friend and leader. A frown curled his lips as he narrowed his eyes from stare to glare. 'Are you just trying to reassure me or have you "seen" something?' he asked.

Syris winked at him, which probably did not have the effect that was intended. It was a slow wink, the eyelid fluttering on the way down as if it was reluctant to close over that eerie, almost milk-white eye. It didn't help that Syris's scraggly, sand-coloured hair practically floated in a tangle around his head, or that his complexion had turned almost blue in the last few weeks. He looked, for all the world, the epitome of the crazed wyrd that the New Saviours continually railed against. The entire effect was somewhat unsettling, even to Francks, who knew that much of it was an act.

'There is a plan for the Universe, my friend,' Syris said, his eyes now definitely focusing on something or someplace far beyond Francks. 'I have barely glimpsed the edges, but there is a plan. And our part in it is far from over. Stay here. Keep the gang safe. We will be together again.'

Francks crouched behind a chimney on a roof near the meeting place and stewed. He realised he was doing something he had never done before – disobeying a direct order. But there was no way he could let Syris attend this meeting alone. The danger was real. How could someone with the 'sight' not see that?

It had sounded too good to be true, which meant it definitely was. Jules Ignus, leader of the New Saviours, wanted to meet with Syris Bowdie, leader of the Saviours of Humanity (or as Ignus had called them 'The Old Saviours') to discuss peace terms. He had said he wanted to meet one-on-one – no lieutenants, no gangs – just the two of them on neutral territory so there would be no chance of the meeting erupting into another gang war, which neither of them could afford.

Francks wished he could get closer, but past this building there was nothing but the acid pools that gave this settlement its name. Nobody knew where the acid had come from originally. It might have been a reservoir hidden beneath the dome that finally ate its way through the dome floor or it might have leeched out of a toxic waste pipe running down from the factories in Hive City.

It didn't matter. Wherever the acid came from, it had been pooling up in Acid Hole for generations, simultaneously dissolving away the settlement and providing its residents with their only livelihood. Acid mining was dangerous work that killed more people than it made rich, but when you're poor and desperate, a chance at a better life is worth any risk, even your life, and that pretty much summed up the situation for nearly every soul in the Underhive.

The pools had claimed almost half the settlement in the last hundred years. Even now, acid licked at the foundations of the building where Francks hid. Soon, it too would crumble. Then the rubble would be used to extend the stone pier that ran into the middle of the pools, allowing the miners to reach their claims.

At least Francks knew that Ignus would have to keep his end of the bargain. There was nowhere his gang could hide out in the pools. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but acid criss-crossed by stone paths. But that also meant he couldn't get any closer. So, Syris stood in the middle of the acid, alone, waiting for his rival to arrive for the peace talks.

It was getting late, which made Francks worry even more. This had been Ignus's meeting. Where the hell was he? Probably trying to addle Syris by making him wait. If that was the case, then Ignus knew nothing about the leader of the 'true' Saviours. It would take more than an hour at the edge of the acid pools to make Syris Bowdie panic.

The sound of a stone skittering off the edge of the roof made Francks whirl around, laspistol in hand.

Jerod Bitten, Ignus's own lieutenant raised his hands over his head, palms forward to show he had no weapon. 'You're not supposed to be here,' said Bitten.

'That makes two of us,' sneered Francks. 'No lieutenants, remember? Only I don't trust your boss to keep his end of any bargain. And it looks like I was right.'

'You don't understand,' said Bitten. He moved forward, but then stopped as Francks re-aimed his weapon at Bitten's head. 'You're not supposed to be here. You're supposed to be protecting the gang. Now, it's all going to hell.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Francks. The pit of worry that had been festering in his stomach all day cracked open and bloomed into full-scale paranoia. He knew exactly what Bitten meant. 'Syris wasn't the target at all was he? Dammit. I should have seen this coming… Syris should have seen this coming. Only he did; that's why he wanted me to stay away from the meeting.'

Bitten stood beside him now. Francks was so caught up in his own guilt he hadn't even seen the rival lieutenant cross the roof. 'We can still stop the rest of it,' he said. 'But you have to trust me.' Bitten was talking fast now, either because he was telling the truth and they didn't have much time, or just to get his story out before Francks melted his brain with the laspistol. 'You have to warn Bowdie. Get him away from the acid pools now! Before it's too late!'

Francks stared at Bitten, still processing the ramifications of everything that had been said in the last few moments. 'Rest of it? Warn Bowdie?'

Bitten grabbed Francks by the shoulders and shook him. 'Your gang is already dead. Ignus is on his way here now to kill your leader. I can't stop him. I just… I can't. But you can. If you act now.'

Francks shook his head to stave off the impinging darkness and then rolled his shoulders to wrench himself away from his enemy. 'This is preposterous. Ignus wouldn't dare murder another gang leader. Nobody is that insane. He'd be dead in an hour. If that's your story, I'm not buying it. If not, tell me why I should trust you.'

Bitten shook his head. 'Because you have no choice. Because Jules Ignus is that insane. I came here to try to stop a murder, but I can't. I… I'm terrified of him. You can stop him, but only if you trust me. Now go!'

Francks stared at Bitten for another heartbeat and then turned toward the pools. Syris was too far away to hear him call. He had no way to get his attention. He looked down at the weapon in his hand. Maybe he did have a way. Francks aimed for the middle of the pool next to Syris. If he didn't hear the blast, he would at least notice an eruption of acid ten metres away. At least then he'd be on guard for whatever Ignus had planned.

As he steadied his grip with both hands to be sure of the shot, Francks thought he saw something move in the distance. No time to lose. He squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. He squeezed again. Nothing. 'Scav!' Francks flipped open the bottom of the grip to check the power cell. It was empty. He'd checked it before he left. What was wrong? 'Those damn juves screwed up the recharge.' He snapped his head toward Bitten. 'Hand me your weapon.'

'But…'

'Quickly!' He snapped his fingers. 'You have to trust me, right?'

Bitten pulled out his own weapon and handed it, grip first, to Francks. His trust obviously only went so far, though, because as soon as Francks had the weapon, Bitten backed out of sight around the chimney.

Francks turned back toward the pools again, ready to fire a warning shot, but it

was too late. Jules Ignus had appeared out of the acidic haze, perhaps another hundred metres past Syris. He must have been waiting out there near the edge of the dome the whole time. He had something in his hands, something metallic that glinted in the dim light. He raised the item up to his shoulder. It was a rifle!

Francks aimed, but had little chance of hitting Ignus from such a distance with a pistol. The two shots rang out almost simultaneously. Francks's bolt slammed into the pool next to Ignus, sending a spray of acid into the air. The blast from Ignus's rifle hit Syris in the back. Bits and pieces of armour flew off as the shot bored through to flesh. Syris's head snapped back and his mouth opened. Francks knew his friend was screaming, but all he could hear was the pounding of his own heart.

He shot again and again, hitting the stone walkway in front of Ignus and then the rival leader's arm. That shot finally stopped him. But the damage had been done. Syris crumpled to the ground.

Francks screamed and continued firing, but in his rage, he never even got close again. He saw Ignus look up at him and raise his rifle again, pointing it at the roof. Still he fired, standing beside the chimney in plain sight, no longer caring for his own safety.

The bolt erupted from the end of the rifle, and Francks could smell the air sizzling beside him as it passed him by. He laughed and took aim again. This time he wouldn't miss. This time he'd hit more than just the devil's arm. This time…

Something hard and sharp smacked Francks in the back of the head. He felt himself falling, felt his eyes closing and the darkness seeping in around the edges of his consciousness. For a brief moment, he felt the rough pebbles of the rooftop on his neck and arms. Above him he saw Bitten, a large chunk of stone held in both hands. He was saying something; something important.

'I'm sorry. It's all I could think of…'

Francks rolled over and groaned. It had happened again. The dream. No, it was a nightmare. Or was it a vision? It was so hard to tell anymore. But this one he remembered from the previous ocassion. At least he thought it was a memory. So much cluttered his brain that it was nearly impossible to sort out fact from fiction, memory from vision, present from past… from future.

The Universe had a plan for him alright. And that plan seemed to be to roam the ash wastes as a madman. At least that had been the plan for as long as he could remember. Beyond that there were only vague shapes and fleeting images.

But today, something was different. He felt different. The images from his dream didn't flee at the first signs of consciousness this morning. That dream *had* been a memory from before. He had been someone – someone important – before becoming a wandering madman.

He had worked beside a great man. He had led men into battle in a righteous struggle. He had even begun to believe in this plan that the Universe had supposedly laid out before him. The reason behind that belief escaped him at the moment, but he knew with a clarity he hadn't had for years that once he had believed.

And now it was time. Time to be someone again. Time to do something important with what was left of his life. Jobe Francks stood up and opened his eyes – his cloudy, grey eyes – and gazed at the endless stretches of white stones and boulders surrounding him. He picked a direction and began walking. It was time to return to the hive.

1: BIG TROUBLE

It felt to Jobe Francks like he'd been walking through the ash wastes for days. In truth it had probably been a lot longer. The ten mile high cone of Hive Primus had loomed ahead of him all that time, seemingly just at the edge of the horizon, never appearing to get any closer. Like a magnet that had changed its poles, it drew him in just as it had pushed him away so many years ago. Now, the home of his youth towered above him.

The tattered remains of his leather trousers and jacket barely covered the old man's stooped body. Scabs from decades-old blisters dotted his ruddy feet, chest and arms. But his face, perhaps protected from the harsh environment of the wastes by the massed tangle of white hair that enveloped his head, was both clear of blemishes and milky-white in complexion.

Francks looked up at the imposing structure of Hive Primus, now mostly shrouded by the layer of poisonous clouds that surrounded it some five miles up. These clouds were testament to the hardworking men and women of Hive City, who toiled in factories so that the nobles could live luxurious lives high up in the spire, well above the poison and filth beneath them. These foul gases also made the ash wastes what it was – an inhospitable hell where even the dregs of society dare not live.

The magnetic attraction drew Francks on toward the Hive. But he knew, deep inside, that it wasn't the Hive that drew him back now. No, it was the body.

'It is time, old friend. It is time.'

He mumbled the phrase over and over as he trudged across the final stretch of wastes. He slipped through the same crack he'd used all those years earlier and trudged on. Now shrouded in darkness as he unconsciously followed the circuitous route from the ersatz entrance toward more habitable areas, he continued mumbling. 'It is happening again. Just as you said it would. It is time. Time for the Universe to pay its debt. It is time, old friend. I am coming.'

‘Are you talking to me, old man?’ asked a guard.

Francks looked up at the question. Somehow he had found his way to the Hive City docks. A ship flew past him, headed for the mooring berths where its cargo would be unloaded, inspected, catalogued and then stored in one of the many warehouses lining the wall of the dome.

A distant memory pulled at his mind. Smugglers. Sometimes cargo needed to bypass inspection. Ships landed in the Wastes and the special cargo got smuggled into the Hive through tunnels beneath one of the warehouses. The Saviours had done some work for the smugglers back in the day. Francks had used that connection to escape the Hive. Now he was back.

Why was he back? The Body. The Bowdie. He shuffled on again, mumbling. ‘It is time, old friend. It is time.’

The clanking of boots running across metal was followed quickly by a hand on his chest. Francks looked up, trying to focus his cloudy eyes on the shape in front of him.

‘Okay, gramps,’ said the guard, his other hand on the butt of a gun still in his holster. ‘I think it’s time you stopped walking and tell me what in the Spire you’re doing here.’

‘I have returned from the wastes to reclaim that which was lost,’ said Francks. ‘The body of Bowdie will return. You will see.’

‘Um, yeah,’ said the guard. ‘Well, I think you’ll have to wait for your buddy in a cell until someone who makes more creds than me figures out what to do with you.’ The guard grabbed Franks by the arm and twisted it, trying to turn him around.

Francks whirled around, easily slipping his thin arm out of the guard’s grasp. From the look of surprise on the man’s face, Francks moved much faster than the guard thought was possible. He pulled the guard forward and gently kissed his forehead.

When Francks released his hold, the guard slumped to the floor at his feet. ‘Be at peace,’ he said as he stepped over the unconscious guard. ‘The Universe has a plan and the time draws near.’

Kal Jerico longed for the day in the not so distant past when he had been hanging from a catwalk with his faithful, yet disgusting sidekick Scabbs holding on for dear life to Kal’s trousers, which had slipped down to his ankles after they both tumbled over the edge. Ah yes, that day was infinitely better than this one. Or the time that Scabbs had almost blown them all up when he kicked a grenade off

the street. That was a fun time… compared to today.

'Have we lost them yet?' asked Kal, not wanting to look back and confirm his worst fears.

He heard a slosh, which might have been Yolanda turning in the waist-high muck to get a look at their pursuers, or his cyber-mastiff Wotan breaking the surface to make sure everyone was still with him. Or it might have just been Scabbs going face first into the dross. Again.

No report was forthcoming from either of his bounty hunter companions, so Kal cocked his head and took a look back. One of the blond braids that framed his wide face fell across his eyes, but he could still see clearly enough.

Yolanda, his brash, amazon-like, sometime partner jogged through the muck beside him. Impossibly long legs kept her loincloth-covered waist just above the brackish, oozing liquid. The scowl on her face and the creases running through the tribal tattoos above her eyes told Kal that she was no happier about this situation than he.

A wake in the muck to the other side showed Wotan's progress. Just then, Wotan's metal nose broke the surface and the mastiff let out a sharp, tinny bark. He was none too happy either, it seemed.

'Good thing Wotan doesn't need to breathe,' said Kal. Scabbs, on the other hand, did need to breathe, but was probably so used to his own stench that he wasn't bothered by the smell of this place. In fact, his constant dips into this muck could only improve the little half-ratskin's odour.

Scabbs was just pushing himself up out of what Kal now suspected was raw sewage, gauging from the brown clumps sticking to his scabby, pudgy face. If it weren't for the ashen colour of his skin, it would be hard to tell where Scabbs left off and the sewage began. Unfortunately, he had fallen behind the other two and was now dangerously close to their pursuers.

Which brought Kal to the crux of the problem. The Goliaths – six angry members of the Grak gang to be exact – were not slowed down by the muck as much as Kal had hoped. These huge, barrel-chested behemoths with their hulking frames, strode through the deep muck as if it were no more than a puddle. The sewage barely reached the Goliaths' knees. Luckily, they only had frag grenades and shotguns, and were still out of useful range for both. But that wouldn't last for long.

'Great plan, Jerico!' yelled Yolanda beside him. She grabbed the edges of her tight-fitting vest and puffed her already well-endowed chest out a little further in what Kal soon realised was an attempt at imitating him. 'Let's cut through these

pools. The Goliaths will never follow us through this muck.'

Kal glanced down at his leather coat, the bottom half of which he realised with a groan was beneath the sewage. He was certain he had never stood clutching his lapels like some soft, Spire-raised politician puffing up before a speech. His poses were much more awe-inspiring.

He grabbed the pommel of his sabre, nearly dipping his hands in the muck, and cocked his head just so before replying. 'They wouldn't have chased us in the first place if you hadn't shot half of them in the chest,' he said. 'You know that just makes Goliaths mad.'

Yolanda whipped around toward Kal, sending her cascade of dreadlocks flying in a vicious circle around her head. 'And I wouldn't have had to shoot any of them if you hadn't spent so much time cutting the head off Grak.'

'Do you know how thick their hides are?' asked Kal. 'Not to mention their steel-like bones. And that head is worth thousands of creds–'

Scabbs cut in. 'Uh, Kal?'

Yolanda and Kal turned on the little man, who had caught up with them as they argued. 'What?' they yelled together.

'Grenade!' cried Scabbs, pointing to a round object dropping toward the muck behind them. He dived forward into the ooze.

Kal and Yolanda looked at each other for a split second before following Scabbs under the dross. A muted explosion made Kal's ears pop and the resulting wave forced his body down to the slimy ground beneath the sewage.

He broke the surface of the muck a moment later, sputtering and fuming. Chunks of what Kal desperately hoped was mud clung to his coat and stringy bits of something greenish-yellow dripped off his braids, nose and beard.

'Alright, now I'm mad,' he said. 'Time to finish this. Come on.' He ran on ahead, trying to get back out of grenade range.

Scabbs swiped a scabby hand over his slimy face as he ran, which did little more than smear the brown chunks, like a paste, across his flaky skin. 'So, you have a plan, Kal?' he said more as a statement than a question.

'Yeah,' replied Kal. 'I'm going to kill them and then go get drunk and forget about this day.'

'Another great Kal Jerico plan,' retorted Yolanda, easily keeping pace. 'We needed a grenade launcher to take down Grak, and that got scavved. How exactly will you kill six Goliaths before they rip your arms out and beat you to death with them?'

Kal glared at Yolanda, but somehow the slime and organic matter had

completely slipped off her body when she came out of the muck, leaving just a liquid sheen covering her bare arms, midriff and heaving cleavage. He quickly lowered his eyes toward her weapon belt, which held about a half-dozen grenades. He then smiled as a plan formed in his head.

'With that,' he said, pointing at her waist.

'No way, Jerico,' said Yolanda. 'I'd rather die standing, if you don't mind.'

'Not that,' said Kal. 'Get your mind out of the sewage.' He smiled at his joke, but neither of his companions were laughing. 'Hand me your grenade belt, he continued. 'You, too, Scabbs.'

His companions looked like they wanted to protest, but both knew better than to fly in the face of a Kal Jerico, live-by-the-seat-of-your-pants plan. Kal took the two bandoliers and reached under the muck for his mastiff. Finding Wotan, he knocked on his steel head. The cyber-mastiff surfaced and looked up at Kal, metal jaw open showing a row of sharp, spike-like teeth. Kal was certain that if Wotan had a tongue, it would be lolling off to the side right about now.

Kal draped the bandoliers over Wotan's head, pointed at the oncoming Goliaths, and commanded, 'Wotan! Deliver!' He then pointed toward the muck. 'Stay down!' he added.

The mastiff's head slipped back under the muck. Kal watched as the wake moved off to the side and began heading back toward their pursuers, who were getting dangerously close to grenade range again. Kal glanced at Yolanda and Scabbs, and smiled as he pulled out his twin laspistols and twirled them both at once. He stood facing the Goliaths. 'This should be fun,' he said.

Yolanda obviously didn't trust in Kal's plan because she kept slogging through the muck. 'Enjoy your death by dismemberment,' she said. 'I'll come back for Grak's head after they're done with you.'

Scabbs, who had stopped when Kal stopped, looked back and forth between his two protectors. He shrugged, which dislodged several large muck-covered flakes of skin from his neck. 'To the end, Kal. To the end,' he said.

'Thanks, Scabbs,' said Kal. 'You don't know how much that means to me.' But Kal could tell by the way Scabbs kept glancing behind them at the retreating Yolanda that his heart wasn't really into it. But he knew the plan would work. It had to.A moment later, the muck in front of the Goliaths erupted as Wotan soared into the air, spraying the giant gangers with slime and refuse. The mastiff's impressive leap carried it over their heads. The stunned Goliaths could do nothing but watch as the metal beast soared above them. Wotan whipped his head back and forth at the apex of his jump, shedding the bandoliers, which fell

on the heads of the two leaders.

As soon as Wotan hit the muck behind the Goliaths, Kal opened fire with both weapons, sending blasts of superheated particles racing toward their pursuers at the speed of light. His shots slammed into the chests of the two leading gangers, which would have had little effect if they hadn't both just acquired new bandoliers full of explosives.

The resulting cascade of explosions ripped through the entire gang as the initial blasts set off the rest of the ordnance carried by the giants. Once the smoke cleared, Kal was quite pleased to see not a single Goliath standing in the muck.

Then he noticed the wave of sewage headed toward him from the blast site.

'Oh crap!' muttered Kal.

'Why are those men standing there?' asked the foreman, a large, beefy man by the name of Grondle. Foreman Grondle had a thick shock of black hair that covered his entire head except for his eyes, nose and bright red cheeks. His stomach extended just slightly out past his huge chest. You might call him rotund, if you were absolutely certain he couldn't hear you.

When the small man beside him didn't answer, Grondle pointed a pudgy finger at a group of workers milling around near a three-storey pile of rocks, concrete blocks and other debris that spilled out of the side of the dome. He'd just recently come on the job and had specific instructions from his boss to get the work back on schedule. This twenty year-old rockslide, most likely caused by a hive quake, was his first priority. 'Those men, there, Dinks.'

'They say the rockslide is unstable,' replied Dinks, the crew leader. He was a short and officious looking fellow, with toothpick arms, no chest to speak of and a ring of short-cropped hair running around his otherwise bald head. 'We're waiting for the engineer to show up and inspect it.'

'We have to get that cleared by week's end,' he grumbled. The masons were scheduled to come in and begin to shore up the dome after that, and if he slipped even a day on the schedule, it would take months to reschedule them – months that he would be out of a job. 'The engineer was here yesterday and declared it safe. Get them back to work.'

'But…'

The foreman glared the crew leader into silence. Staring down at the little man, who seemed better suited for library work up in the Spire than construction, the foreman realised Dinks must have got the job of crew leader because he wasn't physically able to actually do any work. 'No "buts" except yours and theirs up

on that pile of rubble, clearing rocks!' demanded the foreman.

Dinks looked like he wanted to argue, but decided it would be easier to clear rocks than to sway Grondle's decision. He turned and skittered away toward the rockslide. A moment later, the crew began climbing up the rubble. They formed a chain with Dinks at the bottom, a decision he probably regretted when the first, huge chunk of masonry was handed to him and he had to lug it over to the bin.

Tavis would just love that. Waiting for an engineer inspection. The nerve of that Dinks. Guilder Tavis was not the easiest man to work for. He knew what he wanted and had enough money and power to make everyone's life miserable until he got it. Right now, he wanted this old dome cleaned up for a huge new manse. As if the palace where he lived now was too small for him. *Hmmph*, thought Grondle. Probably too small for his ego.

A series of low rumbles snapped Grondle out of his reverie, but they ended as abruptly as they had started. Grondle looked around at the various work areas. It hadn't sounded like a hive quake, it had been too regular and too short. Then he heard screams and turned to look at the rockslide. Men, rocks, and chunks of concrete tumbled down the hill toward poor Dinks, who stood rooted to the spot in fear, screaming, his face ash-white.

Grondle ran toward Dinks, screaming, 'Get out of there, you fool! Move!'

But it was too late. The chunks of rubble rolling down the hill from the top unleashed even more rocks and even a few boulders as the avalanche swept over the line of men, building momentum and growing ever larger as it careened down the hill.

Halfway to the foot of the hill, Grondle screeched to a halt and began backing away. Debris piled up where Dinks had once stood as more rubble spilled down the hill. A head-sized chunk of rock bounded past Grondle as he turned and ran from the continuing avalanche.

And then it was over. The ringing in Grondle's ears from the continuous rumble of rocks cracking against one another came to an end. He looked back at where Dinks and his crew had been just moments before, and saw nothing but what seemed to be an even larger pile of debris than before. Grondle pulled a cloth from his back pocket and began to wipe the seat from his forehead. 'I'm going to need more men again,' he grumbled. 'Tavis won't be happy about that.'

'Holy Undying Emperor!' said Nickle, 'What in the Spire is that?'

This brought a clap to the ears from Staven. 'Never take the name of the Undying Emperor in vain,' he said, adding a moment later, 'Holy scav! What is

that?'

'That's what I asked,' said Nickle. He was the taller of the two by almost a head, but was obviously the subordinate in this relationship. Nickle pulled the hood of his blue cloak down around his neck to get an unobstructed view of the old man wandering through the Hive City docks, and then scratched at the bare skin around his sore ear. 'Ow. That hurt.'

'Maybe you'll remember next time, then,' said the shorter Staven, also pulling his hood down to get a better look.

Both men wore identical blue, hooded cloaks and orange body armour. They also had haircuts that made them look like someone had inverted a bowl full of yellow noodles over their otherwise bare heads. They were Cawdor, part of a local gang called the Soul Savers whose territory included the docks. It was a prestigious area for the Soul Savers. They were entrusted with saving the souls of the dock workers, who were well-known for their sinful ways. They did, however, have to curb their more physically instructive styles as violence was frowned upon even in this rough area of Hive City and the gang was forced to masquerade under the guise of a legitimate security operation.

Nickle and Staven had been standing outside Madam Noritake's House of Fun, verbally instructing its patrons about how much more satisfied they would be in the embrace of the Undying Emperor than in the clutches of the unclean women inside. Most people either ignored the two and hurried inside with their faces averted or just glared at them, perhaps quashing a violent instinct or two of their own.

But this strange man walking toward them with wild hair that seemed to almost float around his head, ripped and ragged clothes that barely covered his thin, blister-covered body and a far-off, almost lost look to his eyes – this was a man that Staven thought could benefit from being saved.

He stepped away from the building as the old man shuffled forward. It looked to Staven like he was headed inside Madam Noritake's, which seemed ludicrous considering his age and condition, but the old guy stopped right in front of Staven. He was mumbling something, but Staven didn't bother to listen. He just started into his speech, modified somewhat on the fly for this special lost soul.

'Have you ever considered that perhaps you are lost and need someone to show you the way to a better place?' Staven was quite pleased with himself on his modified opening, but before he could continue, the man grabbed his face and forced him to look into his eyes – those piercing blue eyes shrouded but not obscured by hypnotic, milky-white swirls.

It felt like he was falling through a blue sky toward white, fluffy clouds. It was at once the most blissful feeling he had ever had, as if he were safe in the embrace of the Undying Emperor, but also the most terrifying experience of his life, like falling through eternity, out of control.

And then it was over. The old man said, 'You are "Saviours". It is true.' He smiled at Staven, who looked over at Nickle. The other Cawdor must have been caught in the same trance because he still had a far-away look in his eyes. 'The Universe has a plan, boys. It has brought me to you. The Bowdie will return. You will see. It is time. The Bowdie will return. Now, take me home.'

Staven turned and began leading the old man through the streets of Hive City, glancing back only once to make sure that Nickle had followed as well. They shouldn't have left their posts, but they did. They were forbidden to bring converts back to the Saviour headquarters without express permission, but that's what they were doing. His life seemed to have turned into a walking dream where the rules of the real world were suspended.

As they walked, the old man continued his mantra and an old memory stirred inside Staven about the return of a mythical body. It wasn't from the scriptures. It was more of a story told to young juves from a time in the past. He remembered an old ganger talking to him and a bunch of other new recruits years ago. What was his name? Burton? Benton? Bitten! That was it. Bitten. Staven wasn't sure if Bitten was still around, but someone must know. He'd send Nickle off to find out when they got the old man back home.

Kal was feeling much better about life in the Underhive. Both he and his clothes had been washed – at the same time but by quite different female hands – and he was now sitting in his favourite watering hole with a drink on the table, a girl on his lap, his cyber-mastiff at his feet and a wad of credits from the bounty on Grak burning a hole in his pocket.

The Sump Hole was the Underhive's premier bar, which was to say it was a rat-infested refuse dump that served what tasted like watered-down lighter fluid in bottles that were only clean by the virtue of holding something so toxic that nothing could live inside. The barmaids were slightly cleaner than the bottles and slightly better looking than the rats, but made up for any shortcomings with short skirts and shorter blouses.

Kal's home away from home was constantly filled past capacity with gangers and bounty hunters, and the next brawl was always just an insult or accidental bump away. There'd been so many knock-down, drag-out fights in the Sump

Hole over the years that the tables and chairs were now bolted to the floor, which made it somewhat harder to hit someone over the head with one, but a lot more deadly when you did.

'I love it when a plan comes together,' he said, stroking the bare shoulders of the redhead on his lap.

A voice stung him from across the room. 'A Kal Jerico plan doesn't so much come together as fall into place – from a great height with a loud splat.'

Kal smiled. As long as the redhead stayed right where she was nothing could ruin his mood, not even Yolanda's strained wit. 'Hello, partner,' he said. 'I didn't see you come in.' Wotan's head lifted under the table at Kal's voice, but then dropped back down with a clank when it became obvious his master was talking to someone else.

Yolanda pushed her way through the crowd with ease. Even with dreadlocked hair framing a face dominated by an intricate Escher clan tattoo that ran across her forehead, Yolanda was still far more attractive than any of the barmaids, especially with her tight-fitting vest and tantalising leather loincloth. But the combination of her incredible height, well-toned muscles and array of holstered weapons made even the uninitiated patron wary as she crossed the room.

After staring down one juve who got a little too close or smiled just a little too broadly as she strode across the room, Yolanda kicked one long leg over the back of the empty chair opposite Kal and slid down. This was Kal's table, and no matter how crowded the Sump Hole got, there were always at least three chairs open. Kal's was the one with it's back up against the wall of the bar.

'Where's my cut, Jerico?' she asked.

Kal toyed with the idea of telling her that only those partners who stood by him in his hour of need would get a cut, but the narrowness of her eyes and the creases running through her tattoo told him she wasn't in a joking mood.

'I've got it in my pocket,' said Kal. 'Roberta here is guarding it for me, aren't you darling?' The redhead purred into Kal's ear and shifted quite comfortably on his lap. 'As soon as Scabbs shows up, we'll get down to business. For now, get a drink and enjoy life a little. It doesn't always have to be about business.'

'With you, Jerico, it's never business,' said Yolanda. 'Everything is a big game to you.'

'And what's wrong with that?' asked Kal, refusing to let her bring him down. 'Life *is* a game, and the one who has the most fun wins.'

'And you're bound and determined to win at any cost, aren't you?' she asked, but a slight curling of Yolanda's lips indicated she was enjoying the banter. It

was the closest Kal had seen her come to smiling in a long time.

But Yolanda's proto-smile disappeared completely when the juve sat in the last open chair. He didn't look at Yolanda, though. In fact, it seemed to Kal that the young ganger was deliberately avoiding eye contact with her. The kid's blue cloak and too-shiny, orange body armour should have rung warning bells in Kal's head, but he'd been distracted by Roberta's tongue in his ear. He didn't realise the danger until the juve started speaking.

'Hi, my name is Georig,' he said in a rush, continuing without even taking a breath. 'I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Did you ever think that you might be on the wrong path? Have you ever considered basking in the glory of the Undying Emperor instead of living a life of drunken debauchery? As the teachings of our spiritual leader, the holy Cardinal Crimson, state…'

The room went suddenly quiet as both Kal and Yolanda drew their weapons in a rush at the mention of the Cardinal's name. Roberta slid to the floor with a thud as Kal stood and glared at the young Cawdor. From beneath the table, Wotan growled between the juve's legs, which sounded like a chainblade screaming to life.

'Because you're so young and so obviously stupid,' started Kal, 'I'm going to give you to the count of three to get out of this bar before I fire. Of course after one, Wotan will make sure you can never debauch again. Ready?'

As Kal breathed in to begin the count, Georig fell off his chair and began scrambling across the floor on all fours, proving he wasn't as dumb as he had first appeared. The crowd kindly stepped aside, probably more to get out of Kal's line of fire than to help the kid escape. Kal holstered his laspistols and sat down with a resigned thump.

'I hate Cawdor,' he said, waving off Roberta as she tried to sit back down on his lap. He was no longer in the mood. 'Useless bunch, the lot of them. Undying Emperor, hah! What a bunch of hokum. And Crimson? Holy? Scabbs is more spiritual than that two-bit hack.'

An odd odour wafted across the bar, one that Kal instantly recognised. 'Although his purity is definitely up for debate,' he added as Scabbs took his seat. 'Helmawr's rump, man. Five hours of bathing and you still reek. Did they find another layer of stench under the first ten?'

Scabbs slid into the chair that Georig has just vacated. Jerico didn't know how he did it, but even with a bath and clean clothes, Scabbs still looked like he had slept in trash for a week. There were obviously some stains in his dingy, grey shirt and trousers that would just never come out. If Kal cared more, he'd buy

the little rodent some new clothes out of his share, but that money was earmarked for drunken debauchery.

'Nice to see you, too, Kal,' said Scabbs. He pointed behind him. 'That your handiwork I saw running out the front like a scared scavvy?'

'Damn Cawdor!' spat Kal again. He was about to go into another tirade about their holier-than-thou attitude, but Scabbs cut him off.

'So, where's my cut?' he asked, holding his hand out over the table. A few flakes of skin fell from his arm onto the booze-soaked table and floated there like little boats.

'Right down to business with both of you,' said Kal, shaking his head. 'What? Don't you trust me?'

Two heads began shaking across from him. 'You spent our shares of the last big score before we even saw it,' said Yolanda.

'Those were business expenses,' protested Kal. 'I lost my pistols and had to buy new ones.'

'Pearl handled?' asked Scabbs. His hand was still hovering over the table, releasing more boats into the Wild Snake sea below.

Kal looked back and forth at his two partners and saw that he was not going to get any compassion from either of them. But, as he dug into his pocket to pull out the bounty money, he thought he heard his name from over by the bar. He looked up and saw another new face.

This person definitely had no place in an Underhive bar. For starters, his clothes were clean. And not clean like Kal's scuffed leather coat was clean. Clean, like new. And these clothes were expensive. They looked like cotton or silk instead of denim and leather.

'Oh scav!' mumbled Kal, and then quietly slipped under the table. The only people who could afford clothes like that lived in the Spire or acted as agents for one of the Hive City Houses. Both spelled trouble.

'What in the unholy Spire are you doing down there, Jerico?' cried Yolanda.

'Shhhh!' hissed Kal. 'That guy at the bar is looking for me.'

There was a pause before Scabbs answered. 'So?' he said. 'He's almost as small as me. You can take him.'

'You don't understand,' said Kal. 'I owe money… a lot of money… for my new laspistols. That's got to be the debt collector from the Re-Engineers, the Van Saar gang that sold them to me.'

'You're in debt to a Van Saar gang?' asked Yolanda, her incredulous voice still too loud. 'Are you insane? You're lucky to still have all your limbs.'

But Kal didn't answer. He was too busy crawling to the next table. As the debt collector came over toward his usual table, Kal skirted around toward the bar. As soon as there were enough people between him and the silk-suited businessman, Kal stood and slipped out of the Sump Hole.

Scabbs tried to act nonchalant as the silk-suited man arrived, which meant he spent a lot of effort picking at some loose skin on his elbow and then cleaning his fingernails with his teeth. His only mistake was spitting the wad of crust and dead skin he'd mined from under his fingernails onto the striped, grey trousers of the debt collector, who was by now standing right next to him.

'Sorry,' he said, looking up into the face of the stranger. The man stood probably two heads less than two metres, which put him about a head up on Scabbs. But his features made him look much smaller. Wire-rimmed glasses perched on a narrow slip of a nose, outlining beady eyes that were so small and dark they wouldn't have looked out of place on the head of a rodent. His thin, dark hair looked like it had been greased to his head and his face showed not even a hint of stubble.

He held a small, black satchel and, after wiping the spittle from his trousers with a white handkerchief, he laid the satchel on the table, placing both hands on it as if that would be enough to keep it safe, if Scabbs or Yolanda should want to take it.

'I am looking for a Kal Jerico,' said the stranger. 'I assume you are not he.'

Scabbs and Yolanda looked at each other, quizzically. Scabbs decided the man must be talking to him. 'That's right, I'm not Kal, and neither is she,' he added, pointing at Yolanda.

'A ha ha,' said the stranger, which seemed to shake his entire skinny body. 'A good joke, Mr Scabbs. Do you know where I can find Mr Jerico?'

Being called by name flustered Scabbs. Was he getting famous, finally? 'You just missed him…' he started before a quick kick to the shin from Yolanda brought him to his senses. 'I… uh… I think he went to the little bounty hunter's room,' he said, pointing at the back of the Sump Hole.

The stranger looked back where Scabbs pointed, which when Scabbs looked, he realised, was just a blank wall. Did the Sump Hole even have a bathroom? Scabbs had always done his business in the alley outside. The stranger drummed his fingers on the satchel.

'What do you want with Jerico?' asked Yolanda.

The stranger's eyes scanned the lanky bounty hunter from top to bottom,

stopping a couple of times for a longer look along the way. ‘We have business that must be attended to in person,’ he finally answered.

‘Well when you find that son of a scavvy,’ continued Yolanda, ‘let us know. We’ve been looking for him all day. We have some unfinished business to attend to as well.’

Scabbs had to admit that Yolanda was a much better liar than he, and the stranger might have just bought it, except at that moment, a whistle echoed through the Sump Hole, and Wotan jumped to his feet beneath the table, nearly knocking the man’s satchel to the floor. As the stranger grabbed for the handle, Wotan bolted for the door, knocking gangers and waitresses to the floor in a loud racket as he left.

‘That, I believe was Mr Jerico’s cyber-mastiff, Wotan, if I am not mistaken,’ said the stranger, repositioning his glasses on his sharp nose.

‘What’s a cyber-mastiff?’ said Scabbs, which brought another kick to the shin. He should really just let Yolanda do the talking, he thought. But it was too late. The stranger had left the Sump Hole, following Wotan into the Underhive night.

Jobe Francks felt more human than he had in a long while. Of course, for him, a long while was counted in years instead of months or weeks. The Soul Savers had fed him and clothed him, and even given him new boots to wear. It felt odd walking through the world without feeling every stone and sharp piece of glass underfoot. Francks wasn’t sure he liked it. It felt a little too detached from the wonder of the Undying Emperor’s creation. But he felt like he could get used to it.

He’d refused the body armour, but enjoyed the feel of the new, blue cloak against his neck, which offered a constant reminder of his years of suffering as it rustled against his blistered skin. After supper, Randal, the leader of the Soul Savers, came up to Francks with a proposition. He was a tall, gangly man with wavy, blond hair that grew down to his shoulders instead of being worn short in the normal bowl cut of his men.

‘How would you like to preach the return of the body to a large crowd of unbelievers?’ Randall had asked. There was a smile on his almost boyish face, but Francks had noticed the slight twitch in the curl of his lips that suggested deceit mixed in with the request. ‘The square outside the Fresh Air saloon is the perfect spot to begin spreading the word.’

Francks had let his eyes cloud over slightly as Randal spoke, and peered into the black centre of Randal’s eyes. Yes, there was deceit hidden beneath his jovial

exterior. Deceit mixed with greed, and just a touch of fear. Randal probably didn't know what to do with him, so was sending him into another gang's territory. It was a brilliant move. Randal had complete deniability if Francks got into trouble, and had much to gain if 'the old man' actually made any inroads into the other gang's home. It was how the game was played. Francks remembered those days well, even through the fog of time.

And so Francks had gone to the square and preached, alone of course. Randal couldn't afford to send any of his men, who would be recognised by members of the rival gang. He'd drawn a small crowd, mostly drunk factory workers who'd stumbled out of the saloon to get a breath of fresh air from the huge fan hanging over the square that pumped recycled air into the area and gave the bar its name.

Francks told of the grand plan of the Universe to save them all and bring them into the glory of the Undying Emperor. He regaled them with tales of the crusades fought through the centuries in His name. He spoke of the messenger – the Bowdie – who would return to reveal the intricacies of the universal plan and light the way home into the bosom of the Undying Emperor.

By the end of the evening, Francks's voice was little more than a whisper and his throat was raw. After two decades of speaking to no one but himself, his vocal cords were too easily strained. He would have to pace himself for a while. Stains dotted his new blue cloak from fruit and vegetables thrown by some of the more passionate members of the crowd. He carried several of the firmer pieces of produce in his cloak to give to the Soul Savers.

As he walked through the dark streets, Francks picked at a line of caked blood on his cheek, remnant of a piece of cobblestone thrown shortly after the produce failed to end his sermon. He had felt the surge of blood, a relic of his youth, course through his veins as the pain from that rock radiated through his face.

He had felt the anger of his old life strain against the self-imposed chains that kept him in check. How easy it would have been to jump into the middle of the crowd and snap the neck of the instigator. But he was here to prepare the world for the return of Bowdie, not to begin a holy war. That was his role in the Universal Plan – at least for now.

Lost in his reverie, Francks didn't notice the dark form detach itself from a shadowy alley and slip in behind him; at least not consciously. But somewhere near the base of his skull, Jobe Francks felt the man's black aura. His mind's eye, which saw more of the world than any sane man should feasibly be able to handle, noticed the intrusion and primed Francks's muscles for action a moment before the assassin's arm shot around his neck.

The stranger in the silk suit, a man by the name of Sorrento, came rushing out of the Sump Hole just in time to see Wotan lope down the street and turn a corner. Unfortunately for Sorrento, in his headlong rush out of the bar, he failed to notice a large bounty hunter heading into the bar.

'Ooomph,' said Sorrento as his nose and glasses slammed into the bounty hunter's barrel-sized chest. He stepped back and tried to re-seat his glasses around his ears, but the wire frames had twisted in the impact.

As he worked on the bent frame, two immense hands dropped onto his shoulders like the gods descending.

'You smudged my armour,' said a booming voice from above.

Sorrento finally got his glasses back on and looked up at a wide, scraggly-haired face. A scar running from the edge of the man's lip down to the centre of his chin marred the perfect two-day growth of beard. One long eyebrow slanted across his forehead and the tangle of black hair covering his head looked thick enough to stop bullets.

'Um, sorry?' asked Sorrento. The grip on his shoulders tightened, making him cry out in pain. It felt like the fingers had penetrated his skin and were now crushing bone. The street began to spin, or was that his head? It was difficult to tell. He needed to appease this hulking brute before he passed out and ended up dead in a gutter. 'I'm… unngh… terribly sorry, sir,' he tried again. 'Let me… um… buy you a drink to make up for it?'

The pressure eased, but was quickly followed by a new pain as the bounty hunter slapped Sorrento on the back and pulled him into a 'friendly' hug that made him gasp as his chest compressed. They walked back into the bar, where Sorrento proceeded to buy his life back with several rounds of Wild Snake.

Kal's luck had definitely changed in the last few hours. After giving the debt collector the slip, he'd wandered the darkened streets looking for a dive where he could drink in peace. By chance, he'd stumbled upon the Lucky Strike Hole. From the front, you wouldn't even know it was there. It was dark, drab and falling apart, making it look like every other semi-inhabited building in the Underhive.

The windows and obligatory blast holes were covered by burlap and tape, which by itself had drawn Kal's attention. Why bother if it was just a flop spot? And a gang would have reinforced those potential incursion points with something more durable than cloth. Intrigued, Kal had gone to the door and knocked. He wasn't too surprised when a small hatch slid open at eye height.

‘What’s the password?’ asked a voice behind the door.

How quaint. A password-protected hole. Luckily, he had the universal password. He pulled out the bounty credits and fanned them in front of the eyes. A moment later, the door opened and Kal walked into the most lavish gambling hole he’d ever seen in the Underhive.

Gambling tables sat on red and yellow carpeting in a huge space that once might have been a factory floor or warehouse. Carpeting! His feet sank into the deep pile, as he stared in awe. Everything looked new. The tables showed no chinks, holes, or scorch marks from previous brawls, and the floor was free of those ugly brown stains that you never asked about and always walked around in other holes.

As Kal revelled in the luxury, a gnawing little voice in the back of his head began to ask some obvious questions. Who would spend this kind of money on an Underhive hole? And if you had that kind of money, why not spend it in the Spire, or at least in Hive City? But at that moment, a waft of lilac followed by a soft touch on his arm pulled Kal from his musings. A beautiful hostess, who made Roberta look like a scavvy, smiled at Kal, took him by the arm and escorted him to a table. She never said a word but it seemed to be understood that as long as Kal was gambling (and winning) she would be his constant companion.

Kal tossed the bounty money on the table and started to play. He was home.

2: OLD FRIENDS

Jobe Francks felt the sharp pressure of a dagger in his side. The shadowy assailant wrapped an arm around his neck pulled him fast against his body. The point of the dagger dug into Francks's skin through the new blue cloak. Underneath the clean shirt, a trickle of blood dripped down to his waist.

'Don't struggle, old man, and I promise it won't hurt… much.' The arm around Francks's neck tightened as the assailant pulled him back toward an alley. The dagger punctuated the threat, digging further through the blue cloth.

But Francks had no intention of struggling. In fact, his plan called for complete relaxation. He glanced down and back to see where they were headed. When his attacker reached the raised platform at the edge of the street, he paused for a moment and then pulled away slightly as they stepped up. At this point Francks went completely limp in the attacker's grasp and slid toward the ground.

The dagger caught in the folds of his cloak, pulling the attacker's arm down and pitching him forward off the edge of the walkway. Francks groaned as the serrated blade scraped across his ribs, but fought the urge to catch himself. The attacker tightened his grasp around Francks' neck and tried in vain to pull the larger man back to his feet.

Francks gagged and fought off the impending blackness as the arm crushed his larynx, but instead of leaning back to ease the pressure, he bent forward, pulling the already off-balance assailant over on top of him. They both fell to the ground in a heap. Francks rolled away and then kicked out with both feet. His new boots cracked into the assailant's knee.

The man screamed in pain as Francks scrambled to his feet. He stood, facing his attacker, who had also found his footing, but was now favouring one leg. Both men breathed heavily, but the attacker smiled.

'Nice moves, old man, but I still have the dagger…' He brandished the serrated blade. '…and a laspistol.' The assailant raised his other hand, holding a jet black

pistol. He held the blade out to the side, poised to strike, and the gun in close to his body, as if protecting it.

Adrenaline coursed through Francks, bringing renewed vitality to his old body and a clarity of mind he hadn't enjoyed in many a year. This was a professional he faced. That much was certain. The angle of the blade, the calm hold on the pistol, the piercing gaze he gave Francks, all said this was a man trained to kill.

Francks knew two things he hoped would help him survive. First, if the attacker was going to use the weapon, Francks would already be dead. For some reason, the pistol was his last resort. Francks didn't know why and didn't care, but he was sure he had nothing to fear from the laspistol. Second, Francks had been trained not to kill, but to survive. The key to winning a gang battle was to not get hit, and in his day Francks had been good at that, one of the best.

The attacker crept toward him, keeping the pistol pointed at his head as he approached. The dagger waved slowly back and forth in front of him in a tight figure of eight as he moved. Francks glanced over his shoulder, as if looking for somewhere to run. He stepped back toward the curb tentatively, trying his best to look scared.

'You can't run, old man,' sneered the attacker. 'I'm younger and faster and I've got the gun.' He tilted the butt of the gun ninety degrees, as if to prove his point.

Francks glanced over his shoulder again as the attacker closed on him. He then pivoted at the waist and took a step as if to run. He heard heavy footfalls behind him. The attacker had taken the bait. Francks twirled around and dropped into a squat, sweeping his leading leg out and slamming it into the attacker's injured knee.

The man dropped to the ground and rolled over in pain. He grabbed at his leg, which pointed in an odd direction below the knee. Francks snatched the laspistol, which lolled in the man's hands, and fell on the attacker. He shoved the gun into the man's stomach between their bodies and fired. The press of the bodies on the gun muted the loud blast. He fired again to make sure, and then rolled off.

A few minutes later, Francks knelt over the body of the attacker in the alley looking at an odd piece of paper. The man had no identification, which was no surprise, but the note he carried gave Francks pause. A simple message scrawled in what looked like blood said: 'This man is a heretic. The heretic must die!'

Francks folded up the note and secreted it, along with the dagger and pistol, in a fold in his cloak. He hurried back to the Soul Savers hideout and dropped the pistol into the gang's armoury cabinet. He kept the dagger, though. It appeared he might need to use the old ways a bit more before this was finished.

Jock Beamler, pit boss at the Lucky Strike, pulled at the taut collar stretched around his thick neck as he watched the gambling floor. Long ago, when this had been a factory, the rusty walkway he stood upon must have provided access to machinery or the ventilation system. Whatever had been there had already been scavenged, but the catwalk remained – most of it anyway.

It made an excellent vantage point for keeping an eye on the Lucky Strike. He wasn't pleased with what he saw today. Most of Jock's night was spent watching the dealers to make sure they weren't cheating the customers and pocketing their ill-gotten chips. Cheating was encouraged, of course, but a portion – an extensive portion, actually – of any extra credits skimmed from a mark belonged to the house.

But this was different. At first, Jock hardly even noticed the bounty hunter sitting with Stella. She was a good girl and always got her marks nice and drunk so they lost all the credits they hadn't already spent on her. He hadn't given that mark a second thought once he saw who was working him.

But now there was a huge stack of chips in front of the man with the long leather coat, and Stella was looking up at Jock and gesturing behind the man's back. From the look on her face, she'd been gesturing for quite some time.

'This is not good. This is not good at all,' said Jock. He swiped a meaty hand across his cheeks and then wiped the slick palm on his neatly-pressed trousers. Jock was a burly fellow, huge upper arms and Goliath-sized chest. In fact, Jock's general size and shape made most people think Goliath – at least until they glanced up at his face. Jock had the smooth skin and rounded features of a child, all set in a head that looked almost ludicrously small sitting atop his massive shoulders and thick neck. Despite his large body and small head, Jock was bright enough to run the Lucky Strike and, more importantly, smart enough to know when he needed help.

He made a quick cutting gesture at his neck, and mouthed the words: 'Cut him off.'

Stella shrugged her bare shoulders and mouthed, 'How?'

Jock shrugged back. 'Think of something.' He turned from the railing and ran toward the ladder. He knew the loud clanking of his hard-soled shoes on the metal would make every eye in the place glance up, but he needed help and he needed it quick.

Kal glanced up at the clanking sound in the rafters, and smiled as he watched the large man run across the walkway and slide down a ladder. He glanced around

the room to see what the commotion was about, but all the patrons had the same bewildered look in their eyes. They all watched as the pit boss lumbered across the back of the room. Buttons popped off his coat as he ran, and he tore his cuff as he slammed through a door, leaving a large shred of black fabric hanging from the busted door frame. The coat was very much too small for him, especially with his muscles bulging in the kind of frantic panic that gripped him now.

The hair on the back of Kal's neck bristled. At first he thought it was due to Stella's soft fingers on his nape, but when he looked back at the table, the tingle turned into a full, ringing alarm. His entire stack of chips had been pushed into the middle of the table… and he hadn't made that bet!

He glanced at Stella, who fluttered her eyelashes and smiled at him as she now began stroking his neck. But it was obvious where her hands had been a moment before. Kal had been set up.

Now he understood the reason for the commotion. It was a distraction, and he'd fallen for it. Of course, he knew Stella worked for the house. She'd been pilfering the odd chip here and there all night, but a soft warm body was a soft warm body, and Kal had figured it was worth a few credits to keep her hands on his neck and shoulders, amongst other places. But now she'd pushed him all in and he had no choice but to ride it through.

Kal checked his down tiles one more time to see if Stella had got her pretty little fingers on those as well. All seemed in order. The joke would be on the house this time. He'd carefully built a Full Spire over the last quarter hour, and most of it was hidden from view in his face-down tiles.

All he was showing was a wild scavvy brute, two Orlock gangers, and a single Spire noble – the Catallii princess – whom Kal mused was the spitting image of Yolanda, without all the gang tats of course. So, it looked to the dealer like he had the makings of a fairly strong hand: two pair, nobles and gangers, or three Orlocks, depending on where he put the wild scavvy. He'd been betting strong, but not too strong, to keep the table alive.

But his stack held three more nobles – two House Ty and the Catallii prince. Along with his wild scavvy, this gave him an almost unbeatable full house of Spire nobles. If Stella hadn't pushed him all in on this round, he might have done so himself. The player to his left, who was showing a weak pair of ratskins, blanched at the bet and folded immediately after the commotion died down.

The next two players quickly followed suit, which brought the bet around to the dealer, a short bald-headed man with a thick black beard. He had the strongest

hand showing at the table: two Ko-Iron nobles and a Delaque gang leader, along with a Spyre Hunter kicker. But, Catallus beat Ko'Iron, so Kal wasn't worried.

Until the dealer matched the bet, and then reached out and flipped the doubling cube.

'House doubles,' he said. The squat dealer tried to smile, but a nasty scar running from his cheek to his chin made it look more like a sneer.

The rest of the players tossed their tiles into the discard pile and sat back to watch the show. The bet came back around to Kal, who pulled at his long sideburn while staring at the dealer. He tried to read the man's face, but the beard left little uncovered. There was a certain gleam in his eye that Kal didn't like, though.

The double cube was a nasty move. It meant that if Kal lost, he would owe the house twice the pot. But if he won, they owed him double. It was used to scare off the weak and those out of money. Well, Kal was only one of those two things.

The real question was had the dealer played him as well? Kal was certain the deal had all been legit. He'd been watching the ugly little dealer like a hawk all evening and hadn't seen a single suspicious move from his hands.

Kal reached out and flipped the double cube again, accepting the bet. His Full Spire was the best hand at the table, he was sure, and the pot would cover the debt for his new pistols and let him pay Yolanda and Scabbs their share. Everybody wins.

Unless…

The tingle returned to Kal's neck, but it came too late. The dealer smiled again and flipped his hidden tiles. Among them were three House Helmawrs, including old Gerontius himself. He had a higher-ranking Full Spire. Helmawrs beat Catallus every day. Kal had lost. Stella slid off his lap and melted into the murmuring crowd.

It dawned on him too late. He'd been played from the beginning. The dealer must have realised Kal was watching him like a hawk and had to wait for the commotion to make his move. He must have been good to make the switch in those few seconds.

Kal wondered who ran this place. Dirty games didn't last long, but these people were obviously professionals. And now Kal was in debt to them.

But that assumed Kal paid this bogus debt. He'd been swindled, and felt no compunction to play fair at this point. He snapped his fingers under the table, and heard a rasping growl in reply. Kal rose to his feet, pushed open his long

leather coat, and rested his hands on top of his twin laspistols. Wotan prowled a circle around him, growling at the crowd of onlookers.

'Clear a path between me and the door,' said Kal, an almost icy calm in his voice, 'and I promise nobody will get hurt.'

But as soon as he finished, Kal knew he wouldn't be able to keep his promise. Somebody was going to get hurt – him. The crowd had thinned as the regular patrons slipped under tables or backed off to the far wall, but he was still outnumbered by the workers. All of them – dealers, hostesses, security guards and even the waitresses and busboys – stood their ground. Almost as one, they drew weapons and pointed them at Kal.

'Let me rephrase that…' said Kal as he raised his hands into the air. 'Don't hurt me and I promise not to do anything stupid. Well, anything else stupid.'

The burly pit boss in his too-small coat pushed his way through the circle with a couple of even taller and thicker guards. He pulled at his cuffs, ripping the torn sleeve even more. 'Come with us, Mr Jerico,' he said. 'The boss would like to see you.'

Wotan growled, and the pit boss flinched, his eyes widening as he stared at the mechanical mastiff. 'Play nice, Wotan,' said Kal. 'We're going to go talk this out.' He made a patting motion with one hand as he spoke and Wotan quieted.

Kal and Wotan followed the pit boss toward the back door, escorted by the two goons. Kal didn't know what to expect past that door, but figured his chances were better once he wasn't surrounded by weapons.

The pit boss opened the door and Kal stepped into a darkened room. 'Now, I'm sure we can all be reasonable about this…' he began.

'I'm nothing but reasonable, my dear Jerico,' said a familiar voice deep in the darkness.

Kal's hopes flew away. He'd been safer out there in the circular firing squad. 'Hello, Nemo,' he said as the door shut behind him.

Jobe dipped his bloody hands in a bowl of water one of the juves had brought him, rubbing them together beneath the brackish surface to remove as much of the stain as he could. His hands shook, but not from the cold water. With the adrenalin ebbing away after the battle, his old body had begun to tremble. His arms and legs felt like lead slag and the simple act of moving them made his muscles ache and quiver in protest.

Afterward, he sat on the edge of his cot and dried his arms and hands with a dirty towel, contemplating his next move. He needed sleep, that much was

obvious. The attack had left him with the strength of a Spire-bred librarian. Even though he had a threadbare blanket to go with his thin towel – which said a lot about the prosperity of the Soul Savers – this was no longer a safe haven.

The Savers were doing well for themselves to afford such luxuries for a total stranger. He had no intention of bringing doom down upon them by overstaying his welcome. Besides, there must be other Cawdor gangs out there.

'The redemption business seems to be going well,' he mused out loud.

'That it is,' said a rasping voice from the darkness by the door. 'But I thought you were out of the business. In fact, I thought you were dead. Half-hoped you were a few times.'

Francks dropped the towel on the bed and stared into the darkness. He could see the man's form well enough with his cloudy eyes, but didn't need the sight to recognise the voice. 'It would have made things easier, wouldn't it?' he said. 'My death.'

'Probably,' replied the figure in the dark. 'But that's not why I sometimes wished it. I just thought you deserved some peace after all these years.' There was a pause, and then, 'How long has it been?'

'Since you tossed me out into the Wastes?' asked Jobe. A smile flickered across his face for a moment. 'I honestly don't know. Twenty years? It's hard to keep track of the days, let alone your sanity, out in the Wastes.'

The silence that followed was broken only by a single 'Hmmph' from the doorway. Then the figure moved into the dim light of the lantern next to Jobe's bed. 'It was the only way to save your life.'

'I know, Jerod,' replied Jobe, his voice barely above a whisper. 'I know. You did what you could to save my life.'

'Such as it was,' said Jerod Bitten, Jobe's old rival.

Jerod's long, black hair had gone completely white and was now cropped short and straight. Blue eyes that had seen too much death in their day looked grey and tired, as did his wrinkled and gaunt face. Bitten's clothes were clean and new, which was quite a change from the torn and dirty body armour he'd been wearing the last time Jobe had seen him.

He sat on the cot next to Francks. 'What kind of life did I condemn you to in the wastes?' he asked. 'I honestly expected you to die out there. I never thought I would see you again.'

'I always knew I would see you again,' replied Francks.

Bitten nodded. 'I know. The plan, the grand scheme of the Universe.'

'You still have one last part to play,' said Francks. 'A vital role.'

‘Perhaps,’ said Bitten. ‘But not now. You shouldn’t be here now. It’s too dangerous.’

Francks turned to look at his former enemy, staring at a spot just behind the man’s temple with his cloudy eye. After a moment, Bitten stood and walked toward the door, back into the darkness, as if that would stop the sight.

Francks wondered how much Bitten knew about the attack. He’d grown to trust this man in the weeks after Bowdie’s death, but he had been an enemy; freely admitted that he’d sent Francks out into the Wastes to die. *How much can I trust him now?*

‘It’s Ignus, isn’t it?’ asked Francks, deciding to push some buttons to see how Bitten reacted. ‘He sent an assassin after me tonight.’

Bitten stopped pacing in the dark. ‘You were attacked?’ he asked. The surprise seemed genuine. ‘So soon after arriving?’

‘Do you know anything about it?’ asked Francks. The adrenaline began to flow again, calming his nerves and numbing the pain in his arms and legs. ‘Was Ignus behind it?’

‘No,’ replied Bitten after a pause. ‘Jules Ignus is gone.’ Another long pause followed, but Francks waited. He knew there was more to come. ‘I don’t know who sent the assassin. Not many people even knew you were back.’

‘How did you know?’ asked Francks. He leaned back, slipping his hand under the blanket to grab the dagger, just in case.

If Bitten was unnerved by the question, the darkness hid it. ‘The Soul Savers sent word. I have a… uh… an arrangement with them. But someone very powerful, and very well-connected must want you dead.’

‘Why?’ asked Francks. He tightened his grip on the knife. ‘What does anyone have to fear from an old man, withered by time and the Wastes?’

Bitten came back into the light, but kept his head bowed, as if he couldn’t look Francks in the eye. ‘As you said, the redemption business is good. The last thing anyone wants is a prophet coming in from the Wastes with a message of hope. An actual saviour appearing right now would be bad for business. There are many people who wouldn’t want that to happen.’

Silence filled the room. Francks stared at Bitten in his new suit, his face clean and freshly shaved. Sure he’d been an enemy, but he’d also been a holy warrior; a leader of the armies of truth. Now who was he? A businessman feeding off the faith of others?

‘What happened to you, Jerod?’ asked Francks.

Bitten finally looked him in the eye and Francks could see the full weight the

years had left on his oldest, and probably only, friend. He released his hold on the dagger. He had nothing to fear from this man.

'I grew up,' he replied. 'I survived the wars and I matured.'

'You mean you lost your faith,' said Francks.

Bitten nodded, slowly. 'And you'll lose more than that if you continue preaching.'

Francks just smiled. 'If that is the will of the Universe, then who am I to argue?'

Bitten shook his head and sighed. 'You won't leave, will you?'

'No.'

'And you're going to continue to preach the return of Bowdie?'

Francks nodded. 'I cannot turn away from the plan.'

'No, I don't suppose you can,' Bitten reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small package wrapped in linen. 'Then take this. It's not much – all the credits I had on hand, plus a list of names and locations. These are gangs who will take you in, no questions asked. Each one knows how to contact me, if needed.'

'More business relationships?'

Bitten nodded. 'That's all I can do, though. If you don't leave, I won't be able to save you this time.'

'It is not I who needs saving.'

Guilder Tavis sat at his desk and tried to concentrate on the paperwork in front of him. His assistant, Meru, had stacked everything into neat piles. There were contracts for him to read, payments on promissory notes he needed to validate, collection requests that had to be signed, and warrants that needed to be approved and stamped.

He pushed his chair back and grumbled. 'How did Meru let this work pile up so much?' He shoved the nearest pile away, scattering the contracts across the desk and ruining the ordered system his assistant had spent so much time upon. He then stood and paced across the room to another table.

Tavis was a heavy-set man with thick black hair that always seemed unkempt even after he combed it. His roundish face slid into a thick neck, with only a thin, greying goatee separating his chin from his jowls. His thick, flowing robes kept him warm in the dank office, but did little to hide the paunch above his belt. He had the look of a former warrior who had gone soft behind a desk.

In fact, Tavis had once been a ganger in the Underhive, and had only disdain for the guilders in his youth. 'They're soft,' he used to say. 'Without their

bodyguards, they're not so tough. Just a bunch of money-grabbing, noble wannabes. Bankers? Businessmen? Traders? Hah! They're nothing more than parasites, preying on the poor, I say.'

His tune changed when a lucky strike put a sizeable amount of credits in Tavis's pocket. After removing the competition and his former gangmates from the equation, he'd gone straight to a guilder. They formed a partnership and Tavis prospered, especially since his partner's untimely failing health had removed him from the picture as well.

In the end, Tavis had become the epitome of the soft guilder he had once loathed. He ran the whole operation, with extensive help from Meru who better understood the contractual side of the business. Tavis still had a nose for opportunity, and that nose had brought in a lot of revenue over the years.

'And now it's time to reap the benefits,' he said as he looked at the model spread out on the back table.

A scale model of a dome dominated the work table at the back of his office. The table itself was priceless, made of real wood, but Tavis had no eye for the fineries of his office today. He took for granted the thick pile carpeting beneath his feet and the tapestries that hid the dull-grey metallic walls of his downhive abode. This was his baby on the table.

He slid the top of the dome off the model, exposing the interior. Inside sat a model of his new manse. He'd outgrown this small hab in Hive City and as he was no noble, he'd had to go outside the confines of the City to find enough space for a manse that would satisfy his lavish tastes. The entire dome was to be his playground. Huge pools surrounded by imported sculpture. His own theatre where he would import special plays for his entertainment. An immense new manse that would be the envy of guilders and nobles alike. A shining gold dome topped a glittering three-storey abode with a pillared entrance. The central courtyard, dotted with statues, led to the gardens in the rear, complete with fountains.

Tavis knew that this last was purely extravagance. The cost of procuring and caring for live plants alone was more than a mere guilder could afford, but he loved to dream, and the comfort of a huge manse in his very own dome had long been Tavis's dream.

'Who would have thought that a man of such humble beginnings would own a dome one day?' he said as he gazed at the model.

A cough from the door brought Tavis out of his reverie. He looked up to see Meru, dressed in her customary, sensible, beige trouser suit. As usual, she held a

data-slate in one hand and a stylus in the other. Tavis wasn't sure he'd ever seen her without stylus and pad. She was efficient and went to great pains to look the part.

She coughed again. 'Excuse me, sir,' she said. 'A Mr Grondle to see you.'

'Mr Grondle?' he asked. 'Oh, the foreman. You can just call him Grondle. That's his name.'

'Of course, sir,' she replied. 'Shall I show Mr Grondle into your office?'

'At this hour?' Tavis sighed and trudged back to his desk. 'This can't be good news.' He fell into his chair behind the piles of paperwork. 'Yes, yes. Show him in.'

Meru stepped back and a moment later the large foreman stepped through the door.

Tavis immediately yelled, 'Stop!'

Grondle teetered forward on the balls of his feet and waved his pudgy arms around, but was finally able to stop his momentum without toppling over.

'How dare you step foot into my office looking like that,' continued Tavis. 'You will not soil my carpet with that filth.'

Grondle was indeed a sight to behold. His shirt, which might once have been white was now stained brown and grey with a mixture of sweat, dirt and mortar. His trousers were smeared with more of the same. Grondle's thick beard and hair were matted against his sweaty, red face. Every once in a while a bit of slime dripped off his beard onto his shoulder, while brown streaks ran like muddy rivers down his glistening arms to hands that were practically encased in sludge.

'You will report from there.'

Grondle wrung his hands, which sent a cascade of dirt hurtling toward the rug. Tavis opened his mouth to scream at the man again, but decided it would only prolong the filthy foreman's stay in his formerly clean office. At last, Grondle screwed up enough courage to start his report.

'I'm sorry to tell ye, sir,' he began, 'There's been another accident at the construction site.'

After all the build-up, this revelation came as no surprise to Tavis. 'How much time will this one set us back?'

'It's worse than time, sir,' replied Grondle. 'We lost a dozen men at least.'

'Lost?'

'Buried, sir. That massive rockslide at the edge of the dome gave way and killed an entire crew.'

'I repeat,' said Tavis, drumming his fingers on his desk. 'How much time will

this cost me?'

'I dunno, sir,' said Grondle. 'It all depends… '

'On what?' Tavis stood and came around the desk, staring Grondle down until the large foreman balked and looked away.

'On whether I can get the men I need to do the work.' Tavis opened his mouth to protest, but Grondle pressed on, perhaps trying to get it all out quickly so it would hurt less. 'There's been half-a-dozen accidents in the past six months alone. It's been hard enough to get workers and today I lost twelve men and another twelve walked off the job after we dug out the bodies.'

'Hire more men,' said Tavis. He strode over toward Grondle. You're the foreman. Personnel issues are your problem.'

'That's what I'm telling ye, sir,' said Grondle. He began to wring his hands again and then noticed the pile of ash and dirt on the carpet below him and stopped. 'I can't get anyone else to work for me. The men think this project is cursed. Nobody will work on it anymore… at least not at the wages we're paying.'

Tavis yelled right in Grondle's face. 'We're already paying twice the scale rate!' He stormed back to the model. 'And we're not anywhere closer to this than when we started two years ago.'

'What can I do, sir?' asked Grondle. 'Without men, we can't do the work.'

'Then find men!' screamed Tavis. 'I don't care where. I don't care how. But you get workers into that dome or you'll be scraping waste from the bottom of Dust Falls until your hair falls out and your eyes bulge.'

'How do I…?'

'Whatever it takes, Grondle,' said Tavis. 'You do whatever it takes to get the job done, do you hear me?'

'Yes sir.'

Now get your filthy carcass out of my office. And send Meru in here with a mop and a broom.'

It took a few minutes for Kal's eyes to adjust to the dim light. The only illumination came from a bank of vid screens arrayed in a semi-circle facing the back wall. Nemo, master spy of the Underhive, collector of confidential information, keeper of arcane secrets, purveyor of archaic tech and personal pain in the rump for Kal Jerico, sat in a high-backed chair in the middle of the monitors.

But even though he was bathed in the warm glow of the screens, the spymaster

looked like a silhouette. He was dressed from head to toe in a form-fitting, flat black fabric that seemed to drink in the light. He would have been impossible to see against the black chair if not for the reflective helmet that covered his head. Kal could almost make out the images on the screens reflected in Nemo's smoked-glass mask.

The bounty hunter could sense other presences in the room as well. There was the pit boss and his two goons behind him, but a low growl and a snap of Wotan's jaws beside him confirmed there were other guards lurking in the shadows to the side.

'You have me at a distinct disadvantage, Nemo,' said Kal, adding 'again,' under his breath.

'And you owe me a lot of credits, Jerico,' replied the spymaster. Kal couldn't even tell if Nemo was looking at him or not. Even as Nemo spoke, the chair swivelled back and forth to face one and then another of the vid screens. It was a little disconcerting. 'How would you like to settle up? Cash or an IOU?'

Kal weighed his options for only a second. He had no cash and would never sign a debt note to Nemo; at least not again. He decided to try a third option. 'I don't accept the premise of your statement, Nemo,' he began. 'That game was rigged. I owe you nothing. And if you want to dispute it, I suggest we take the matter up with the local guild magistrate.'

'Oh, there's no dispute,' said Nemo. 'You bet and lost… doubled. I have an entire room full of people who will attest to that.'

Kal barrelled onward. 'But your hostess pushed me all in so your dealer could beat me with his rigged hand. All I need is one person at that table to fold under the scrutiny of the guild magistrate. Do you have that much confidence in your people?'

An odd noise emanated from behind Nemo's mask. It sounded like tar bubbles popping in quick succession or the sound of far-off gunfire. After a moment, Kal realised that the spymaster was laughing. He looked around the dim room, but none of the black shapes had moved or even said anything since Kal had entered. Perhaps there was something on one of Nemo's monitors that had made him laugh.

'What's so funny?' he asked, finally.

'You don't know how right you are, Jerico,' said Nemo.

'So, I'm free to go?'

'No, no. When you called them my people.' The sentence was punctuated with that disconcerting, rapid-fire laugh again. 'There's no one out there who will

speak against me. I think you know that. And as for the magistrate, I believe he was the man to your left at the table.'

At that, the entire room erupted in laughter.

'You lost, Jerico,' said Nemo. 'Yes, Stella bet all of your chips. But you went along with the bet, even after the double, and you lost. Now you owe me a great deal of money, and I ask once again, how do you plan to pay?'

'But, but…' sputtered Kal.

'Bring on the magistrate, Jerico,' continued Nemo. 'In fact, Jock, go fetch the magistrate right now. He's probably still trying to win back the money he owes me. We can take care of this tonight, and then tomorrow you, Kal Jerico, will be in the slave pits for failure to pay your debt.'

The pit boss turned to leave. Kal was getting flustered. Why did his meetings with Nemo always end so poorly? 'Wait,' he called out. 'I'll sign the IOU.' At least that would give him some time to find a way out of this mess.

'I have a better idea,' said Nemo. He turned toward the side wall and flipped a few switches on a board. 'I have a bounty that needs hunting. You bring in this man for me and I will wipe your slate clean.'

'One bounty and no more debt?' asked Kal. 'That's a high price for a single head. Sounds too good to be true.'

'Oh, not just this debt, Jerico, but all of your previous debts to me. You still owe me over that little matter with the Underhive vampire last year, not to mention the deaths of several of my best men over the past few years.'

Kal blanched even further. If Nemo was willing to forgive and forget on all of their past business dealings, then this bounty would be tough to collect. 'What's the catch?' he asked.

'You must bring him in alive,' said Nemo. 'He is of no use to me dead, so keep your buxom partner on a tight leash. There is no half-bounty for a head in a sack.'

'That's it?' asked Kal. 'Doesn't sound too hard. Just give me the particulars and Wotan and I will go take our leave to begin tracking down this dangerous fugitive.'

'Not so fast, Jerico,' said Nemo. He flipped another switch.

The room went white. Kal raised his arm to shield his eyes, but was blinded for a moment by the sudden assault of bright light. Wotan growled and barked, but the rasping sound that Kal had always likened to the revving of a chain blade stopped abruptly. He then heard laughing again, but this time it was almost a childish giggling, and he was almost certain there were two distinct pitches in

the laughter.

Kal tried to move toward Wotan, but his eyes were blurry and stars filled his vision. As he wiped the stars from his bleary eyes, hands grabbed him from either side and slammed him into the wall.

When Kal could see again, he found Jock, the pit boss, and his two goons holding him in place against the wall. Nemo was still at his chair, but the other two guards were slapping each other's hands, jumping into the air, and slamming into each other, giggling and laughing like girls.

He recognised the guards, now that he could see them in the light. It was the twins who liked to be called 'Seek' and 'Destroy'. Wotan had sat on one or the other during the whole Underhive Vampire fiasco, giving Kal enough time to handle the situation in his own inimitable style.

Wotan now lay at the feet of the cavorting twins, shackles around his legs and a steel muzzle holding his strong, metallic jaws shut tight.

'What is the meaning of this?' asked Kal.

'Collateral.'

'What?'

'It's simple,' said Nemo. 'You bring me Jobe Francks, alive, and you get your cyber-mastiff back, alive. If not…'

3: NEW ENEMIES

Cardinal Crimson basked in the adoration of his flock, the warmth of his convictions, and the glow of the molten pits of acid and waste surrounding him.

'We bring not judgement upon the wicked,' he called out to the gathered throng of Redemptionists. 'We bring holy salvation. Let all who have sinned, be they unbelievers or witch-wyrds, blasphemers or debauchers, heretics or mutants, cleanse their souls in the scalding bath of truth.'

He paced back and forth atop a rocky abutment, his dais, and gestured to the hundreds of believers who lined the bubbling, green pools below. As his followers chanted 'Burn their sins, burn their sins, burn their sins away!' Crimson raised his arms above him and looked skyward, as if peering through the miles of rock and metal of the hive to the face of the Undying Emperor himself.

The flowing sleeves of his red robes fell back revealing arms that were little more than patches of blackened skin over exposed muscle and pitted bones. Strips of sinew and tattered shreds of leathery, flaking skin barely held together skeletal hands.

'Let them find salvation everlasting in the flaming fire of our faith,' he continued. 'Let them reflect on their evil ways as we burn their sins away. Let righteous redemption come to them at the end of their wicked days. It is the way. It is the will. It is the commandment of our Lord and Saviour, the Undying Emperor.'

The chanting grew louder and faster at the utterance of His name, becoming a single word over and over: 'Burn. Burn. Burn!'

Crimson tossed back his hood and dropped his robes to the ground, standing half-naked before the fervent mass with his arms raised to the heavens. The burned flesh extended across his entire body. Not a single strand of hair was left on his head or chest. Large chunks of skin seemed to have been eaten away,

exposing ribs, muscles, and even organs. What flesh remained was blackened or glowed bright red as if inflamed. His eyes bulged in empty sockets beneath the bare skull of his forehead. His large, hooked nose remained intact, but his lips seemed to have been completely dissolved, leaving the Cardinal with a permanent, grizzly smile.

'I, who have walked through the fire of faith and bathed in the burning acid of truth will reveal the path to the wicked,' chanted Crimson. 'It is the will. It is the way.'

The chanting paused as the crowd intoned the words back. 'It is the will. It is the way.'

Crimson lowered his bony hands and pointed to the wings of his cavernous cathedral. 'Bring forth the heretics!' he called, 'and let them bathe in the truth this day.'

The crowd intoned again on cue: 'It is the will. It is the way!'

Two groups of Cawdor gangers, resplendent in clean blue cloaks and gleaming orange armour, climbed onto the abutment, dragging captives up the rocky slope behind them. Where the gangers were freshly bathed and dressed in new or cleaned clothes, the captives were dirty, and what was left of their clothing was torn and bloody. Multiple bruises and cuts showed through the gaps in their clothes, and most were barely conscious.

One group struggled with an Escher woman who pulled at her chains and spat at her captors. 'You brainwashed sons of ratskins can all go straight to bottom of the sump and rot!' she screamed.

The bronze mohawk that swept over her head into a ponytail was matted with blood and large patches of hair had obviously been ripped out. The gang tattoos she wore across her forehead and above her ears were marred in several places by long gashes. Blood had pooled and dried around her ears and nose, while sweat and dirt streaked her bruised and battered arms, legs and torso.

Still, the thick-muscled woman towered over her captors. She glared at them as they pulled her across the raised outcrop and yanked on the chains shackled to her wrists, pulling over two of her captors. 'I will not burn for your enjoyment!' she yelled as she ran, half-stumbling, toward the edge of the flat, rocky dais.

The other gang members, holding their own captives, could only watch as she made a break for the wings of the cave. Before she could reach the edge, Cardinal Crimson leapt from his spot in the centre of the dais, landing between her and freedom.

'No,' he said, loud enough for the congregation to hear. 'You will burn for your

own salvation.' With that, Crimson grabbed the tall, powerfully-built Escher by the neck and leg and lifted her over his head. He took two steps forward and tossed her off the edge of the rock like a sack of garbage. She soared, screaming and cursing, through the air, landing in the bubbling pool of acid. Her screams intensified into an incoherent wail as she sunk into the roiling mass. The acrid smell of charred flesh wafted over the crowd, who had resumed their chant of 'Burn, burn, burn!'

One by one, the other captives were given unto the cleansing pool, and with each redeemed soul the chanting grew more fervent until the words echoed throughout the cavern. After the last body had been consumed by the pools, Cardinal Crimson, now fully robed once again, stood alone on the rocky platform and raised his hands toward the heavens. The chanting ceased immediately.

'The souls of the wicked have been cleansed today and we have sent them to their final reward at the left hand of the Undying Emperor,' he intoned. 'Go forth and spread the word. Go forth and bring the heretics unto me and I will bathe them in the holy fire of Redemption.'

The enthralled masses replied as one: 'It is the will. It is the way.'

The service concluded, Cardinal Crimson bowed his head and left the dais. He was immediately surrounded by a retinue of gangers and robed deacons who escorted him through the teeming crowd. Parishioners surged forward, hoping to get near or even touch their leader, but the circle of bodyguards shoved back, forcing open a path through the masses, and sending more than one congregant into the acid pools as they guided the Cardinal to safety.

One of the deacons, a middle-aged man named Ralan with thin black hair slicked off to one side, a piercing look to his eyes, and an acid burn that wrapped around his neck in the rough shape of a hand, walked to the side but always just behind Crimson. He cleared his throat, as if trying to get the Cardinal's attention, but afraid to speak out of turn.

After a few minutes of coughing and clearing his throat, the deacon opened his mouth. 'Cardinal?' he asked. 'A message arrived for you during the service, and I knew you would want to read it as soon as possible.'

Crimson glanced at the deacon. 'You read the message?'

'Of course not, sir.' Ralan bowed his head in contrition. 'But it came from that special messenger. The one you hired recently, sir. I knew the matter to be urgent.'

Ralan held up an envelope. Crimson, galled at the impertinence and stupidity of

the man to bring this matter to him in such a public place, snatched the envelope out of his hand. He glared at Ralan until he fell out of his customary position back into the crowd of deacons and bodyguards at the rear of the procession.

Crimson opened the message and read it quickly. It was only four lines, but he read it twice to make sure that it wasn't a mistake.

'May the Undying Emperor damn him to the depths of the Underhive,' he muttered under his breath. He looked back at Ralan. 'Did the messenger wait for a reply?' he asked.

The deacon nodded his head, his lips pursed tight together.

'Good. We shall have further need of him,' said Crimson. He continued on in silence for a few minutes, then asked, 'And what of that other matter?'

Ralan looked pained to have to answer verbally, but finally unpursed his lips and said 'It is being taken care of, sir.'

'Be sure that it is, Ralan. Be sure that it is.'

Kal sat at his regular table in the Sump Hole nursing a Wild Snake. Normally, he would have gulped down the entire bottle in a single shot, snake and all, mostly to avoid actually tasting the vile stuff. But it *was* morning, plus he had a lot on his mind. His pockets were empty, his worst enemy was holding his best friend hostage and even if he did find this Jobe Francks, that still wouldn't get back the money he had lost at the tables.

All in all, it should have been a fairly normal morning for Kal Jerico, but he knew it was about to get worse.

'Fry up some millisaur eggs, bud,' called a familiar voice. 'And don't try to pass off giant spider eggs like last time. And bring me a Snake to wash it down with.'

Yolanda dropped into the chair opposite Kal without even looking at the bounty hunter. 'Nothing worse than the taste of that man's eggs,' she said. 'Except the aftertaste they leave behind.'

Kal took a long draught from his bottle and tried not to make eye contact with his partner. But he could see her looking at him now through the murk of the half-filled bottle. She cocked her head to one side, regarding him with a raised eyebrow.

'What in the hive is the matter with you, Jerico?' she asked. 'It looks like you lost your best friend…'

Kal stared at his bottle.

'Oh, no!' she said. 'It's Scabbs isn't it? What happened?'

Kal broke his silence. ‘It’s not Scabbs, though I haven’t seen him yet this morning. It’s worse.’

‘Oh no!’ said Yolanda. ‘You lost our money, didn’t you?’

She slammed her fist down on the table so hard, it knocked Kal’s bottle over. Kal’s hand whipped out and caught the bottle by the neck and righted it without spilling a drop. ‘It’s even worse than that,’ said Kal. ‘I lost Wotan.’

Yolanda had raised her hand up and pointed a finger at Kal, but stopped in mid-gesture. ‘The dog?’ she asked. ‘That’s why you’re so bummed? You lost your stupid dog?’

Kal nodded, not even bothering to correct her. Wotan was a cyber-mastiff, no mere dog.

‘But the money’s okay, right?’ she asked.

Kal shook his head.

‘Kal Jerico! You scavving idiot!’

Yolanda jumped to her feet and slammed both fists onto the table. This time there was no saving the bottle. It bounced right off the edge and shattered on the floor.

‘It still gets worse,’ said Kal, figuring at this point, she couldn’t get any madder.

‘How?’

Kal snapped his fingers toward the bartender to get another bottle. ‘Well, it’s a long story that involves Nemo and Cardinal Crimson.’

‘Holy, scavving Helmawr’s rump!’ she cried. Her face was now so red that the tattoos running across her forehead and temples practically pulsed and glowed.

‘Yolanda, you’d better sit down and take a breath before your head explodes,’ said Kal. ‘And let me explain how this wasn’t my fault.’

‘That’s not terribly likely,’ she said. Just then her eggs and Snake showed up, so Yolanda sat.

With Yolanda glaring at him over a plate of runny, grey millisaur eggs and a bottle of foul-smelling homebrew, Kal described how he’d been tricked into losing the money and then forced by Nemo to take on a bounty to get his cyber-mastiff out of hock.

Yolanda pushed the empty plate away and downed the rest of her Snake. ‘So, how does Crimson enter into all of this?’ she asked.

‘Well, this Francks character is some sort of Cawdor prophet who wandered into the hive from out of the Wastes,’ said Kal. ‘Crimson supposedly knows something about his history that might help us find him.’

‘So what are we supposed to do?’ asked Yolanda. ‘Just walk up to Crimson and

ask him to turn over his precious prophet?'

'That was pretty much my plan,' replied Kal.

'Are you scavving crazy?' she yelled. She slammed her bottle down on the table, rattling the dish dangerously close to the edge. Kal could see her tattoos begin to throb again. 'Every time we get mixed up with those two lunatics, we end up smelling worse than…'

Scabbs walked up, preceded by his odour. Yolanda gagged and it looked like she might toss her breakfast back onto the table. 'Well, worse than him after taking a bath in raw sewage.'

'Hey, I took a bath after that, I'll have you know,' snorted Scabbs. He plopped down into the last chair with an audible squish.

'Maybe next time you should use soap,' snapped Yolanda.

'And water,' added Kal.

'You just keep your trap shut, Jerico,' she snarled. 'You have no right to talk to him that way this morning.'

Scabbs scratched at a patch of skin hanging from his chin. 'Did I miss something?' he asked.

Yolanda jabbed her finger at Kal. 'Mr Lucky lost all our money and his dog last night *and* ran us afoul of both Nemo and Crimson.'

Scabbs glanced back and forth from Yolanda to Kal, with an odd expression on his scabby face that Kal couldn't quite read. 'Is that all?' he finally asked. 'That's a pretty normal day's work for Kal Jerico. Besides, I'm sure he's got a brilliant plan to get back Wotan and our money, don't you Kal?' He looked at Kal with a big smile on his face.

'Yes, Jerico,' purred Yolanda. 'Tell Scabbs your brilliant plan.'

Kal looked at the doting smile on Scabbs face and the sarcastic smirk on Yolanda's – and found inspiration. 'I did have a good plan,' he said, 'But in times of need, I think it's always best to turn to our friends and family, don't you?'

The smile and smirk disappeared from both of their faces, replaced by the furrowed brows of befuddlement. 'Yolanda, I want you to contact the Wildcats and find out anything you can about Cawdor gang activity that might point the way toward Francks.'

'That's actually a pretty good idea, Jerico,' she said. 'What are you going to do?'

'Scabbs and I are going to pay a visit to an old friend who can keep an eye on Crimson for us and let us know when Francks contacts our acidic Cardinal

friend.'

Scabbs smiled again and clapped Yolanda on the shoulder. 'See Yolanda? What'd I tell you? Kal's on the job.'

Jobe Francks checked the information Bitten had given him and then looked at the building in front of him. It was always tough to locate anything in the Underhive. It wasn't like the buildings had addresses painted on the walls. Most didn't even have walls. But this had to be the place. The note said 'North corner of Glory Hole settlement, orange two storey building'.

Perhaps he was just tired. He had been up for twenty-four hours now, and he'd been travelling all night through the Underhive, which is tough for a juve let alone someone his age, but this two storey building didn't look like a Cawdor gang hideout.

For one thing, all of the walls, doors and windows were intact. For another thing, he'd seen no patrols or guards, and here he was supposedly standing outside the front door to – he checked the parchment Bitten had given him again – the Universal Saviours.

Lastly, there were no slogans painted on the side of the building, or anywhere along the street for that matter. No 'Death to the heretics' or 'Praise be to the Undying Emperor' anywhere to be seen. Not even a single 'Be Saved or Die' banner. It was refreshing to say the least. Even in his day, the hardliners were already in the majority. It seemed it was much easier to convert people to an absolute faith than one that depended too much on personal beliefs.

Still, Francks was sure even a moderate gang would have an extreme reaction to a stranger wandering into their hideout, so he knocked on the door first. A few moments later, a much too young voice behind the door asked, 'What's the password?'

Jerod had said nothing about a password. Jobe tried the simple approach. 'Bitten sent me!' he called through the door.

He could hear sounds of footsteps and hushed voices through the door. A moment later, the door opened a crack. A young pair of eyes just visible beneath long, straight hair peered out at him through the gap. 'Are you Mr Francks?'

Jobe almost laughed. He didn't think he'd ever been called mister before. 'Yeah,' he replied. 'Jobe Francks. Can I come in?'

The door closed again and he could hear more hushed voices. Then the door opened all the way and he walked in. As soon as the door closed, Francks slapped the young juve across the temple with the back of his hand.

‘Don’t you ever open the door again unless you hear the password,’ he growled. ‘Do you understand?’

‘But Mr Bitten told us to expect you, Mr Francks,’ he protested, his voice rising into a whine.

‘And you have only my word that I am Jobe Francks, he snapped back. ‘What if I’d been some rival gang member, huh? You’d all be dead right now because you opened the door without authorization.’ Francks looked around the room. There were maybe half-a-dozen juves sitting around tables. He couldn’t tell what they had been doing; perhaps playing cards. There were no weapons and no upper echelon gang members in sight.

‘Where is your leader?’ he asked the long-haired juve. ‘Where’s the rest of the gang? And why aren’t you juves cleaning weapons or at least guarding the hideout?’

The kid ran long fingers through his stringy hair, pushing the strands off his face for the moment. Francks could see the fear in his eyes – more fear than there should have been even given the browbeating he was currently undergoing.

‘Every… everyone’s out,’ he stammered. ‘They were… we’ve been called out by the Righteous Saviours. They all left hours ago.’

Tears welled up in the juve’s eyes and Francks softened a bit, putting an arm around the kid’s neck and leading him to one of the tables. ‘It’s been bad, hasn’t it?’

The young juve plopped into the chair. Even without his cloudy-eyed sight, Francks could see the weight this kid was carrying. There was every chance he’d be the leader of the Universal Saviours by nightfall.

‘They say we harbour heretics,’ he began, ‘but we don’t. It’s just that our leader, Breland, won’t condemn every wyrd and unbeliever on sight. He says, “We are all on separate paths to salvation, but the paths converge to a single point, like spokes on a wheel.”’

‘Breland sounds like a smart leader,’ said Francks, adding to himself, ‘perhaps a little too smart for his own good.’ He looked around the room again. Like outside, there were no slogans painted on the walls, no altars of fire or sacred pools of acid. What he did see were books. Lots and lots of books. An expensive habit, thought Francks. Bound tomes were virtual relics, worth at least triple their number in weapons.

He now realised that the juves had all been reading when he came in. Francks looked at the books on the table in front of him and recognised a couple of titles: *The Universal Path* and *Questioning the Truth*. Bowdie had forced him to read

these when he was just a juve. They had been sacrilegious works even then. One said that the Undying Emperor was more an ideal – a universal force – than a god, and that all would be saved if they just walked the path of a virtuous man. The other taught that reason and forgiveness were the supreme qualities of man, that intolerance and hatred were the hallmarks of a limited mind.

Francks could see now why the Universal Saviours had run afoul of other Cawdor. They were espousing heretical ideas. It was a wonder they had survived this long. 'Where is the meeting?' he asked.

The long-haired juve looked at Francks and then at his fellow Saviours. They all shrugged, leaving the decision up to him. 'At an abandoned factory not too far from here,' he said. 'I can show you the way.'

Francks shook his head. 'No. You stay here and keep your brothers safe until I return,' he said. 'Don't open that door unless you hear the password, and hide these books somewhere safe. They're worth more than your lives. Any of our lives.'

Markel Bobo was taking it easy. He'd been out of work for days, which suited him just fine. The life of an intelligence gatherer tended to be stressful and he'd been in dire need of some downtime. So, for the last few days, he'd hardly moved from the parlour of Madam Noritake's House of Fun – at least not until Jenn Strings finished her last client of the day. Then the two of them would retire to Bobo's room upstairs, which was paid up for another month at least.

Officially, Bobo was on the payroll of House Helmawr, but he'd just finished one job and was waiting for new orders. In the meantime, he had decided to forego freelance work and spend more time with Jenn.

So, Bobo sat in an overstuffed chair, drink at his elbow and cigar in his hand, watching the unending parade of flesh that passed back and forth through the parlour. None of the girls paid any attention to Bobo – they all knew he belonged to Jenn – and none of the clients even noticed him. A small, nondescript man, Bobo stood well short of two metres and weighed little more than the slightest of Madam Noritake's girls. He had a forgettable face topped by short, thinning hair of an unremarkable colour.

As always, Markel wore slightly rumpled, loose-fitting, beige and grey clothes. He blended into every background, an effect he worked quite hard to perfect. While there were no weapons visible on or near Bobo's body, he could disembowel a man in a second with any number of sharp implements secreted away within easy reach.

He didn't expect any trouble but, as a general rule, Bobo knew that was exactly when trouble sought you out. Right now, he was waiting for trouble, hopefully of the paying kind, but he wouldn't bet on it.

'Good morning, Markel,' said a familiar voice from the doorway.

'Morning, Kal,' replied Bobo between puffs on his cigar. 'Sit down. I've already ordered you a drink.'

Kal dropped into the chair opposite Bobo, picked up the glass, and downed its contents. 'How'd you know I was coming?'

'Word travels fast in the Underhive, Kal,' said Bobo. 'Plus, your friend there does tend to announce himself well before he arrives.' He pointed at Scabbs, who had sprawled on a couch, sending a cloud of dirt, dried skin, and noxious fumes into the air.

'I need your help,' said Kal. He waved at the bartender to get another drink.

'So I gathered,' said Bobo. 'You never come around just to drink.'

Kal smiled. 'I drank, and I'll drink again.' He took the glass from the bartender, downed it in a single gulp, and then slammed it on the table beside him. 'But, I also came to warn you that Nemo seems to be collecting on old debts.'

Bobo took a long drag on his cigar and puffed an intricate series of smoke rings that practically danced in and around each other. 'Hasn't forgiven you for beating him to Armand's stolen intel, eh?' he asked. 'Or is he still sore about what we did to his two thugs?'

'The twins?' asked Kal with a smirk. 'They were hardly thugs. More like clowns with guns. What did they call themselves?'

Bobo thought for a moment and then smiled as well. 'Seek and Destroy. I remember Wotan sat on one of them.'

'Good times,' said Kal with a chuckle, but his smile faded quickly. 'And now Wotan is paying for it. Nemo's taken my cyber-mastiff hostage and is forcing me to bring in a bounty to trade for him. If I know Nemo, it won't be an even trade. We may be next.'

Bobo stamped his cigar out in the empty glass, leaned forward, and lowered his voice. 'That might explain some odd news I heard yesterday,' he said.

Kal leaned in as well. 'What was that?'

'Business first,' said Bobo. 'I assume you can pay for my services, right?' Bobo actually assumed just the opposite, but it was fun to watch Kal try to squirm out of paying his debts.

'Well, actually, I'm a bit tight at the moment,' said Kal with a sheepish green. 'You know how it is.'

‘I do,’ said Bobo. ‘Probably better than most. So, what are you offering?’

Kal looked almost upset at Bobo’s gruff, business-like manner. ‘Do you talk to all members of the royal line of House Helmawr like that?’ he asked.

Bobo took another long puff on his cigar. ‘You’re like, what? Forty-second in line?’

Kal looked almost completely deflated. Bobo could tell he was off his game today. Nemo must really have him worried. ‘Look,’ said the little spy, ‘put in a good word with your cousin Valtin the next time you talk and I’m all yours.’

Kal smiled. ‘You are too good to me,’ he said.

‘You’re right,’ said Bobo. ‘But as you say, I do need to keep the royal line happy.’ He handed Kal one of his cigars.

‘So what was this odd news you heard?’ said Kal as he took the cigar and lit it up.

‘It seems someone is hiring assassins on the QT,’ replied Bobo. ‘I don’t know who or why, or who’s being targeted.’

Kal puffed on his cigar and pondered the news. ‘What does that have to do with me?’

‘Perhaps this bounty hunt is just an elaborate setup to get you killed,’ said Bobo. ‘It’s just the kind of complex setup Nemo loves.’

‘Great,’ said Kal. ‘Just what I need. Not only do I have to deal with Nemo and Crimson, but now assassins? This case just gets better and better.’

‘Crimson?’ said Bobo, his eyebrow arching. ‘Cardinal Crimson?’

‘That’s the thing,’ said Kal. ‘Nemo’s bounty is some sort of Cawdor prophet. One of Crimson’s crew, I guess. Only we can’t get close to his holiness…’

‘Yeah,’ said Scabbs. ‘He wants Kal dead even more than Nemo. Probably because Kal dropped him in that pool of acid.’

Kal blew a cloud of smoke into Scabbs’s face. ‘…so we were hoping you could watch his craziness for us.’

‘You want me to get close to Crimson?’ said Bobo. ‘That rates more than just a mention to cousin Valtin,’ but Bobo was smiling now. This actually sounded like fun and he was getting bored. ‘But this goes into the debt column should you ever advance those forty-one steps up to the throne. I’ll even put out some feelers to see if I can track down who’s hiring those assassins.’

‘Great,’ said Kal. ‘Thanks. Yolanda’s out checking her gang contacts to see if we can flush out this prophet. We’ll follow up with her and contact you later.’

Bobo stared at Kal. ‘She’s out there alone? Isn’t that kind of risky if Nemo’s on the warpath?’

‘Oh I wouldn’t worry about Yolanda,’ said Kal. ‘She can take care of herself.’

‘Damn that Jerico,’ grumbled Yolanda as she trudged through a tunnel connecting two domes. She hardly looked where she was walking, letting her legs take her on the all-too-familiar path back to her roots – back to the lair of the Wildcats – while her mind wandered back to a life that was, but wasn’t, her own.

Yolanda, daughter of House Catallus, had long ago given up the boring, phoney, political life of a Spire brat to go live downhive where she could enjoy life on the edge. There, her fiery temper found her on the wrong side of one too many arguments with the Underhive’s male-dominated society, which led her to the Escher, a House of strong women and subjugated men.

But even the Hive City Houses were too tame for Yolanda Catallus, and so she pushed her way down into the dark places where only the strongest survive, where men and women are forced to fight to survive. The Wildcats took her in, nurtured her violent nature and eventually made her their leader. Yolanda had finally found her home. Until Kal Jerico came to take her back.

‘That was the day you ruined my life, Jerico,’ she called out to no one.

The Wildcats wouldn’t take her back once they found out who she really was. A Spire brat had no place leading an Escher gang. Not even one as bloodthirsty as Yolanda Catallus. But life changes. It’s the only constant in the Underhive.

‘You either move when the acid comes pouring down or you get washed away as so much detritus,’ said Yolanda, repeating an old, Underhive proverb.

So, Yolanda became a bounty hunter. It was really the only life left to her. Her main skills all involved violence and death, and this allowed her to stay at least a hair’s breadth on the right side of legal. How she became partners with Kal Jerico, though, even Yolanda didn’t truly understand and she bemoaned her fate nearly every day.

‘Kal Jerico will be the death of me yet,’ she grumbled.

‘I think you’re wrong about that,’ replied a booming voice from behind her.

‘Helmawr’s rump!’ said Yolanda, snapping out of her reverie. ‘How could I have been so stupid?’

The tunnel she’d been walking through had long ago fallen into disrepair. I-beams, pipes and metal plates had been scavenged from the domes at both ends to shore up the walls and repair cave-ins. It was like walking though a metallic jungle. Yolanda had even had to push strands of tin piping out of her way several times as she walked through. She had done so automatically, without thinking –

without keeping an eye out for the hidden dangers.

Now she would pay the price for her daydreaming. Two Goliaths stepped out from behind a sheet of steel ahead of her. Chains dangling from metallic shoulder pads stretched across their massive chests to thick, leather ammo belts at their waists. Other than bits of metal armour and chains, both were practically naked. Their muscles rippled, glistening with sweat in the dim light of the tunnel.

One pulled the ripcord on his chainsword and it screamed to life. The other raised an autocannon up to his hip, hardly even needing his second hand to steady the monstrous weapon.

'Maybe it's us Goliaths who are so smart, eh?' the booming voice behind her was still audible over the grinding metal-on-metal screech of the chainsword.

Yolanda turned her head just enough to look back down the tunnel without taking her eyes off the two gangers ahead of her. The speaker, a Goliath by the name of Gonth, stood with his massive hands on his hips. Yolanda saw what looked like a meltagun slung at his waist, just below one hand.

She recognised Gonth by his bright red mohawk and by the one missing ear. A nasty-looking gash ran from the scabbed-over wound all the way down and across his jaw line to his chin. Blood seeped from the wound, staining his iron shoulder armour with streaks of red. Gonth had been Grak's second-in-command until yesterday when she and Kal turned Grak's head in for the bounty.

Gonth was flanked by two more Goliaths. Both held shotguns ready and aimed at her. The three of them had apparently been standing behind a mass of beams and pipes waiting for her to pass. Now she was caught in the middle. Five on one, she thought. Hardly sporting odds. She decided to handle the situation in her normal manner – by turning up the heat.

'Sorry about the ear,' said Yolanda. She turned her body to the side to give both sides a smaller target and allow her to see all five without turning her head too far. As she turned, Yolanda moved her hands toward the pistols at her waist. 'I was aiming for your neck.'

The firefight had already started by the time Jobe got to the factory. He could hear laspistols and bolters blasting as he slipped inside. Most of the metal sheeting that formed the walls of the factory had been stripped off long ago, leaving just a maze of support beams at ground level.

Jobe darted from beam to beam, working his way ever closer to the action. He passed a makeshift ladder – pipes screwed into a beam – which led to a second

level, and decided to climb up to gain the high ground. Of course, high ground usually also meant higher visibility to the enemy but Jobe felt a sudden urgency to find the Universal Saviours quickly.

The second level looked much like the first, only with less flooring. There were far fewer support beams to hide behind up top as well. Apparently, this had been a wide-open section of the factory. Perhaps an assembling room or mass storage. The bigger problem was the floor, or rather the lack of one. It was a patchwork metal grating and wide open areas criss-crossed by beams.

Jobe dropped to his hands and knees and crawled forward. He wasn't worried about falling so much as staying undetected, especially since all he brought to this gunfight was a knife. A stray slug whizzed overhead as he crouched and he could smell the acrid, electrical odour of burnt ozone. He was definitely getting close to the action. A little further along he began to hear voices.

'Quit hiding, you heretics,' yelled a nasal voice. 'Come out and accept your salvation like men.'

The taunt was answered by a hail of slugs, which was immediately silenced by the loud report of a laspistol.

'I got one, Tyler,' yelled another, higher pitched voice. 'I think I got one of those lousy Unies.'

Jobe had found the Righteous Saviours and they had the high ground. He could see at least five of them, crouching behind the few beams that extended through the second level to the roof above. Each had a patch of flooring behind them and an opening to fire through. They had chosen their spot well. It appeared the Universal Saviours had walked into a trap.

As his gang shot down into the dark, the one called Tyler kept slinging insults at the rival gang. 'You Unies are worse than wyrds and muties,' he called. 'They're abominations, sure. But you chose to live as a Uni. The Undying Emperor will see you all burn.'

The ganger with the high-pitched voice started to chant. 'Muties and Unies and Wyrds,' he began. 'Burn. Burn. Burn.'

Soon the entire gang, Tyler included, was chanting in between shots. 'Muties and Unies and Wyrds – Burn. Burn. Burn.'

The whole scene reminded Jobe of another place and time. Against his will, his eyes clouded over, turning the present-day world completely white. Then he could see again, but he was crouching next to Syris Bowdie, their backs pressed up against the crumbling wall of a burned out building!

'Syris!' he exclaimed. 'How…?'

‘An ambush, that’s how,’ replied Syris. ‘Ignus knew we couldn’t turn our backs on a soul reaching out for salvation.’

Francks remembered now. They had learned that a witch-wyrd was in trouble, physically and spiritually. She wanted salvation, but had turned to the wrong set of Cawdor for help. Jules had her tied to a stake in the centre of Acid Hole and was preparing to light her up. When Syris and his gang showed up, they were immediately caught in a crossfire as Jules’s men had taken up position on the surrounding rooftops.

‘Come out, come out wherever you are,’ called Ignus in his damnable sing-song voice. ‘Come out and join your wyrd pal, Bowdie! We can have a twofer.’

Jobe tried to remember how they had got out of this ambush but his cloudy mind’s eye forced him to live through it again with no foreknowledge.

‘You’re going to burn in the end anyway, you blasphemous abomination,’ called Ignus. ‘Save yourself today, and save us from starting a second fire.’

He laughed a long, cackling laugh, and Jobe turned and peered over the crumbling wall to try to take a shot at the arrogant ganger. At that moment, Ignus dropped a flaming torch onto the gas-soaked rags surrounding the bound wyrd. A huge gout of flame leaped up and engulfed her, sending Ignus running for cover.

The crackling of the fire mixed with the woman’s screams to create an eerie howl. Jobe felt a tear rolling down his cheek as he witnessed the murder for a second time. The air sizzled near his head and he dropped back behind the wall as a laser blast slammed into the dirt next to him.

Jobe looked at Syris, about to ask him what they should do, when he noticed his mentor’s eyes had clouded over like white smoke drifting across his blue orbs. A moment later, Jobe heard new screams and looked up to see several New Saviours on nearby rooftops fall to the dusty pavement.

He looked back at Syris with a furrowed brow, a question obviously on his lips. Bowdie’s eyes had cleared and he was smiling. ‘They must have lost their footing,’ was all he said before running off.

‘What about the witch?’ asked Syris.

‘She’s with the Emperor now.’

As Jobe stood to follow Syris, he found himself back in the factory, standing in full view of the Righteous Saviours. The tear he’d shed for the burning wyrd dropped off his cheek onto his shoulder.

‘Hey, old man,’ called the high-pitched ganger. He pointed his laspistol at Francks. ‘Move your shrivelled butt out of here before I frag you good.’

Francks stared at the young ganger. He was wearing the customary orange body armour and blue cloak of his gang, but his bright red hair gave away the fact that he'd been an Orlock ganger before being converted.

'We all follow a path, my son,' said Francks, and then pointed at Tyler. 'But that one is leading you in the wrong direction.'

'Great Undying Emperor,' exclaimed the ganger. 'He's another Uni.'

'Must be their dad come to take them home to mommy,' said Tyler. 'Shoot him, Miguel, and forget him.'

As Miguel aimed his weapon, Francks's eyes clouded over and he whispered a single word: 'Stagger.'

Before he could fire, Miguel crumpled to the ground, falling to the side as if something had slammed into his hips. He almost fell through the hole, but Tyler reached out and grabbed him by the belt and hauled him back onto the patch of metal flooring they had shared.

'Stagger. Righteous, stagger,' intoned Francks, and one by one the Righteous Saviours fell to the floor. Most fell through to the floor below. The rest were too dazed and confused by their sudden vertigo to move, but Francks knew this respite wouldn't last long.

He called out softly to the Universals with both his voice and his mind. 'Run, Universals. Run home. Run now!' He waited to hear the scrabbling of feet below and then stepped off the beam. Jobe Francks floated to the floor and followed the retreating Universals, disappearing into the maze of beams.

Jerod Bitten fretted over an open ledger. Four more ledgers lay in a stack to his left and another two to his right. The columns of numbers in the open ledger were already making his old eyes blur but he knew he needed to balance the rest of the books before bed so he rubbed the heels of his closed fists into his eyes for a minute and tried to refocus.

After a while, satisfied that the numbers in the open ledger added up, he closed the oversized book and set it on top of the short stack to the right. He was just about to reach for the next ledger on his left – one labelled US – when he heard a staccato knock at his door.

Bitten cocked his head and counted the knocks. After listening to the rhythm twice, he rose from his desk and started for the door. Halfway there, he hesitated, shuffled back to the desk and dropped the ledgers into the bottom drawer, and then returned to the door. The knocking had continued the entire time and was getting much louder and faster by the time he reached for the handle.

When he opened the door, the light from Bitten's parlour spilled out onto the step, outlining a cowled figure standing there, poised to knock again.

'What took you so damn long?' demanded the voice from beneath the hood.

'I was–'

'Close the scavving door,' interrupted the visitor.

It was pitch black past the pool of light coming through his doorway. Britten stepped outside and closed the door behind him, plunging them both into darkness.

'Hold out your hand,' said the demanding voice.

Bitten was beginning to get worried, but complied. The stranger immediately grabbed his wrist, seemingly unaffected by the inky blackness, and then slapped something down into his palm.

'Here's the package you requested,' stated the voice in the dark. 'You understand your part in all of this?'

When Bitten didn't reply immediately, the pressure on his wrist began to increase. 'I understand,' he said at last. His wrist was freed as soon as he replied.

'Good. Don't fail in this or your past will finally come back to haunt you.'

Bitten opened his mouth to protest.

'Don't speak,' said the figure. 'He knows what you did, and you should have died long ago because of it.'

'I… I won't fail him this time,' said Bitten.

There was no reply.

'I… Hello?' Bitten reached out with one hand and pawed at the air in front of him. Nobody was there. He reached back and opened his door. The light hurt his eyes, which had just got used to the dark. The figure was gone. He stepped inside quickly and slammed the door. After a moment, he slid the locking bar down into place and walked back to his desk.

He looked at the package in his hand. It was a large envelope, thicker and heavier than he had expected. He opened it and peered inside. A low whistle escaped his lips. He dumped the huge wad of credits onto the desk. Even without counting it he knew this added up to more money than the bottom lines on any two of his ledgers.

4: IN THE TRENCHES

Foreman Grondle scratched at his neck, his fingers completely disappearing within the thick, black tangle of his beard. Work at the site had been slow this morning. No, that was an understatement. Not a single piece of rubble had been moved since the remnants of his crew had unburied their fellow workers the day before.

Now, he stood at the construction site alone. What workers he still had on payroll were out recruiting. Luckily, he didn't need skilled workers at this point. He just needed grunts who could move debris from one pile to another. Once they got that blasted rock pile cleaned out, he could get some skilled tradesmen in to shore up the wall of the dome, but some days it felt like he would never even get that far.

He heard a noise like a low rumbling back near the entrance. 'What now?' he asked. Grondle turned and groaned from the strain on his knees. They'd been aching all morning. The previous day's exertion after the rock slide was the first real work he'd done in years and he'd got painfully out of shape as a foreman. 'I'm gettin' too old and too fat for this,' he sighed.

But the next moment put a smile on the large, round foreman – not that anyone would be able to see it beneath the black forest covering his face. His new crew leader, an industrious ex-Orlock ganger named Ander, with thick arms and a thicker head, was leading his crew into the dome.

No, leading wasn't the right word. Dragged behind him in chains was more accurate. Ander and a few of the other paid workers held long lengths of chain attached to lines of manacled people, who staggered or were dragged along behind them.

Grondle hobbled over toward Ander and his crew. He moaned and grumbled with each step as his ponderous weight compressed his aching knees, but as bad as Grondle felt, he could tell the new workers felt worse. They were a sad

mixture of scavvies, ratskins, muties and even some humans – at least what might once have been human. What little clothing the group wore was nothing more than filthy rags held together by string or worse. It was tough to tell where soiled clothing ended and dirt-encrusted limbs began. The grime was so thick that even the manacles attached to their ankles hadn't rubbed any of it off.

He wouldn't have been surprised if Ander had grabbed them all from the Ash Wastes, except he knew Ander didn't have the guts to venture outside the dome. As he neared the rag-tag group, Grondle noticed two more disturbing things about the crew. First, they stunk. A horrid mixture of urine, faeces and toxic waste radiated off them like a glowing, radioactive stench. Second, each member of the chain gang had nearly identical bloody bruises on their temples.

Grondle asked the question he knew he shouldn't ask. 'Where did you get your crew, Ander?'

Ander drew his hand down a stringy goatee and smirked. 'At the volunteer centre,' he said. 'And I'm sure I can find more volunteers as needed.'

Grondle looked at the chain gang and considered his options. He quickly realised he had none. 'Take them to the rock pile,' he said. 'I'll supervise them while you and your crew go recruit some more workers.'

'Not a problem, Grondle. The streets are filled with volunteers.' He turned to his companions. 'It's all in how you ask, right boys?' They laughed, and then handed the chains to Grondle before heading back toward the dome entrance.

Yolanda drew her laspistols and fired to either side. One shot glanced off Gonth's shoulder pad, hardly even fazing the disfigured Goliath. The other hit the chainsword-wielder in the hand, burning off a finger. Yolanda didn't wait around to see their reactions. She dived forward into a tangle of pipes, beams and metal plates welded haphazardly into the side of the tunnel.

A stream of shells erupted from the autocannon and screamed through the tunnel behind her. She scrambled behind a loose piece of metal plating just as a shell exploded on the other side, spraying shrapnel into the rafters and across the floor. Above the din, she heard a somewhat more human scream of pain echoing down the tunnel. Apparently the overanxious Goliath had hit at least one of his comrades with the autocannon burst. Yolanda hoped it had been Gonth.

'Scavving idiot killed my brother!' said one of the Goliaths.

This was followed by two loud shotgun bangs and a dull 'Ooph.'

Yolanda knew from experience that a shotgun blast, even at close range, would do little more than enrage a Goliath, especially one large enough to handle an

autocannon. She was right. The next sound she heard was the whine of the autocannon's cylinder revving up. She peeked out from behind the metal plate to see Gonth and the lone shotgun wielder diving for cover. The third Goliath lay on the ground, with a gaping bloody hole where his chest should have been.

A hail of shells screamed through the tunnel, slamming into beams, pipes, the floor and the ceiling. One hit the dead Goliath, spraying blood and limbs onto the walls. She was about to lean out a little farther to see what happened to Gonth when the screech of the chainsword impacting metal above her head made her pull back.

'That hurt!' said the Goliath, waving his four-fingered hand in the air as he came around the sheet of metal. He revved the motor of the whining chainsword and grinned at Yolanda, who had fallen into a squat in the cramped space behind the loose sheet of metal. The whine turned into a wail and then a screech as he raised the sword over his head and let it bite into Yolanda's metal shield. Sparks flew as it ground and sawed its way through the steel.

'This'll hurt more,' she said. Yolanda, her forearms braced on her knees, squinted as she aimed her pistols up high. Searing red energy spat from the end of her laspistols, slicing through the air and hitting the Goliath in the wrist. Both blasts impacted at a single point, cutting a neat hole through his wrist, bone and the mass of tendons that controlled the joint.

The Goliath looked up just in time to see his hand go limp and release the raging chainsword. It kicked off the wall and fell end-over-end in seeming slow motion toward his face. He tried to dive to the side, his mouth open in a soundless scream, but the chainsword caught him in the chin. It skipped against the jawbone and slid down to his shoulder.

Blood sprayed into the air as the whirling blade sliced into his flesh, ripping through tendons and muscles. The Goliath fell backward, still trying to get out of the path of the tumbling chainsword. It bit into his thigh, but must have hit bone and jammed. The extra weight and loss of muscle in his leg sent the Goliath crashing to the floor.

Yolanda sheathed her pistols and pulled herself to her feet. She stepped gingerly past the prone Goliath, who writhed in agony, the chainsword still whining and bucking as it strained against his femur.

'Don't say I never did anything for you,' she said as she yanked the sword free of his leg. Bits of red muscle and white bone sprayed out of the wound. She flicked the off switch and carried the weapon out into the tunnel, kicking the Goliath in the head as she left.

‘That belongs to me,’ said Gonth, pointing at the chainsword with his meltagun.

Gonth stood blocking Yolanda’s exit from her hiding spot, meltagun levelled at her head. His armour had been scarred and blackened from autocannon shell explosions. She could also see streaks of red splattered across his chest and neck, but he seemed too calm for any of the blood to be his own.

Yolanda weighed her options. She did have the chainsword, but one shot from the meltagun would leave a wet spot on the floor where she stood. The other two Goliaths were nowhere to be seen, but judging from the shouting and shooting down the tunnel, at least one of them would be back soon. Plus, she could hear the injured Goliath scrambling around behind her. This was still too close to a fair fight for her liking.

‘Fine,’ she said as she pulled the ripcord. ‘You can have it back.’ The chainsword screamed to life, and Yolanda revved the motor once before heaving it up into the air toward Gonth. As the new Goliath leader scrambled to get out from under the spinning weapon, Yolanda turned and sprinted down the tunnel.

The chainsword crashed to the floor behind her and the chain flew free, embedding into the wall next to her. The next moment, the wall burned red-hot, hissing and popping as the molecules became instantly super-heated. Yolanda kept running, weaving back and forth as parts of the tunnel burst into flame and melted around her.

She felt her back start to heat up and dived forward. The heat intensified and acrid smoke filled the air around her. She began to lose consciousness with the smell of burned flesh in her nostrils. Then a hail of bullets and laser blasts streaked down the tunnel above her and the heat stopped.

Yolanda looked up and tried to push the pain down and focus her tear-filled eyes. The tunnel was filled with Escher gangers. Several of them continued to fire down the hall, their long purple, red and yellow mohawks waving back and forth with every recoil.

‘Looked like you needed some help,’ said one of the women. She had bright blonde hair pulled up and over head into a ponytail. The sides of her head were shaved clean, showing the entire Wildcat tattoo that ran across her forehead and wrapped around both ears.

‘Thanks, Themis,’ said Yolanda to the Wildcat leader. ‘But I had it under control.’

‘Well, we’ll just leave you to it then,’ said Themis, smiling.

That smile was the last thing Yolanda saw as she slipped into unconsciousness.

‘What are we doing here?’ asked Scabbs.

‘I need to think,’ said Kal. ‘And the Breath of Fresh Air was the closest bar.’ He pressed the tips of his fingers against his forehead. ‘But it’s too scavving quiet in here.’

Scabbs looked around. He and Kal were the only ones in the place other than Squatz, the dwarfish bartender, who was hobbling back behind the bar. He disappeared for a moment and then popped back up with an oomph, obviously having difficulty climbing onto his plank. ‘This place used to be booming,’ said Scabbs. ‘What happened?’

‘You two. That’s what,’ said Squatz. He spat on the bar and wiped it up with a dirty rag. ‘You turned my doorstep into a battlefield against the blasted vampire, and my business has never been the same.’

‘I thought your customers were eaten by the vampire well before we came along,’ said Scabbs. He looked with suspicion at the bottle of House Special Brew that Squatz had placed in front of him. It had no snake in the bottom, which was a plus, but he didn’t like the way it continued to bubble and froth.

‘Or perhaps this stuff killed them,’ he said. He took an experimental sip and gagged. It felt like his mouth was on fire. Scabbs scraped his tongue against the palm of his hand and gagged again as a wad of skin flaked off in his mouth.

‘Careful,’ called Squatz from the bar. ‘That stuff’ll stunt your growth,’ he laughed. ‘Looks like you’ve had too much already.’

Scabbs spat the dead skin into the bottle, where it fizzed and popped and shrunk as if being eaten away. ‘You’re one to talk,’ he said. ‘I don’t need to stand on a plank to see over the bar.’

‘Girls! Girls!’ said Kal. ‘Get to the part where you’re pulling each other’s hair, already, would you? A good brawl would at least help me think.’

‘If it’s a bar brawl you want,’ said Squatz, ‘Go back to your precious Sump Hole. This be Hive City. The Enforcers keep this place civilised.’

Kal snorted. ‘Yeah. Thugs with power mauls roaming the city busting heads, that’s civilised.’

‘Besides,’ added Scabbs. ‘Kal’s got debt collectors and assassins after him.’

Kal tried to shush him, but Scabbs kept talking. ‘He had to duck out of the Sump Hole just last…’ Kal jammed the still fizzing bottle of House Special into Scabbs mouth and tipped it up. The burning liquid scorched his throat as he was forced to chug it down.

‘So,’ said Squatz. ‘That was you who dropped the assassin last night, then?’

Kal released his hold on the bottle. ‘Assassin?’ he asked. ‘What assassin?’

Squatz dropped back down from his plank and waddled around the end of the bar. ‘Maybe not, then,’ he said. ‘Whoever took down old Krellum was a hell of a skilled fighter. Shattered his knee and put two big holes in his chest. At close range too. Like someone got the drop on him.’

Scabbs grabbed the bottle from his mouth, spilling the rest down his shirt. He watched Squatz climb up onto the chair opposite Kal and stand looking at the bounty hunter in the eye, as if sizing him up.

‘Couldn’t have been you,’ said Squatz. ‘I don’t think you’re that good. Lucky, sure, but not skilled enough to get the drop on Krellum.’

Scabbs pushed his chair back, hoping to get out of the line of fire. Kal was never one to let an insult go unchallenged, but he almost dropped the empty bottle when his friend laughed.

‘Heh. You’re probably right,’ said Kal. ‘And I’d have taken him in for the reward. As I remember, Krellum has quite a healthy bounty on his head. Where’d you say he was found?’

‘I didn’t say,’ replied Squatz. He stared hard at Kal, perhaps debating how much more he should divulge. ‘And you don’t get any more out of me for free.’

Kal looked at Scabbs. ‘Pay him,’ he said.

‘Do what now?’

‘We owe Squatz for letting us use his place as a base of operations last time,’ said Kal. ‘Pay him.’

Scabbs dug into his trousers and pulled out the few credits he had left along with a handful of ash grey detritus. He scowled at the smiling Squatz and dropped the whole dirty handful into the little man’s pudgy hands. Squatz looked down at the wad of credits and crud in his palm and swore under his breath.

Then they both looked back at Kal, who had his pearl-handled pistols out and trained on Squatz. ‘Now, you’ll tell us what we want to know and maybe you live to spend that money.’

Scabbs’s scowl turned into a smile. That was the Kal Jerico he remembered.

‘I… I don’t know much,’ said Squatz. His face was the same ashen colour as the dirty credits in his hand. ‘Krellum was found by the Enforcers this morning in an alley, just like I said – two blasts in his chest and a broken leg.’

‘Where was this alley?’

‘Just a few blocks from here.’

‘Who was the target? Who ordered the hit?’

‘I…’ Squatz gulped. ‘I don’t know. Honestly. I don’t.’

‘Squatz?’ Kal pushed the barrel of his weapon into Squatz’s cheek. ‘You know

everything that goes on around your bar.'

'Really, Kal,' he said. 'I don't know. Whoever hired Krellum, did it quietly. I didn't even know he was in town. He always used to come by for a bottle of House Special before a job, but not last night. Maybe that crazy preacher scared him off. Did a number on the rest of my patrons.'

Kal holstered his laspistols and looked hard at Squatz. 'I'm only going to ask this once,' he said. 'And I don't want to have draw my guns again. What did this preacher look like?'

A group of Universal Saviours crowded around Jobe Francks in the hideout. The word had spread that the 'Prophet of the Body' was in their midst, had even saved the gang from a grisly death at the hands of the Righteous Saviours. Food and drink had been piled on the table next to Francks and he had to admit that it was pleasant to have a crowd listening to his every word and handing him food instead of throwing it at him.

After telling the gathered gangers the story of the factory battle – downplaying his role as simply the power of suggestion upon the weak-minded – Francks told them the tale of the Return of Bowdie. He described Bowdie's death at the hands of the intolerant Ignus and how Ignus had disposed of the body in the Acid Pools.

As he told the tale, Francks's eyes clouded over and he found himself transported back in time once again. 'I was on the run after that day,' he said, his voice seeming to echo as if it had to travel over a vast distance to reach his own ears. The New Saviours had eyes everywhere, and Ignus still wanted me dead.'

He heard a gasp, probably from one of the juves, but it barely registered as his subconscious mind had taken over. 'I found myself back at the acid pools again, a week after Bowdie's death,' he said.

And then he was there.

Francks looked about. The Universal Saviours' hideout had faded away, leaving him alone in the middle of the pools. He was scared. He'd been running. A couple of New Saviours had chased him through the settlement, but he'd given them the slip and run out into the middle of the pools.

The only people who came out this far were acid farmers, and it was too late in the day for even them. The encroaching darkness gave him some protection from prying eyes, but made it difficult to pick his way across the uneven pathways.

He stopped. An odd sound put him on edge again. He drew his laspistol and peered about, trying to find the source of the sound. There it was again.

Thump-plop. *Thump-plop.*

He whirled around, but there was nothing behind him.

Thump-plop.

He stood still and concentrated on the sound, but in the vast open field of pools, it was almost impossible to tell where the sound came from.

Thump-plop.

Francks scanned the nearest pools, looking for movement in the gathering darkness.

Thump-plop.

He moved slowly toward an intersection of two paths.

Thump-plop. There.

Ripples hitting the near bank of one of the pools. He crept around the pool, nearly tripping over a loose piece of masonry at the edge of the pool.

All of a sudden, a certain dread fell over him. This was the pool where Bowdie had been gunned down. *Thump-plop.* He moved to the spot where Ignus had stood, fearing what he would find there. And there it was. He gasped.

Bobbing up and down in the acid, periodically slapping into the bank of the pool was a large dark shape, the size of a human body. Francks fumbled in his pocket for a torch and, throwing caution to the wind, flicked on the beam. He aimed the torch down toward the pool and almost cried out loud when he saw the face of Syris Bowdie.

The body didn't have a mark on it; not from the attack and not from the acid. His skin and clothing glistened from the liquid, but had not been eaten away at all by the toxic pool. His hair floated around his head like a wreath and his cloak was wrapped around his body like a shroud.

Francks reached down to grab his leader by the arm and pull him free of the acid, but his hands began to burn as soon as he touched the wet clothes and he dropped the torch into the pool. It sizzled and popped as the acid ate its way through the casing. Francks grabbed his own cloak, wrapped it around his hands and reached down again.

'It was then I heard shouts and the sound of gunfire from behind me,' said Francks to the assembled Saviours. The vision began to fade as soon as his hands touched the acid. He was back in the hideout with his new parishioners. 'Ignus's men had seen me. I had no choice but to run. When they reached the body, I knew I hadn't imagined it because they all stopped and aimed their own torches down into the pool. I got away because they found him. His very presence saved my life.'

‘A miracle,’ gasped one of the juves.

Francks nodded. ‘Yes, it was,’ he said. ‘But no one was to know about this miracle. I watched from a safe distance as Ignus was called out to the pools. He screamed at his men and they weighted the body down with ropes and huge chunks of masonry then tossed it back into the acid.’

‘But it came back, isn’t that right?’ This question came from the leader of the Universal Saviours. Francks looked at him with a furrowed brow. ‘I have read accounts of the Return of the Body,’ he explained.

Francks smiled. ‘Yes. Bowdie returned once again two weeks later. This time he was seen by several acid farmers. They pulled him out and brought him into town. Unfortunately, the body disappeared that night and was never seen again.’

‘Another miracle?’

Francks shook his head. ‘No. I suspect his final disappearance was the handiwork of a somewhat less than divine being.’

Cardinal Crimson lounged in a soothing bath of hot oils mixed with a special elixir of vital essences. He had no idea what the medics put into the elixir, but the stench of the bath often brought to mind the scent of the sacrificial altar. He felt that not knowing was better for his soul. He was doing holy work on this world – in fact it was a miracle he was alive – so the pain and suffering of a few was a just cost for his continued good work. He knew the Undying Emperor understood it was all for the good of humanity.

The baths were a twice daily ritual to prevent the remnants of his skin from drying out and flaking away, to keep his exposed muscles supple and pliant so they wouldn’t tear apart when he moved, and to stave off infections that now had ample opportunities to invade his scarred body.

It was a time of quiet reflection and, more importantly, a time of utter vulnerability. His inner circle knew not to disturb the Cardinal during his bath. It was drawn by the medics, who then left by a back entrance and returned only after Crimson dressed and returned to his duties.

And so, Crimson soaked and dozed and dreamed of sitting at the right hand of the Undying Emperor, where he passed judgement on the blasphemers. ‘Down to the Abyss with you, witch-wyrd,’ he called out. He looked out at the gathered throng of wyrds, mutants and heretics. ‘Be gone,’ he called. ‘There is no place here for the damned or the deformed.’

One of the misshapen figures, a mutant with pink, fleshy growths on his bare head and shoulders, opened its mouth to protest. ‘Excuse me, your eminence,’ it

said. ‘I’m sorry to interrupt your bath, but there is an important matter…’

Crimson stared in disbelief at the mutant, trying to make sense of the creature’s statement when he recognised the voice and opened his eyes. ‘Ralan,’ he said, staring at the officious man standing in the doorway. He fiddled with a piece of parchment, absent-mindedly pulling off bits and dropping them on the floor. ‘If this is not as important as you think it is, I will hand you over to the medics and you will get a much more personal bathing experience during my next treatment.’

Ralan swallowed hard and passed his hand over his stringy hair, which was plastered to his head by the heat and humidity of the bathroom. ‘I’m sure you would want this report as soon as possible, your grace,’ he said. ‘It concerns the heretic Kal Jerico.’

Crimson stood and exited the bath, the oils still glistening on his skin and exposed bones. ‘Robe!’ he commanded.

Ralan dashed across the room and grabbed the robe. He draped it around the Cardinal’s dripping, skeletal frame and followed him out of the room.

‘What has the heretic Jerico done now?’ asked Crimson as he stormed down the hall, his robe billowing out behind him.

Ralan had to run to keep up, and the exertion made him wheeze. ‘It seems the bounty hunter is on the trail of the prophet, he said between huffs. ‘He is out searching for Jobe Francks right now!’

Crimson slammed open the door to his office. ‘Why must that man defile everything we try to do in this world?’ he said. ‘He is the hand of Chaos reaching out of the void to thwart me at every turn.’

‘But sir,’ said Ralan, ‘he is just looking for Francks. That doesn’t mean he will find him.’

Crimson fell back into his chair and grabbed his head between both bony hands. ‘But he will find him, Ralan,’ he said. ‘The man is relentless. He will find the prophet and he will ruin all that we have worked so hard to achieve.’

‘Perhaps…’ began Ralan, but then stopped.

The Cardinal pulled at his hair and began screaming. ‘Damn Jerico! I want him dead, Ralan. Dead. Do you hear me?’

‘Yes, Cardinal.’

‘Put all of our gangs on the task,’ said Crimson. He shook his hands in the air. Wisps of grey hair floated down toward the desk. ‘Kal Jerico must be dead by the end of the day.’

‘Yes, Cardinal.’

Ralan turned to leave, and Crimson smoothed his hair back down and took a breath. As his rage ebbed away, his mind cleared and a thought occurred to him. Crimson started to laugh. ‘Wait, Ralan,’ he said as his aid left the room. ‘I have a better idea.’

Ralan turned at the door, and Crimson thought he detected a note of scorn on his face. Crimson waited for the obligatory ‘Yes, Cardinal’ but it did not come.

‘I think we may be able to use this information to our advantage,’ he said. ‘I think we can use the chaos that the heretic Kal Jerico is bound to sow to help the cause of Redemption this time. Perhaps, just perhaps, if he plays his part right, I will have the chance to redeem Kal Jerico’s soul in the pools of fire before this is all ended.’

‘What would you have me do, your eminence?’

‘Bring me Kal Jerico, alive!’

Yolanda awoke in the Wildcats’ hideout. It was strange but familiar, like waking in your childhood bed after a long nightmare. She was warm, which reminded her of the melta that had been aimed at her back, but a quick hand check beneath her vest came up clean. Her skin seemed to be unharmed. No, the warmth was all over, which was odd. Underhive hideouts were not known for warmth.

Then she remembered. This had once been her room when she led the Wildcats. It was right above the kitchen in the back of a burned-out eatery. The Wildcats had found the kitchen intact, including all the old pots and pans. The dining room was more rubble than actual walls, but the kitchen and the apartment above were another matter. It had become the official bedroom for the leader of the ’Cats.

‘Themis must be trying to butter me up,’ said Yolanda, ‘giving me her room to sleep it off. I wonder what this will cost me down the line.’

‘Not a thing, if I know Themis,’ said a voice in the dark. ‘She thinks she still owes you for that Spyrer rig you gave us.’

Yolanda recognised the lilting, high-pitched voice. ‘Evening, Lysanne,’ she said. ‘That wasn’t a gift. It was a loan. I hope you haven’t got it shot up.’

Lysanne opened the door to let some light in the room. The teenage Wildcat looked much the same as Yolanda remembered. She still wore loose, black trousers and the wrap-around robe that tied at the sides. She’d dyed her hair black with a streak of purple running down the parting. She’d also received her Wildcat tattoo, a series of whorls and interlacing lines of black, blue and purple across her forehead. As she rose in the gang hierarchy, the tattoo would grow

past her temples and eventually over her ears.

'Not to worry,' said Lysanne. 'We've kept it safe. We never take it into battle. It would make us too big of a target. But it does have other uses.'

Yolanda remembered. It had been a Malcadon rig from the Spyrer unit sent down to hunt the Vampire. Not only could you climb sheer cliffs while wearing the rig, it also had web spinners. 'I'll bet you can get into some interesting spots with that rig,' she said.

Lysanne nodded. 'So, are you ready for some supper? The mavants are already serving downstairs.'

'I was out that long?' asked Yolanda. She got up and collected her weapons from the bedside table.

'All day,' said Lysanne. 'Some of the newer girls wondered if you'd ever wake up.'

'Hope I didn't disappoint anyone,' said Yolanda with a smirk. She fastened her weapon belt and followed Lysanne down the stairs.

'Well, I made fifty credits betting on you,' said Lysanne over her shoulder. 'So, I'm happy.'

Yolanda chuckled. 'You should cut me in for half. I think I earned it.'

'What, saving your life wasn't payment enough?'

'Fine, we'll call it even.'

Lysanne guided Yolanda through the kitchen. Three mavants, male slaves bound in service to the gang, toiled away in the kitchen. One stood over the burners stirring a steaming pot. Another was busy cutting bread and stacking it on large platters. The last one held a tray full of bottles and waited, head bowed, while the two women walked past and through the swinging door. All three wore nothing but dirty white shirts and shorts. Their heads looked like they'd been shaved with dull knives. Patches of hair remained in some places, while cuts and scabs could be seen in the bare spots.

'Themis has given the mavants trousers?' asked Yolanda, looking back as they went through the door.

'I am nothing if not compassionate,' said Themis.

'Well, you can take compassion too far when it comes to men,' said Yolanda. She sat down on a cinder block at the main table, a large block of petrified wood the Wildcats had found years earlier. It was their prized possession. 'Even a little starts to give them ideas, makes them think they own us… instead of the other way around.'

Themis smiled at the Wildcats' former leader. 'How is Kal Jerico?' she asked.

‘Still getting me into more trouble than he’s worth,’ said Yolanda. ‘That’s why I came to see you.’

The drink mavant walked around the room distributing bottles of Wildsnake to the assembled Wildcats. He placed the last bottle in front of Yolanda and turned toward the kitchen. She kicked him in the rear as he passed, sending him tumbling through the door. ‘Serve the guest first,’ she called after him.

‘Does it have anything to do with those Goliaths who attacked you?’ asked Themis.

Yolanda upended the bottle and poured its contents down her throat, snake and all. ‘Nah, that’s old news.’ She tipped her bottle toward Themis who nodded in return. It was all the two would say on the subject. Gratitude was seen as a weakness by the Escher, but both women knew there was a blood bond between them now.

‘Now we’re looking for some crazy Cawdor prophet,’ continued Yolanda after the exchange. ‘We wondered if you had heard anything. Has there been any unusual Cawdor gang activity in the last few days?’

The bread mavant entered the room. His fellow slave must have explained the proper etiquette for serving guests because he shuffled immediately over to Yolanda with the tray. She grabbed a slice and pushed him on around the table.

He served Themis next. Themis ripped her bread apart and stuffed a large chunk into her mouth. She talked around the wad. ‘There was something about a madman coming into Hive City the other day from the Ash Wastes. Wild hair and creepy eyes. Wearing rags that our mavants wouldn’t be caught dead in. Looked more animal than human, but I guess that’s normal for men, huh?’ she laughed.

‘That could have been anything,’ said Yolanda. ‘Scavvies try to break security all the time.’

‘Ahh, but this one made it through security, supposedly someone found the guard wandering the docks later. And I heard the mystery man left with two Cawdor.’

She looked at Lysanne, who was last to get her bread and had just slapped the mavant on the butt. ‘What’s the name of that gang,’ asked Themis. ‘The Cawdor that hang around Madam Noritake’s all the time.’

‘The Soul Saviours?’ said Lysanne, but it was more of a question than an answer. ‘I think. Or maybe the Savers? All their names sound the same to me.’

‘That can’t be right,’ said one of the other ’Cats, a juve with long mousey-brown hair that Yolanda had never met. ‘Because we heard today that some

wild-haired Cawdor helped the Unies – the Universal Saviours – escape from the Righteous Saviours down in Glory Hole.'

'Was it the same guy?' asked Yolanda. She chewed on her bread and tried to digest both the hard crust and the information about the travelling Wildman.

'Probably not,' said Lysanne. 'I heard that report as well. This guy was wearing the blue cape and orange armour of a Cawdor.'

'But one of the Righteous told me he had weird eyes,' said the juve. 'All cloudy and swirling. He said it was a wyrd. Used some kind of witch power on them. When they woke up, the Unies and the wyrd were gone.'

Themis gave the juve a stern look. 'What were you doing talking to a Cawdor?'

The juve blushed and stared at the crust of bread on the table in front of her. 'Nothing sacred, that's for sure.'

The Wildcats began laughing. Several of the girls slapped the juve on the back and congratulated her on such a brazen conquest. Yolanda just kept chewing her bread and thinking. Two reports in two days of a wild-eyed man connected with the Cawdor. That had to be more than mere coincidence. Kal would want to know about this.

The soup came out from the kitchen and the mavant Yolanda had kicked reappeared with another tray of Wild Snake. She looked around at her laughing sisters and at the amusing mavants. Jerico could wait, she thought. She needed a girls' night.

Grondle's day had turned out far better than he could have hoped after his late-night meeting with Guilder Tavis the evening before. The chain gangs worked harder than the paid labourers ever did, and all they expected in return was an occasional drink of water and fewer beatings than they received on the street.

The mound of rubble was now half the size, and Ander, his Orlock goon of a crew chief, had rousted up two more gangs for the swing shift. With any luck, the debris pile that had haunted this construction job would be gone by morning.

'Need any more workers, boss?' asked Ander. 'Me and the boys could recruit plenty tonight. The great thing about street people is they all sleep in the same burned-out holes after hours.'

Grondle shook his head. 'No. I just need you to keep these new gangs working through the night,' he said. He pulled at a few stray hairs that had been sticking straight out from his bushy beard all afternoon and thought for a moment. 'Maybe tomorrow night, though,' he continued. 'We'll need a lot more workers for the next stage.'

The two of them worked out arrangements for transporting and housing the chain gangs that were going off shift as Ander's men supervised the shift change. A muffled boom made Grondle catch his breath and the flesh on the back of his neck tingle. 'Oh no,' he said and his attention snapped to the construction zone.

The wall of the dome above the rock slide had erupted outward and a cloud of white powder billowed out from the gaping hole. But Grondle knew that was just the beginning.

'Run!' he called. 'Get off the pile!'

Ander's men reacted immediately. They dropped the chains and sprinted down the hill amidst a sustained low rumble that grew louder and louder as they ran. One lurched forward and sprawled face first into the rubble. His mates ran past him. He rolled down the hill until he found his feet and stumbled on, well behind the others.

The chain gangs tried to follow but were hampered by the manacles around their ankles and the chains stringing them all together. They had to move in unison, which was impossible to do quickly.

As the cloud above the mound expanded, large chunks of debris emerged from the dust, raining down on the top of the rock slide. Several larger pieces, some as big as the men rushing down the pile, flew out the side of the cloud and plummeted toward the lower areas where the chain gangs had been standing – were still standing.

The incoming shift had to turn around before they could descend. They were still trying to reverse direction when the outgoing gangs ran into them, knocking several workers to the ground. The chains connecting them all went taut causing a cascading collapse of bodies.

Chunks of masonry and jagged pieces of metal crashed into the mass of bodies. Screams pierced the low rumble, echoing horribly in Grondle's ears. He stood rooted to the spot as the weight of the debris began an avalanche that swept down the pile of rubble, burying the chain gangs and threatening to overtake Ander's men.

The man who had stumbled screamed as rocks and chunks of metal began to fly past him. Soon the surge of the avalanche overtook the man and carried him, tumbling and rolling the rest of the way down the hill.

As the rumble began to die off, Ander and Grondle ran to the base of the rock slide. An arm and a leg stuck out at odd angles part way up. The two men yanked at the rubble and, with the help of the rest of Ander's men, soon had the half-buried worker free. Blood covered his face and chest and streaks of red ran

down his arms and legs, but he was alive.

'You're usually more sure-footed, Rafe,' said Ander with a smile and a little laugh.

Both seemed a bit forced to Grondle, but the injured man returned the smile and tried to laugh as well, which turned into a hacking cough. After the spasm, Rafe looked at Grondle. 'Something hit me in the back of the head,' he said. 'While I was rolling I saw this and grabbed it.'

He opened his hand. In his palm sat the charred remains of a small metal box with wires protruding from two sides.

'That's a detonator,' said Grondle.

'Helmawr's rump,' muttered Ander. 'Sabotage?'

Grondle plucked the detonator from Rafe's hand. 'Looks like it,' he said, muttering a curse of his own under his breath. 'And all this time we thought we were cursed.'

'What do we do about it?'

Grondle glared at the enlarged mound of rubble that had swallowed all four chain gangs and ruined another day of work. His gaze rose to the new gaping hole in the side of the dome, which would have to be patched. 'Get more workers,' he said. 'I need to talk with our employer about providing some protection.'

The assassin slipped into Glory Hole through a tunnel few knew existed. He was in a basement surrounded by kegs and shelves filled with dusty bottles. A twisted knot of pipes criss-crossed the low ceiling above him, and beyond the stairs could be seen a maze of larger conduits in a crawlspace.

He shut the access panel behind him and moved a couple of empty kegs back in front of the secret entrance. The assassin cocked his head, as if listening to some faint or far away sound and then crept over to the corner at the foot of the stairs. A large, vertical conduit pipe set into the wall rose up through the ceiling and down through the floor. He reached out and released a hidden catch on the pipe, opening yet another secret hatch.

The assassin crept inside the conduit and pulled the hatch closed behind him. Pressing his legs and hands against the sides of the pipe, he scampered up the pipe, climbing as easily as a spider. At the top, the pipe turned ninety degrees and he was able to crawl on all fours to the other end. After emerging, the assassin looked across the street at the building he had just exited – a local bar called Hagen's Hole, usually populated by bounty hunters.

He smiled and loped noiselessly across the roof, away from Hagen's. As he ran,

he pulled out a piece of parchment and read it. The note said simply ‘North corner of Glory Hole settlement, orange two storey’.

After reading the note, the assassin popped it in his mouth, chewed it up, and…

Jobe Francks awoke with a start, sitting straight up in bed. There was a terrible taste in his mouth, and he spat a wad of parchment into his hand. He’d seen it all – the assassin, the trip into Glory Hole, the note with the Universal Saviours’ address on it – and he might have convinced himself that it had all been a dream, except for the doughy wad of wet parchment in his hand.

Another assassin had been sent to hunt him down, was probably inside the settlement already and coming his way. Jobe had no time to lose. It was time to move on again.

5: IN THE CROSSHAIRS

Francks stepped onto the roof of the Universal Saviours' building. His hand shook as he closed the door. The vision of the assassin had been intense. He'd never experienced anything like that before. Sure, he sometimes relived the past through his cloudy eyes, but this was like seeing through someone else's eyes. He'd been inside the assassin looking out, had known who he was and what he was doing. For a time, Jobe Francks had been the assassin.

After the vision, he'd dressed, stopped to warn Breland and started to leave.

When he'd put his hand on the front door, a feeling of dread came over him. Death lay in wait outside that door. He'd backed away, his eyes wide in fear and confusion. It was happening too fast.

He wasn't ready for the next stage of the Universe's plan. Not yet. Not here. People would get hurt. Die. Perhaps not him. The Universe wasn't quite done with him yet. But Breland and his gang – the reading juves and the all-too-tolerant Universals – they would pay the price for his fear. They would die for him, for his cause – if he let them. He had to find another way.

And so, Jobe Francks found himself on the roof, skulking towards a gap between the buildings. It was important to be seen but not caught. The timing would be tricky. He ran toward the edge, trying to time his strides for the final leap but old age and the thick boots he'd only worn for a day tripped him up. He had to stutter step at the end and lost much of his momentum.

He jumped. He had no choice at this point. He sailed over the alley in a shallow arc. The brick wall came up at him fast. He wasn't going to make it. Jobe pumped his legs, trying to run through the air, but it didn't help. He reached out with his hands as he fell. His fingertips caught on the rough ledge. His body bounced against the wall. His fingers slid, scraping against the edge of the bricks. He could feel blood trickle down the inside of his palm to his wrist.

But he held on. Francks glanced down at the shadowy pavement below. He'd

break a leg at least if he let go. His legs scrabbled against the wall, trying to find some purchase. His arms began to ache but his toes finally caught in the grout between bricks and, with the adrenaline now pumping through his veins, he climbed the wall and then dropped on the roof.

Francks lay there breathing for only a moment before pushing himself back to his feet and running across the roof. He kept low, trying not to be seen from below. He found the roof access and dropped into the building. It was dark, but his eyes adjusted quickly and he found his way down to the door.

Now he could exit from the wrong building, giving the Universals some protection, but he still needed to find a way to get out of the settlement alive. Francks tried to reach out with his mind to the assassin. He could sense him nearby, on a building across the street. He sent a silent command, as he had done with the Righteous gang, but the assassin's mind was too focused, too well trained. He'd have to find another way.

Francks opened the door and stepped out. He had to hope the assassin wouldn't shoot the first old man he saw. Professionals don't like to make mistakes, and he was coming out of the wrong building. He walked down the street toward the intersection. As he turned the corner, right before he would be out of sight of the assassin, Jobe opened his mouth.

'For I am the light and the way and the path to glory,' he called out, preaching loud enough for the assassin to hear. 'Hear the word of the Undying Emperor and be redeemed.'

Reaching out with his mind again, Jobe felt the assassin moving from his position. He'd heard. He would follow him, away from the Universals. Now he only had to worry about his own safety. So he ran. Down the street and around another corner he ran.

It would take the assassin a few moments to get out of the building. He didn't have to rush. One building. Two buildings. The third was bombed out. He dashed through a hole in the wall and kept running. He could feel the assassin getting closer, padding down the street, weapon in hand. Perhaps night vision goggles on. He had little time.

Jobe tripped over a loose pipe on the floor. He sprawled on the ground in a clatter. The assassin turned the corner. Had he heard? Francks couldn't tell. He rolled away from the debris and found his feet again. He ran out the back of the building and down the street. He knew where he had to go. Had a vague idea of how to get there. He just needed to keep one street ahead of the assassin.

He felt the assassin exit the burned-out building just as he turned another

corner. His breath began to catch in his throat. His old lungs and legs were no match for the young assassin. He needed just a little more time. He was almost there. He reached out with his mind once again.

'Trip,' he commanded.

He heard a clatter and a muffled yelp from behind him. 'Got you,' he said, and ran on.

A few minutes later, Jobe found the place he'd been looking for. He turned one last corner and sprinted for the door. It opened just as he got there and he barrelled through, almost knocking down the armoured man coming out.

'Watch it, old man,' snarled the bounty hunter as he pushed Francks away and then continued out the door.

Francks fought down the adrenaline-inspired impulse to punch the much bigger man, and simply bowed his head and walked over to the bar. 'You must be Hagen,' he said to the bartender, a large man with a round stomach just barely covered by a stained, white shirt.

'Yeah. What of it?' asked Hagen.

'Snake me,' said Francks, slamming a credit down on the bar. He looked around Hagen's Hole and smiled. The place was filled with ratskin guides, mercenaries and bounty hunters – lots of bounty hunters. The back wall was plastered with wanted posters showing mutants, scavvies, renegade gangers and assassins. He was safe, for now.

As he drank the Wildsnake Hagen handed him, Jobe Francks reached out with his mind once more and found the assassin, sitting on the roof of the building across the street and wondered how long he'd wait out there.

He finished his drink, swallowing the snake hole, and headed for the back room. While the regulars played cards and drank their foul brown drinks, Jobe Francks slipped through the door to the basement. As he moved the barrels away from the hidden door, Francks thanked the Emperor for the vision of the secret exit.

Kal tipped the bottle up to his lips and took a long draught of liquid breakfast. He looked at Scabbs sitting across from him. His partner was poking at his eggs. He lifted up the edge of the dull yellow mass with his knife and peered underneath. Kal wasn't sure, but he thought he saw something move beneath the eggs.

'I keep telling you,' said Kal, 'The only thing in the Sump Hole that you can swallow is the booze, and that's only because it's so vile it kills anything that

might crawl inside.'

Scabbs pushed the plate away and took a swig of his own drink. 'Then why do we spend all our time here?' he asked.

Kal finished his Wildsnake and spun the bottle on the table. 'Because it's the best hole in the Underhive.'

Scabbs humphed. 'We need to find a better place to live.'

'What and miss all this excitement?' Kal smiled.

'You mean like being ambushed by Goliaths who are still out for our blood?' said Yolanda as she dropped into a chair. 'Or do you mean dodging Crimson and Nemo just so we can get back the money we already earned? That the excitement you're looking for, Jerico?'

Kal's smile didn't diminish at all. 'Yeah. Something like that,' he said. 'Have a bad day, honey?'

Yolanda glared at him. 'You call me "honey" again,' she sneered, 'and you'll have to stand up to smile.'

Kal leaned forward and put a serious look on his face. 'I'm sorry, Yolanda,' he said as sincerely as he could. 'Here, have the rest of my eggs.' He pushed Scabbs's plate toward his female partner. Scabbs opened his mouth to say something, but Kal shot him a look, and he sat back.

Yolanda dug into the eggs that Scabbs wouldn't eat and described how Gonth and several members of the Grak gang had attacked her in the tunnels. 'I don't think they're going to let this go, Jerico,' she said after a while.

Just then something black with lots of legs did crawl out from beneath the eggs and Yolanda skewered it with her knife. She pushed the plate away, grabbed Scabbs's bottle, and took a long drink. 'We'll have to kill every last one of those Goliaths before this ends.'

Kal waved her off. 'I can't worry about that now,' he said. 'We've got professional competition for our bounty. Seems someone is hiring assassins to go after this wandering prophet. One of them ended up dead near the Fresh Air.'

'Wandering is right,' said Yolanda. 'According to the 'Cats, this guy was seen on the docks with one set of Cawdor two days ago and then over in Glory Hole with a gang called the Universal Saviours yesterday.'

'Why is this guy so popular?' asked Scabbs. He scratched at his arm, sending a flurry of dried skin floating down to the table. 'You don't suppose he's the real deal, do you Kal? I mean why else would Nemo want him so bad?'

Yolanda spoke around the food in her mouth. 'The Wildcats did say that he'd used some weird powers in that battle and to get past a dock guard.'

Kal shook his head. ‘Nah. He’s just some wyrd. And Nemo’s only interested in one thing – information. This guy must have some secrets.’

Neither Scabbs nor Yolanda looked convinced. Scabbs opened his mouth, but Kal shook his head again, trying to shut down this line of questioning. ‘Look, it doesn’t matter what this Jobe character is or isn’t,’ he said. ‘He’s a bounty, that’s all that matters. Let’s just bring him in and let our enemies worry about him.’

‘Alright,’ said Yolanda, reluctantly. ‘I want to get our money back. What do we do next?’

‘We could question the dock guards or that first gang, but I think those leads have gone cold,’ said Kal. ‘If that dead assassin was after our guy, that might explain him heading to Glory Hole. We should look for him there first. Maybe check Hagen’s to see if anyone there has heard any…’

‘Kal?’ asked Scabbs.

But Kal wasn’t listening. His attention had been drawn to the door of the Sump Hole. The debt collector in his shiny, pressed suit had just walked in. He pushed on the bridge of his glasses with a single finger to resettle them on his nose, and began scanning the room.

Kal slid off his chair and sidled up against the wall. He pressed a finger against his pursed lips and made a shushing noise. ‘That little rodent of a debt collector is back,’ he said. He opened the door to the bathroom and slipped inside. Through the crack, he said, ‘Distract him while I get out of here. We’ll meet at Hagen’s Hole.’ With that, he closed the door.

Scabbs turned around and saw the officious little man at the bar. The bartender pointed back toward their table. He didn’t know what to do. He wasn’t the ideas man. That was Kal’s job. Or Yolanda’s in a pinch.

He looked to Yolanda, but she was still trying to wash the taste of bug out of her mouth with his bottle of Wild Snake. Then Scabbs got an idea. He grabbed the plate of half-eaten eggs and pulled the knife out of the table, making sure the dead bug stayed skewered on the tip. He turned and headed for the bar.

‘What’s the meaning of this?’ he yelled, waving the knife around in his right hand. The bug flopped a little on the tip as he shook his hand. ‘Snake in my bottle, okay. But bug in my eggs? That’s just gross.’

One of the other early risers called out from another table, ‘You mean you won’t share breakfast with your brother, Scabbs?’

Scabbs turned to look at the speaker. It was Bear, a huge behemoth of a man with a stomach that rivalled Hagen’s and arms as thick as rocket launcher tubes.

Scabbs knew he could count on Bear's loud mouth. He took two more steps before he spoke.

'No, but I'll share them with you,' he said, and flung the plate of eggs toward Bear, making sure most of the runny, grey scramble splatted on the silk-covered chest of the debt collector.

Bear tossed his chair aside, ripping the legs right out of the floor, and advanced on Scabbs. Scabbs slipped around behind the debt collector and waved the bug-tipped knife in the air. The silk-suited man looked horrified by the bug whipping around by his eyes and ear, but the look of surprise on his face when Bear grabbed both of them and heaved them from the floor made Scabbs smile on the inside.

If this is a Van Saar debt collector, he thought, they recruited him from the Spire. He has no business down here in the Underhive.

Scabbs's smile was short-lived, though. Bear squeezed the two of them into a big hug, forcing both little men to exhale most of the air in their lungs.

The bartender, who'd been silent up until this point, simply said, 'Take it outside, Bear.'

And with that, the mountain-sized bounty hunter walked to the door, kicked it open and tossed the two men out into the street. 'Don't come back without your master, little man,' he said, pointing at Scabbs. 'You need to stay on Jerico's leash.'

Scabbs rolled over the debt collector, trying to kick as much dirt as he could onto the man's silk suit, and keep him from seeing Kal as he slipped out the door and then ducked into an alley. Kal smiled and winked at his partner before he disappeared.

'I'm so sorry,' said Scabbs as he helped the man up from the ground. He brushed at the man's jacket, but Scabbs's dirty hands and the egg still stuck to the debt collector's jacket combined into a fine pasty smudge on the soft material.

'Just leave me alone,' said the debt collector. He slapped at Scabbs's hands and walked toward the door. Just as he reached for the handle, the door opened up, hitting him and sending him flying into the dirt again. Yolanda stepped out as Scabbs went to offer his hand to the debt collector once more.

'Don't touch me, you vile person,' said the debt collector. He crawled away from Scabbs through the door, which Yolanda held open for him.

She smiled at Scabbs as she closed the door again. 'Well played,' she said. 'I didn't know you had that in you.'

‘Neither did I,’ said Scabbs. ‘I thought Bear was going to kill me.’

‘He would have,’ said Yolanda, pulling Scabbs away from the bar. ‘But I caught his eye and motioned for him to keep calm.’

‘Thanks,’ said Scabbs. They walked a little farther down the road. ‘Well, I suppose we should catch up with Kal, huh?’

Yolanda walked a few more steps before answering. ‘In good time,’ she said. ‘In good time. I could still use some breakfast.’

Jobe had been running through the Underhive all night. At first he didn’t know or care where he was headed. He just ran. He needed to stay ahead of the assassin. After a time, he couldn’t sense the presence of his follower any longer and slowed down, but he never stopped moving. To sit was to die.

He just needed someplace safe to rest for a while and commune with the Universe. He needed to figure out where to go next. He needed to understand why he had returned to the Hive. He needed to determine where his destiny lay. He needed to sleep.

The morning began to hum in the Hive as he walked. Workers left their homes and headed out to factories or the mines or the docks. Faceless, nameless, futureless drones trudging back and forth through their lives. This was the monotonous existence the gangs rebelled against: the endless sameness, the senseless tedium of working for little or no reward, of moving forward but never getting anywhere.

Some turned to adventure, hooking their hopes on the one big score. Others sank into violence, wreaking vengeance for their tiresome lives on all they encountered. Still others, a dismal few, really, looked to a higher power to find some meaning in their lives. He thought it was unfortunate that so many Cawdor fell into the first two categories and never discovered the third possibility.

As he pondered these universal ailments, Jobe’s feet kept walking, turning corners periodically and even climbing or descending stairs without any conscious effort. And then he stopped moving. Francks looked up, confused by his own lack of motion. He was standing in front of a door. He looked around to see where he was. Hive City. How had he got all the way into the middle of Hive City?

He looked at the door again. There was no name plaque above the frame. No number to signify an address. Just a brass knocker in the middle of the iron door. The Universe brought me here for a reason, he thought. So he knocked. A shuffling noise came from behind the door; not of feet but of paper and books.

There was a bang, like a door closing or a drawer slamming shut. Then, finally, the sound of feet. The door opened.

'Good morning, Jerod,' said Jobe without even a hint of surprise in his voice. Jerod Bitten stood in the doorway, wearing a thick, red morning coat. The wall behind him was lined with bookshelves and a large desk occupied much of the room. Oil paintings hung on the walls and there were even a few sculptures on pedestals in the corners. Jerod Bitten had done quite well for himself in the past twenty years.

'What are you doing here?' asked Bitten. He looked completely bewildered by the visit.

But it made perfect sense to Francks. His body had guided him to the one place he could rest and meditate on the past. The one place in the entire Hive where he could be safe for a time. 'I just need a place to sleep,' he said. 'Can you put me up for a day?'

Kal strolled down the road just inside the Glory Hole dome. He hadn't been down to this section of the Underhive since that whole vampire incident kicked off. He'd been drugged and kidnapped right outside of Hagen's Hole and things went downhill from there. Now he wasn't quite sure how to get back to Hagen's.

That's why he kept Scabbs around. The little man remembered every step he'd ever taken. Of course, he left a trail of dead skin wherever he went, so it couldn't be too hard to find his way back again. But now he was lost again, and he'd just stepped inside the dome. Every blasted-out building looked like the last, and it wasn't like he could just stop someone and ask. He was Kal Jerico. It wouldn't look good for the famous bounty hunter to ask for directions, especially to a bar.

He walked into the middle of an intersection and scanned all four streets, looking for some clue, some landmark to jog his memory. One of the streets was completely blocked off by a pile of debris. It looked odd, like it had been piled there instead of happening naturally – meaning from a grenade or a missile or perhaps a hive quake. Then it hit him. He'd created that pile himself; well he and Scabbs had while Yolanda watched and criticised.

They were going to try to trap a bounty up against the blockade, but Yolanda messed it up and Scabbs ended up blowing up the side of a building that fell on their quarry. Kal smiled. Looking back, that was a lot of fun – a lot more fun now than when it happened, of course.

He turned to look down the other way to see if the rubble from the explosion that killed their bounty was still there. What he saw instead was a group of

Redemptionists walking toward him, weapons in hand. He looked back the way he had come. A second group of Redemptionists had appeared and now headed towards him. Kal hardly had to look to know what waited for him down the last street. A third group stepped out from a door, drew weapons, and fanned out across the street.

He had one exit and he knew it to be blocked. He had blocked it himself a few months back. 'Scav,' he said. 'I wish Yolanda was here. This is how you set a trap.' Kal drew his laspistols and fired into the first group. He then turned and ran toward the blockade, zigzagging down the street as las-blasts hit the ground around him.

Scabbs pushed away the plate of food the mavants had served. 'That tasted pretty good,' he said. 'Like mom used to make.'

Yolanda tried not to imagine Scabbs as an ugly scab-covered boy sitting down to a meal with his ugly, scab-covered family, but the image popped into her head unbidden. She shivered and put it out of her mind.

She stared straight down the tunnel, not wanting to look at her companion at the moment for fear the image would return. 'Yeah,' she said. 'There are some places in the Underhive where you can get a decent meal, but Jerico insists on going from one hole to another,'

'He likes the barmaids,' said Scabbs. 'He says they help him think.'

Yolanda humphed. 'Only because his brains are in his pants.'

'What do you mean?'

Now Yolanda looked at Scabbs. There seemed to be an honest look of bewilderment on his face, although it was tough to tell underneath all the sores and flaky skin. 'Never mind,' she said. 'Let Jerico have his barmaids. 'I'll take an Escher-run restaurant any day. The mavants know how to cook.' Of course, one bad meal will get them ten beatings, she thought to herself.

'The food was good,' said Scabbs, 'but those waiters were awfully dirty.'

Yolanda stared at Scabbs as they walked. He had taken a bath a couple days earlier, but that had only washed off the top layer of crud. Still, she had to admit that he was cleaner than most mavants she'd kicked around. 'That's just part of the… décor,' she replied after a moment. 'Like the barmaids in the Sump Hole. Something to take your mind off how dirty and poor you are.'

Scabbs nodded his head but Yolanda doubted he truly understood. He seemed to revel in being dirty and poor. It was the only thing that explained why he had stayed with Jerico so long.

As she pondered why she stayed with the disgustingly swarthy bounty hunter, Yolanda heard something rumbling behind them. ‘Did you hear that?’ she asked.

‘Hear what?’ said Scabbs. He picked at the sores on his elbows as they walked, which made a scraping sound. Glancing down at his arm, he said ‘Sorry. Didn’t realise you could hear that.’

The rumbling continued and began to get louder. Yolanda shook her head. ‘Not that,’ she said. ‘But stop it anyway.’ She pointed back down the tunnel. ‘I think something is coming. Probably those scavving Goliaths again.’

Yolanda scanned the tunnel, looking for somewhere to hide. They were at least a mile from the entrance to Glory Hole, and it was a pretty featureless tunnel. They were trapped. The rumbling sound grew louder and began echoing all around them. Yolanda wasn’t sure, but it sounded like engines.

‘I hear it now,’ said Scabbs. ‘What is that? Chainswords?’

Yolanda shook her head again. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Bigger. Much bigger. Run.’

Around a bend in the tunnel emerged three men on motorcycles. They belched black smoke, leaving a roiling dark cloud in their wake. Yolanda ran. She glanced over at Scabbs. He was running as well, his short legs pumping twice as fast as hers, but he was still falling behind.

The motorcycles gained on them. Yolanda could now see the riders. They wore what looked like Orlock colours and waved chains over their heads. ‘What’s their problem,’ she asked. ‘We haven’t ticked off the Orlocks… not lately.’

In a moment, they were on top of Scabbs. The lead biker swung his chain toward the little half-breed. It snapped out and caught him in the calf, wrapping around his legs with a clang and pulling his legs together. Scabbs pitched forward and hit the ground hard as the bikes zoomed past.

They’d be on her in a second. She stopped and drew her sword. The second biker tossed his chain at her. A large hook swung on the end as it flew. Yolanda sidestepped and slashed her sword down in front of her legs. The chain hit her sword and whipped around it several times before catching on the hook.

Yolanda braced herself as the biker drove by. When the chain went taut she yanked back hard. There was a moment of tension and Yolanda’s sword bent dangerously far over. Her bare biceps bulged as she fought against the biker’s momentum.

With a snap, the tension eased and the biker flew back off his cycle. He hit the ground hard on his back and Yolanda heard a sharp crack. The riderless motorbike wobbled and fell over, skidding down the tunnel until it came to a stop against the wall.

‘That’s one,’ she said, but she knew the other two would be back to finish the job. Yolanda turned to see how Scabbs was doing, but he was nowhere to be seen. A pit formed in her stomach as she realised what had happened. She turned toward the departing bikers. Scabbs trailed behind them, bouncing and scraping against the ground as he clawed at the hooked chain wrapped around his ankles.

‘Helmawr’s rump,’ yelled Yolanda as she ran toward the downed bike.

‘You can’t stay here,’ said Bitten. ‘It’s not safe.’

‘Another assassin tracked me down,’ said Jobe Francks. He pushed his way inside and closed the door behind him.

Bitten stared at the closed door, unable to object, but unwilling to give in just yet either. He wondered how his life had got so complicated so quickly. Assassins. Jobe Francks. His own past with Ignus. It was karma, he decided. He was paying for the sins of his youth and now they’d come back threefold.

‘Fine,’ he said, resigning himself to the realities of the day, just as he had always done. ‘But only for the day. We’ll smuggle you out to another gang hideout tonight.’

Francks dropped into a chair and stretched his legs out in front of him. He looked exhausted. Bitten crossed to his desk and sat as well. He thought about the packet in his drawer, but decided it could wait for now.

‘Who’s after me?’ asked Francks. He sat stretched out in the chair, rubbing his eyes with his fists. ‘I can’t see past the hate and the passion. I can’t see the face.’

Bitten let the question and Francks’s odd wyrd-talk hang in the air for a minute, as he considered his response. Perhaps it was time. He might never get another chance. ‘It’s Ignus,’ he said. ‘At least I think it’s Ignus.’

‘What?’ asked Francks. He sat up in the chair, his face going flush. ‘You said he was dead.’

‘I said he was gone,’ said Bitten. ‘And even that was not quite true.’

‘How do you mean?’

Bitten wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. ‘He’s not the man you knew. He’s changed. Jules Ignus did die – he is gone, for good – but the man he became, the one who came after, that man is no more Jules Ignus than I am. He’s more. More powerful. More influential. More righteous.’

‘You’re not making much sense,’ said Francks.

Bitten laughed out loud. ‘You. The prophet. Telling me I’m not making sense,’ he said and laughed again. ‘Now that’s funny.’

Francks wasn’t laughing. ‘That’s why I couldn’t see him before,’ he said.

‘There’s a thread of Ignus still woven into the plan. So I looked for him, but he wasn’t here. But you say, it’s not really Ignus anymore. I can use that. I can seek him out now.’

Bitten stopped laughing. ‘You can’t do that,’ he said. ‘You shouldn’t do that. I told you I can’t save you this time. He’ll keep coming. You can’t beat him.’

‘I don’t have to beat him,’ said Francks. I just need to show him. I need to make him understand.’

‘Understand what?’ Bitten was starting to shake. He didn’t like where this conversation was going anymore.

‘His own mortality.’

With that, the conversation ended. There was nothing more Bitten could say. He couldn’t help. He had to stay out of it if he had any chance of living through this. After a while, Francks fell asleep in the chair. Bitten opened the drawer and pulled the envelope full of credits out and walked across the room. He dropped the envelope in Jobe’s pocket and then left the hab to run an errand.

Kal shot blindly behind him, just trying to scatter his pursuers and give him a little more time. He scrambled up the pile of debris, desperately trying to reach the top before they regrouped and got a bead on him with their weapons.

So far, he’d been lucky. They were either terrible shots or he was just that good. As much as he wanted it to be the latter, he knew the odds of dodging that many blasts were pretty darn low.

He grabbed at the back of a chair lodged between a chunk of masonry and an overturned crate and tried to pull himself up another few feet. A laser blast screamed over his shoulder and obliterated the chair. ‘Maybe they’re better shots than I thought,’ said Kal as he slid back a metre.

‘Come down and you won’t be hurt, Kal Jerico,’ called one of the Redemptionists. ‘We just want to talk.’

Kal caught himself on a table leg and turned around. There were about a dozen blue-robed gangers spread out in a loose group on the street. Kal wished Scabbs were here with his bandolier of grenades. That group just begged for a large explosion.

Behind the gangers stood a man wearing robes with a thin slick of hair pressed against the side of his head. One of Crimson’s deacons. This was worse than Kal had thought. It wasn’t some random gang of Cawdor trying to protect the prophet. Crimson had finally entered the hunt.

‘We don’t want to kill you,’ said the deacon. He held his arms out wide in the

universal greeting of friendship.

'Well that changes everything,' said Kal, who had no intention of becoming friends with a Redemptionist deacon. 'Because I have no problems killing you.' He aimed and fired both laspistols. One of the blasts caught the deacon in the shoulder, spinning him around and knocking him to the ground.

The gangers opened fire again. Blasts sizzled all around Kal, but none came close. They had orders not to hurt him. Kal wanted to wonder why, but he didn't have time. He fired back, dropping two of what he now assumed to be Crimson's personal guards.

The deacon, who had a much higher tolerance for pain than Kal had thought possible, pushed himself to his feet. 'We won't kill you, Kal Jerico,' he said again. 'But I have no problems causing you pain. Take him down.' This last was an order to his men.

'Oh scav!' said Kal. He shot a few more blasts and started to scramble back up the pile. Blasts ripped through chunks of metal and concrete all around him, sending plumes of dust and acrid smoke into the air.

Kal coughed as he inhaled a puff of powdered cement, doubling over and dropping another metre back down toward the base of the pile. Another blast screamed through the air, hitting the table he had just been clinging to.

'That was a little too close,' he muttered. 'Time to trust my luck.' He turned again, braced his feet against a metal door, and aimed at the approaching gang. He fired four shots in quick succession, dropping three guards and disarming the fourth. 'Damn, I'm good,' said Kal.

The next volley of shots all impacted below Kal, obliterating the door under his feet. Kal slid down the blockade. He grabbed at the debris around him, but couldn't stop himself. There was a large hole where the door had been, and he slipped right into it. Another round of blasts over his head started a small avalanche. Chunks of concrete, chairs, crates and other debris crashed down around Kal, burying him up to his neck in trash.

'Well,' said Kal. 'Those were pretty lucky shots.'

Yolanda grabbed the handlebars and yanked the motorcycle upright. The engine was still running. She kicked a long leg over to straddle the thrumming machine, and pumped the throttle. The engine revved. She kicked it into gear and tore off down the tunnel, leaving the former driver moaning on the ground behind her.

Through the braids flapping around her face, Yolanda could see the other two bikers up ahead. Scabbs still tumbled along behind them. Thankfully they had

slowed down, but it didn't look like the little man was struggling anymore either.

She didn't know if he was alive or dead, but figured it didn't matter. Either way, she had to kill the two gangers. Yolanda pulled out one of her weapons and gunned the bike, closing in on her quarry before she opened fire. She couldn't really aim while zooming along at top speed through a narrow tunnel, so she just fired a stream of blasts toward the bikers.

The first few shots went wide, but one hit the rear of the second bike, burning a hole through the frame. The rear wheel swerved and skidded, but the biker got his machine back under control just as it teetered dangerously to the side. He turned in his seat, made a rude gesture at Yolanda and gunned his own bike, burning a long black mark into the floor.

Yolanda fired again, but misjudged the distance as he pulled away from her. She opened up her throttle all the way and crept closer. She fired a few shots at the chain holding Scabbs, but came dangerously close to his legs, so thought perhaps that wasn't such a good idea after all.

A loud bang brought Yolanda's attention back to the second biker, who now held a shotgun. Shrapnel flew off the wall beside her from the blast. She swerved as sharp bits of masonry rained down on her. The biker jerked his arm, pumping the shotgun, and aimed it at her again.

Yolanda hit the breaks and turned the handlebars sharply, putting the bike into a sideways skid. She dropped off to the side away from the shotgun, holding on with just one hand and her foot on top of the seat. The shotgun fired and the blast hit the side of the bike, sending sparks and bits of metal into the air.

After the blast, Yolanda pulled back on the handle, straightening her bike out. Staying low and off to the side, she steered with one hand while aiming her pistol. She had a better angle from there and fired several times, hitting the second biker's rear tyre with at least two shots.

The rubber shredded itself away from the rim in seconds. A steady stream of sparks began to spray out from the metal wheel. Without traction, the bike lost momentum and rear end began to skid back and forth. The biker dropped the shotgun to keep both hands on the handlebars, and kept it under control.

Yolanda pulled herself back upright and fired several more shots. Blasts hit all around the swerving biker. Chunks of metal and several gleaming pipes flew off the bike as her las-blasts rained down on him. Her last shot slammed into the biker's back, burning a hole through his leather coat. His hands flew up as he arched his back in pain. A moment later, he tumbled off the back of the motorcycle, bouncing and rolling right toward Yolanda's bike.

Yolanda tried to turn out of the way, but it was too late. Her front wheel struck the biker in the shoulder, spinning him about. His legs swung under her bike and hit her back wheel. She wasn't sure what happened next, but assumed his leather trousers got pulled up into the wheel because the back end of her machine bucked up into the air as she ran over him.

The next thing Yolanda knew, she was going over the handlebars. She tried to hold on to the seat with her powerful legs, but to no avail. She flew into the air and landed on her back in front of the bucking bike. With only a second to react, Yolanda fired two shots from her laspistol, hitting the handlebars with both.

The bike turned, tipped and skidded. The rear wheel slid right toward Yolanda. She rolled to the side, not even looking back. She didn't stop until she hit the side wall of the tunnel. The bike continued skidding down the tunnel until it slammed into the far wall.

Yolanda got up. Her back ached so hard she could hardly stand up straight, and she was bleeding from her knees and elbows. She looked down the tunnel. She could just see the last bike, with Scabbs, unconscious or dead, skipping along behind. She started to stagger down the tunnel as fast as she could.

Then her bike exploded.

Jobe Francks dreamed.

As usual, he looked down at himself to try to determine his age. For someone who could relive his own past, it helped to place the dreams in time. On this occasion, though, he didn't recognise his clothes or his body for that matter.

He was walking through a dark tunnel. Pools of light flashed over him as he walked. He was carrying something over his shoulder. He looked at it when he walked through a pool of light. It was a body.

The body had a blue cloak and he could see a patch of orange armour when the cloak flapped aside. A dull ache began to gnaw at his stomach. He tried to stop in the pool of light to look more closely at the body, but he had no control over his body. Another spot of light approached. He stared at the back of the body when he entered the light. It was there. A scorched hole in the cloak between the shoulders. His heart sunk.

He was carrying the dead body of Syris Bowdie.

He walked on, trapped in someone else's body, unable to alter the flow of time. He came to a round metal door. It curved slightly away at the top and sides. There was no handle in the door. Just a wheel sticking out from the middle. He spun the wheel and pulled. The door opened with a whoosh.

Francks noticed a small window in the door as it opened. He looked at the window as it came into the pool of light and saw a reflection there. It confirmed what he had begun to suspect. He was inside the body of Jules Ignus.

Ignus went through the door into the inky blackness beyond. He turned and pulled the door shut behind him. He switched on a torch and the beam hit the curved wall. They were inside a dome.

Even the poorest settlements had some power. Some lights would be burning somewhere, but this was pitch black. They were in an abandoned dome.

They walked through the dome for quite some time. Francks couldn't tell what Ignus was looking for. He was along for the ride but couldn't sense anything within Ignus. Perhaps there really was nothing there to sense.

After a time, Ignus stopped. He waved his light around. They were still near the wall of the dome, but had come quite a distance around from the door. They stood on the edge of a hole. The light hit crumbling walls around the hole. It was a bombed out building. The walls of the basement had crumbled in, leaving just a debris-filled hole.

Ignus pulled the body off his shoulder and dropped it down into the hole. Francks screamed, but no sound came out. Ignus turned around and flashed his torch on the wall of the dome behind him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a metal box. There was a crude timer on the front. He set the timer to ten minutes and then taped the box to the wall as high as he could reach.

He then walked back toward the door, whistling as he went. When he reached the door, he opened it again and walked through, but then stood there waiting. The bomb exploded, lighting up the small dome with a flash. The dome shook and rumbled as the wall fell in and covered up Jules Ignus's murder. He closed the door and began to whistle again as he walked back down the tunnel.

Francks began to cry as the vision faded.

The assassin had tramped around the Underhive all day, with no sign of his quarry. The old man had disappeared somehow from Hagen's Hole. It seemed inconceivable but he must have known about the secret exit. He'd left Glory Hole the same way, but the trail had long since gone cold.

Then he'd got lucky. A piece of news came his way that the old man had gone to see an old friend in Hive City. It was dangerous to do a job in the city, but not impossible, and he was being well paid.

And it had paid off. The information was good. He stood at a window, covered in a blanket of darkness and a special cloak he'd taken from a Delaque agent

he’d taken down a few years back. The cloak soaked up the darkness and radiated nothing back, not even heat. He was all but invisible, even to infrared or night vision goggles.

In the room beyond were two old men, one asleep in a chair and the other sitting at a desk. One was the target and the other his friend. It didn’t much matter which was which. He’d let the authorities sort out the bodies later. It was almost time to go to work.

6: THE CARDINAL RULE

A blast of flame and heat hit Yolanda in the face, throwing her back down the tunnel. She flew five metres through the air and landed on her back.

'Ow!' she said. Yolanda was pretty sure nothing was broken, but felt she deserved a little rest after the second tunnel attack in two days. She lay there in a pool of light, staring at the roof of the tunnel and wondering how many more times this would happen this week. Then she rolled to the side. She crossed her arms and turned over and over.

A burning tyre landed behind her with a squelch. Yolanda stopped rolling when she hit the wall. She looked back to see the wheel roll down the tunnel, leaving a trail of smouldering tar and black smoke. 'I just don't need this,' she muttered as she pushed herself back to her feet.

Yolanda walked gingerly toward the burning bike. Smoke billowed toward the ceiling as a flaming puddle of fuel spread across the tunnel. She held her breath and darted past the puddle before it cut her off. On the other side, she searched for the trail of the final bike. It wasn't hard to find. Apparently, the motorcycle had been leaking oil, which mingled with drops of blood and bits and pieces of Scabbs's clothes and flesh.

As she jogged down the tunnel, following the trail of blood and oil, the black smoke behind her must have reached the ceiling. A decrepit sprinkler system cut in and stale-smelling water rained down on Yolanda, drenching her in seconds. Her dreadlocks soaked up the water and stuck to her face like thick, doughy strands. Rivulets of water ran down into her ears and eyes, and the ridge of her nose became a waterfall. Her leather vest and loin cloth became heavy with water and began slapping her bare skin.

Worst of all, a few minutes after the sprinklers started, the water all but washed away the trail.

'Helmawr's rump!' she yelled.

The assassin crept across the roof of the old man's hab, searching for a way inside. The hab backed up to the wall of the dome, so there was no back door and the buildings on the block had been built side-by-side, so there were no alleys. The only door led right into the room where the two men had been sitting, and the windows were all barred, even those on the second floor.

Whoever lived here was highly security conscious. The home was secure from anything but a frontal assault and that would surely bring the enforcers, probably preventing a quick and quiet escape. But if there was one thing the assassin knew, it was that no hab in the hive was totally secure.

The roof yielded only one possible entrance. A metal, box-shaped ventilation unit ran across the roof and down the entire block of buildings. A small pipe dropped from the metal box into each building to push air in, while a larger shaft allowed the recycled air to re-enter the ventilation unit from the building.

All he had to do was crawl into the unit and climb down the shaft. He found an access panel to the unit three buildings down, but it had been welded shut. This guy is pretty good, he thought, but he was better. He pulled out a welding torch, set the flame to a blue-white pinpoint, and went to work on the welds.

A while later, after using his torch again on the attic vent, the assassin climbed out of the shaft, switched to nightvision on his goggles, and tiptoed across the rafters. He found the attic access panel, but then sighed when he realised it was screwed into place from the other side. He checked the small gas tank for his welding torch. It felt light. 'Should be enough,' he said.

He cut around the screws, leaving a small sliver of metal to hold each one. He then attached a suction cup and pushed the panel out. After pulling the panel up into the attic, he dropped down into what looked like a bedroom. He slipped out the door and down the steps.

At last, he peeked around the doorway into the main room. Both men were right where he had left them. If his luck held, this would be over in a minute and he could slip back out the way he came in. These two could rot for days before anyone found them.

Sliding a long, thin dagger out from a fold inside his light-drinking cloak, he slipped in behind the man at the desk. He reached around and clasped his free hand around the man's mouth as he jabbed the dagger through his neck from the other side.

The old man stiffened under his grip and kicked at the desk twice before going limp. The assassin looked up at the man sleeping in the chair. He hadn't stirred. He pulled the dagger out of the wound and leaned the dying man's head back

against the top of the chair. Blood sprayed out the hole in his neck and pooled on the floor.

Being careful to avoid the growing puddle of blood, the assassin crept over toward the other victim. ‘One down, one to go,’ he said to himself as he prepared to strike.

‘Get up!’ screamed a voice in Scabbs’s head. In his semi-conscious state, he couldn’t tell if the voice was his own or Kal’s, or perhaps someone else entirely. But the little half-ratskin had been so conditioned to respond to loud commands through his years of working with Kal and Yolanda, that he reacted out of pure instinct.

He stood without opening his eyes, snapping to attention before the voice spoke again and, more importantly, before the subsequent smack hit the back of his head. In retrospect, he probably should have opened his eyes first, for as soon as Scabbs got to his feet, he pitched over forward, hitting the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of his gut.

‘Get up!’ came the command again, quickly followed by a sharp rap on his back. This time it was definitely audible and definitely not Kal. Scabbs opened his eyes, and immediately wished he hadn’t. A bright light pierced his skull, bringing the splitting headache that he’d only dully been aware of before into sharp focus.

In fact, his body ached from his feet to his teeth and beyond.

A hand holding a short length of pipe emerged out of the light and hit him between the shoulder blades again. Scabbs scrambled to his feet, trying to ignore the aches and sharp pains that wracked his body. He looked at his feet and saw the reason he had fallen earlier. His ankles, red, raw and swollen, were shackled together.

He started to remember. The motorbikes. The chain. Being dragged down the tunnel.

‘Ow,’ he said.

‘Shut up and get moving,’ said the Orlock ganger connected to the pipe-holding hand. He wore a red bandana around his melon-shaped head, a leather vest over a thin shirt and thick steel-bound boots, which probably explained the pains Scabbs felt in his ribs. But he had no visible weapons beyond the pipe. As Scabbs looked at him, the ganger raised the pipe for another blow, but Scabbs shuffled his feet forward, complying before the blow fell.

As he walked, Scabbs checked his injuries. He probably had some cracked ribs

and a concussion. He rubbed the back of his head, and checked his hand; no blood, but there was a thick knot at the base of his skull. His grimy grey clothes were stained brown and red, but even though his shirt was mostly tattered fabric now, he was no longer bleeding from being dragged along by his captors. His swollen ankles ached and chafed against the manacles, but he felt no sharp pains as he walked, so the bones were likely intact. He felt lucky to be alive.

'Start over there,' commanded the Orlock, pointing at a large pile of debris.

Scabbs looked up. A couple of dozen other dirty, bloody, manacled people carried rocks, chunks of metal and other bits of unrecognizable objects down the hill and dropped them in bins. Other slaves – there really was no other word for the manacled workers – pushed full bins away from the hill while others brought empty bins back. Those that had dropped their loads off climbed back up the hill.

The Orlock guard shoved Scabbs in the back with his pipe. He stumbled a few feet before gaining his balance. Taking a shallow breath so his ribs wouldn't hurt so much, Scabbs followed the slaves up the hill and grabbed a crumpled piece of pipe.

Yeah. Lucky. That's what he was.

Snap!

Kal Jerico hadn't thought his life could get any worse after spending an afternoon trudging through raw sewage.

Snap!

He'd even spent a moment during his meeting with Nemo later that night musing. Now I've definitely hit bottom and things have to start to get better, he'd thought back then.

Snap!

Now, he realised those moments of his life were all just prelude to this one. This was definitely the lowest of the low.

Snap!

The whip hit Kal just below his knees on that tender piece of flesh above the calf. He marvelled at the precision. He had also just about bitten through his lower lip trying not to scream.

'Stop,' said a familiar voice.

Kal exhaled slowly through pursed lips, trying to force the pain out of his body with the air. It worked only slightly. His inhale was slightly harder. He'd always found it tough to breathe in while suspended above the ground by his wrists.

Cardinal Crimson walked around in front of Kal. He had a gruesome, toothy

smile on his lipless face. His eyes practically danced in their open sockets. The look on the Cardinal's face was one of holy contentment. Ecstasy even.

'Looks like you just had an epiphany in your pants,' said Kal with a smirk.

Crimson raised a bony finger in the air. *Snap!* The whip hit the spot again. 'You will speak only when spoken to, heretic,' said Crimson.

'So, now would be okay, then?' asked Kal. He was pleased his voice only cracked a little.

Snap!

'You will answer questions, Kal Jerico, and keep your heretical comments to yourself.'

Kal kept several heretical comments to himself while he waited for the first question.

'What is your interest in the heretic known as "the Prophet of the Body?"'

Kal was so stunned by the question that he almost blurted out the truth. So, the prophet was a heretic in Crimson's eyes as well. That was an interesting piece to add to the puzzle. Kal wondered how much more information he could get out of Crimson while the Cardinal interrogated him.

'Why do you want to know?' he asked, and was immediately sorry he hadn't thought that out a little more.

Snap!

'I'm asking the questions, heretic,' said Crimson. He circled back around Kal. 'What is your interest in Jobe Francks?'

'He's a bounty, that's all,' said Kal.

'Who's paying you for this bounty?'

Kal considered his options. Nemo wouldn't be happy if Kal sold him out, but his legs were on fire and his shoulders and arms were shooting pains all the way down to his hips. Plus, the truth might actually be beneficial here. He heard the whoosh of the whip being pulled back for another strike.

'Nemo!' he cried out.

Crimson muttered something. Kal held his breath and strained his ears to listen, but he only got fragments. '…lousy spy… can't let him get… what does he know… can't take any chances…'

After a while, Crimson stopped muttering and walked back into view. He smiled again. Kal tried not to shiver at the sight. 'Kal,' he started. 'Kal, we've not always seen eye-to-eye on things. But I think we can both agree that we hate Nemo more than we hate each other, right?'

Kal considered his answer quickly and carefully. 'Okay,' he said.

‘Right,’ said Crimson. ‘That man is a no good spy. A heretic of the first order.’ He held out his bony hand and placed it on Kal’s flexed and aching shoulder. ‘Let me burn my way to the point, shall I?’

Kal nodded. Anything to get Crimson’s hand off his body.

‘I will pay you twice what Nemo is paying to bring Francks to me.’

‘Four times,’ said Kal automatically, and then cringed. Still, he’d have to pay Nemo at least double just to get out from underneath his thumb.

The whip didn’t come.

‘Done,’ said Crimson. ‘We have a deal then?’

‘That’s dead or alive, right?’ asked Kal. ‘Same price either way.’

‘Actually,’ said Crimson, ‘just dead.’ His floating eyes bored into Kal.

‘No deal,’ said Kal defiantly. ‘I’m a bounty hunter. Not an assassin.’ He’d blurted the response before he could even think about it.

The fire returned to Crimson’s eyes and his lipless smile shifted into a horrible sneer. ‘Jobe Francks must die!’ he screamed. ‘He will die and you will die beside him. Two heretics sent to fiery redemption. It is the will of the Undying Emperor.’

‘It’s the will of an undead lunatic,’ said Kal.

Snap! Snap! Snap!

It dawned on Kal that his lowest moment was still yet to come. When and if he got out of this chamber and back to Yolanda and Scabbs, he would have to admit they were right. Going to Crimson would have been a very bad idea. Probably just as bad as getting caught by Crimson.

Snap!

Jobe Francks’s hand flashed out and grabbed the assassin’s wrist. He opened his eyes to see a bloody blade quivering a few centimetres from his chest.

‘How in the…?’ said the assassin, his eyes wide with shock.

Francks didn’t hesitate to try to understand the moment. He acted. One leg whipped up, his booted toes slapping into the assassin’s groin. He cocked the other leg and kicked the man in the gut, propelling him away from the chair where Jobe had been sleeping just moments before.

The knife flipped into the air as the man slammed into the desk. Jobe rose to his feet and snatched the tumbling dagger in one fluid movement.

‘You were asleep,’ gasped the assassin. He held his stomach and tried to catch his breath. ‘How did you…?’

Jobe levelled a cloudy-eyed glare at the killer. ‘Bad dreams,’ he said as he

advanced.

The assassin retreated around the desk as he fumbled in his billowing, dark cloak. He pulled out what looked like a gun with an attached gas canister. He snapped the trigger and Jobe dived to the side. Nothing more than a thin blue-white flame emerged from the tip. It was a welding torch. He twisted a knob and the flame lengthened, and then waved the torch back and forth in front of his body.

Jobe moved in on the assassin again. He flipped the dagger over in his hand to be able to parry. He didn't need it to kill, just to get past the flame. He made a feint with the knife, thrusting its tip toward the assassin's torch hand. Instead of flinching, the assassin dropped his arm under the attack and twisted his wrist, altering the angle of the flame.

The torch lanced across Jobe's arm. Pain shot through his body. The smell of burnt skin and hair wafted into the air. He pushed the pain down and disregarded the urge to grab his arm and look at the wound. Time enough for that later. Jobe pulled back a step to regroup.

It was then he happened to glance over at the desk and saw Bitten slumped in his chair. A trickle of blood leaked out of a hole in his neck. 'Oh my Emperor,' he exclaimed. 'What have I wrought?'

'Your own demise,' said the assassin.

Jobe looked back too late. The killer was on top of him. He slapped the dagger hand aside and drove Francks to the ground. With a deft move, the assassin scissored Jobe's legs together as he lay on top of chest and hand. He held Francks's free hand down and shoved the torch into his neck.

Nothing happened. He could feel his neck burning, but the searing pain he expected never arrived. The assassin lifted the torch up, obviously also wondering why Francks wasn't dead or dying, or even in pain. The torch had gone out.

Francks wanted to laugh at his luck, but the image of his dying friend drove everything else out of his mind. He looked into the befuddled face of the killer and the pain and anger and frustration of decades in the Wastes boiled over inside.

The killer reared back with the torch, but he never got the chance to smack him in the head. With nothing but the will of his mind, Jobe Francks tossed the assassin into the air. The killer flew up into the ceiling and stuck as if bolted through the hands and feet.

The assassin squirmed, but Francks held him in place with his mind. Jobe rose

from the floor to his feet without bending his body or using his hands. He raised one hand and clutched at the air above him. He could feel the killer's neck in his grip even though he held nothing at all. The man gasped and choked as if unable to get his breath.

'What… what are you?' he gasped.

'I am the prophet,' replied Francks. 'And here is my message.' With a jerk, he twisted his wrist in the air. The assassin's head snapped to the side and a loud crack echoed through the room. Francks let his arm drop to the side and the killer fell to the ground in a crumpled mass.

As he looked at the dead assassin, Francks's mind cleared and he felt himself begin breathing again. He looked over at Bitten. Through his cloudy eyes, he could see breath escaping his friend's lips. He rushed to the chair. Hesitating for just a moment, he reached out and laid his hand on Bitten's shoulder.

At his touch, Bitten stirred. He tried to raise his head, but apparently didn't have the strength left for even that. 'You're alive,' he said, his voice raspy and barely audible. 'Good… idiot killed the wrong… old man.' Bitten coughed. A gurgle of blood spat out of the hole in his neck and bubbled through his lips, moistening his mouth with red liquid.

Jerod Bitten's eyes fell closed and his head lolled to the side. Jobe held his head in his hands and then leaned down and kissed his old enemy on the forehead. Blood trickled down Bitten's cheek and ran through Jobe's fingers, staining his hand.

Bitten's eyes snapped open wide as if in terror or pain. 'The truth,' he whispered, 'is here. Find it.' And then he was gone. Jobe Francks sat cradling the head of his only friend in his lap and cried.

After several hours of tramping through the lower reaches of the Underhive, Yolanda was dry, but by no means happy. 'Scavving Jerico,' she said. 'This is his fault as usual.' She kicked a loose rock, sending it skittering down the dusty tunnel.

She'd picked up the motorcycle's trail just inside Glory Hole. After waiting for Jerico at the rendezvous point for an hour, Yolanda followed the trail deeper and deeper into the Underhive until it ended at a blank wall in the middle of a dark tunnel. In her torch light, Yolanda saw the last few drops of oil near the wall had been smeared. Something had scraped them to the side. It took her ten minutes to find the seam in the wall and pry it open.

Now she trudged down a corridor that had probably not seen regular traffic in

decades, perhaps even centuries. Yet it bore marks of recent activity. The dust-covered walls were shored up with clean braces and the thick layer of sediment on the floor had been scuffed almost completely down the centre.

Someone lived or worked down here, and that someone had kidnapped Scabbs. 'And it's all Jerico's fault,' she said again. 'Him and his scavving debts. You should have been with us, Jerico.'

As she was about to continue her tirade, Yolanda saw a light ahead. She flicked off her torch and crept forward. The tunnel ended in the normal circular hatchway of early domes. A small window at eye level let out light from within. Yolanda stepped to the side of the window and craned her head around to peer inside.

Dozens of men and women in rags and chains worked under the watchful eyes of Orlock gangers. A burly man yelled at the gangers, who whipped a few straggling workers. It looked like the Orlocks were mining this abandoned dome for materials or tech, but she'd never known a gang to use slave labour – kidnapped slave labour at that. That was a sure way to get the Guilders after you.

Something moved past the window and Yolanda ducked back. When she looked again, her jaw dropped open. The shadow had been a couple of Guilder guards. They paced on around the area, as if they were guarding the work site.

What in the Spire is going on here, thought Yolanda? An abandoned dome in a deep crevice of the Underhive filled with slave labour and Orlock gangers, all being protected by Guilder guards. What had Scabbs fallen into this time?

Whatever it was, she couldn't barge in alone. Then she got an idea. The Orlocks all wore bandanas, one of which could easily would hide her Escher tats; and dirty shirts one of which would hide her… other Escher assets. She just might be able to infiltrate the site, if she stayed in the shadows. With Jerico missing in action – again – she just might be Scabbs's only hope for rescue. She had to chance it.

Yolanda ran back down the dark tunnel. She knew where she could find her disguise. She just hoped the fire and sprinklers hadn't got to the two bodies she'd left behind.

The day lights in Hive City flickered to life outside Jerod Bitten's hab, sending a beam through the window onto the macabre scene inside. Jobe Francks sat on the floor behind the large desk, with Bitten's bloody head in his lap. He'd stopped crying hours earlier, more due to his tear ducts drying up than to any sense of closure to his grief.

The Universe had asked so much of him, and this latest death had been one cost too many. His will to push on in the name of the almighty plan had drained away with his tears. He felt empty and lost, more so than at any time during his years of wandering the Ash Wastes. He now had no friends, nowhere to turn for help, no idea where to go next.

As he sat, the light from the street shone on his face, outlining his head in a soft, white glow. He raised his head and gazed into the light being reflected down upon him through an odd pattern of reflections from the framed paintings on the walls. He could see the path the beam traversed across the room. It bounced from an image of Dust Falls to a rendering of the Spire and then to an eerily familiar painting of the Acid Pools before shining into his eyes.

The pools. Bitten had known then what was happening, but couldn't or wouldn't do anything to stop it. He'd been too afraid of Ignus. But he'd known. What did he say before he died?

'The idiot killed the wrong old man.'

Bitten had known what was coming. He had to. But he was still too afraid to act. And this time that fear cost him his life. Bitten's last words echoed in Jobe's mind.

'The truth is here.'

Something stirred inside Jobe Francks. A new sense of purpose. A newfound desire. Ignus was still alive, still killing his friends. It was time for the killing to end. Time for the plan to move forward.

Francks laid Jerod Bitten's body gently on the floor and climbed into the chair. He opened the drawers and combed through their contents, looking for something – anything – that might point to Ignus's current whereabouts.

The bottom drawer was filled with ledgers. He flipped through them. They contained accounts for all of Bitten's business dealings. After a while, it became obvious that Jerod had been funding a number of Cawdor gangs in the Underhive. He pulled out the note Jerod had given him. A fat envelope fell out of his pocket as well. He opened it to find a wad of credits.

'No time to wonder on that,' he said, and laid the envelope aside. Unfolding the note, he checked the gang names against the records in the ledger. The names and places matched. Jerod had helped each of those gangs financially and took a portion of their earnings in return.

Francks wondered if they were all like the Universal Saviours or if any of them were hardline fanatics like the Righteous Saviours. He wanted to believe that Bitten had been doing some small part in promoting truth over fear. It might be

the former fanatic's only lasting legacy.

There was one last ledger. This one listed the names of several Guilders; investors perhaps. It seemed Bitten had become quite the manipulator of money. There was a healthy flow of funds between all of the accounts. Where it all came from and the paths it took would take weeks to follow through the books. But it didn't matter. There was nothing here that overtly linked Bitten to his past with Ignus or to the current location of that murderer.

He looked into the drawer again. It was empty, but images swirled in his cloudy eye. He saw a hand reach into the empty drawer and press down on the bottom close to the back corner. A small section depressed allowing the fingers to grab the bottom and pull it out.

Then the image was gone. Francks shook his head to clear the vision and reached into the drawer. He pressed the spot and pulled out the false bottom. Inside was nothing but a small brown key, almost invisible in the dark drawer. He pulled out the key and held it up to the light to look at it.

'What do you open?' he asked. Jobe's eye refocused from the key to the painting of the Acid Pools on the wall. Somehow he knew he was right. He walked over to the painting and pulled it off the wall. Behind it was another false panel like the one in the desk drawer. He never would have noticed it before finding the false bottom.

A moment later, Francks located the button that freed the panel. Behind it was a wall safe. He inserted the key and unlocked it. Inside he found what looked like another ledger with some loose paper sticking out from the pages.

He opened the ledger and pulled out the loose parchment. As he opened it up, a smaller, folded sheet fell to the floor. On the large piece was an odd drawing full of lines and arrows and notes written in small, fine handwriting. Francks looked down at the other sheet, which had opened up when it landed. It was a wanted poster with the name and image of Jules Ignus. At the bottom, in large print, it read '10,000 credits – Dead or Alive'.

He picked up the wanted poster and headed to the desk to look through the ledger. Instead of columns showing credits owed and earned, inside was a listing of dates, places and descriptions, written in the same tiny handwriting. Transactions? No. He took the ledger back to the desk and read a few of the passages at random. They were gang activities – the New Saviours' gang activities.

Francks scanned the entries. He found a description of the burning murder of the Wyrd girl. A few pages later he found a detailed account of the death of Syris

Bowdie and the ambush and mass murder of the Saviours of Humanity. He flipped through the book. Every evil deed Jules Ignus ever performed was described in the ledger, complete with dates, places and names.

A thought occurred to Francks. He flipped through and found what he needed. The date Ignus buried Syris's body. As he read the sketchy account, which he'd witnessed in greater detail through his cloudy visions just that night, Francks felt his mind transported away once again.

He stood in the dome where Ignus had left Bowdie, but it was no longer dark. Lights blazed from the tops of poles spaced throughout the small dome. Around him he saw Guilder guards and some Orlock gangers, who all seemed to be standing around watching a large group of slaves hauling stone and chunks of metal.

Francks recognised the spot and moved his consciousness to the wall. He could feel the presence of Bowdie beneath the rubble. It was close. He extended his will into the mind of a large, hairy man who seemed to be directing the workers. The man scratched at his temple for a moment and then called to one of the gangers and pointed toward Jobe. The ganger whipped the slaves, driving them to the spot, where they began clawing at the rubble.

As his vision cleared, Jobe wondered what had just happened. Was it past, present, or future? Did he truly interact with the workers? He didn't know, but he needed to find that dome. Jobe checked the account in Bitten's journal. It described how Ignus had found the dome years earlier and had been siphoning archeotech from it slowly so as to not arouse suspicion from rival gangs or the local Guilders. It mentioned a map.

Francks opened up the drawing again and read the notes. It was the map, or a copy of it. Directions were scrawled in the margin in a different colour. He gathered up the journal, re-pocketed the envelope full of credits and headed for the door. Looking back at the bodies of the assassin and his dead friend, Jobe Francks mentally thanked them for renewing his faith in the plan and said a short prayer to speed them on to their ultimate rewards, whatever they might be.

Scabbs cringed and bit his lip to hold back a scream as the whip stung his back. His shredded shirt provided little protection from the intermittent lashes, so each one ripped across his scarred and bleeding back. He dared not scream, though, because that merely brought more beatings.

'Get a move on,' said the ganger behind him. It was the same one who'd captured Scabbs – a gangly young man with a thin goatee and stringy black hair

sticking out from beneath his bandana. He'd heard the foreman call him Ander.

'All you crew move to the back corner,' said Ander. The whip came down again, but this time it hit a scrawny girl ahead of Scabbs.

She fell to her knees and began to cry. Scabbs stepped forward and bent over her, catching the follow-up smack on his own, raw back. He cringed again and almost bit through his lip as the pain shot up his spine.

He pulled the girl back to her feet. 'Thank you,' she mouthed to him. 'My name is Arliana. I…' Scabbs heard the crack of the whip, but was too late. It slammed into her back again. He pushed her forward before she could scream, hoping to get away from Ander, who seemed to enjoy his work a little too much.

'Don't speak,' he whispered once Ander found a new target. 'Just work. My friends will get us out of here.'

'My friends are all in here,' said Arliana.

Scabbs put his finger to his lips and handed her a piece of pipe from the pile. He then dug out a chunk of debris of his own and followed her to the cart. The chain gang worked at the new location for an hour or so, clawing at debris and hauling chunks to the carts.

Ander's whip came down more often than Scabbs thought was needed. He helped Arliana as best he could, grabbing larger pieces that she struggled with and catching her when she stumbled. She smiled each time, but Scabbs had to admit to himself that his deeds were far from selfless. He simply hoped to keep Ander's attention away from his area.

After dropping a particularly large chunk of masonry into the cart, Scabbs turned to follow Arliana back to the pile. She'd got ahead of him as he had struggled with the concrete block. Halfway back to the pile, Scabbs heard Arliana scream. He looked up, but Ander was nowhere near her.

She stood by the pile, hands on her cheeks, screaming incoherently. Scabbs shuffled forward as fast as he could, but Ander got to her first. He raised his whip, but it never fell. Arliana was now pointing down at the pile. Ander turned and yelled at the foreman.

'Grondle,' he called. 'We got another body.'

Scabbs came up beside Arliana. She'd stopped screaming, but he heard her whimper. A hand stuck out from beneath the pile in front of her, palm up. Something seemed odd about it. The rest of the chain gang crowded around to get a look, pushing Scabbs and Arliana back.

'Don't just stand there,' said Ander. 'Get back to work. Dig it out.' He snapped the whip, hitting an old man standing next to Scabbs.

With each trip after that, more and more of the body came into view. The strangeness that Scabbs noticed became clear after a while, even to the weary eyes of the chain gang.

'There's not a scratch on it anywhere,' said Arliana under her breath as they worked together to lift an iron beam off the legs.

The body was not just perfectly preserved, it didn't have a mark on it anywhere. The tons of debris that had come off the pile that night hadn't left a single scratch or bruise on the exposed flesh and the clothes were neither torn nor even dirty.

By the time Scabbs and Arliana returned after dropping the beam in the cart, the rest of the gang had pulled the body free from the pile and laid it flat on the ground. Wild, frizzy hair topped a drawn, lined face. The clothes were definitely gang-issue, consisting of a leather coat and trousers and large boots.

'Hmmph, said Ander, for the moment forgetting that his slaves had stopped working. 'Not one of my men.' He called for Grondle to come over. 'This one of your workers from the earlier accidents?'

Grondle scratched his beard as he stared at the body. He looked over at the hole from where the workers had pulled the body, and shook his head. 'No. Never seen this one before,' he said. 'And we never worked in this area before this morning. Gotta be old. Really old.'

Ander shook his head. 'It's got to be recent,' he said. 'It's not even decomposed. I've seen old bodies. They look bad. They smell worse.'

Scabbs snapped his fingers. 'That's it,' he said before his mind stopped his mouth.

The whip didn't come though. 'That's what?' asked Grondle. He grabbed Ander's arm, which had raised up with the whip.

Scabbs looked at the two of them, trying to figure out which one was really in charge. He shrugged and said, 'The smell. It's all wrong. He's dead alright. I'd guess ten maybe twenty years based on the staleness of the clothes.'

He picked up steam as Grondle and Ander leaned in to listen. 'But the body itself has no odour,' continued Scabbs. 'No decay. No rot. It's perfectly preserved, like it's been kept in a vacuum all this time. But space would have done other things, bad things, to the body. It would be a mess. I can't explain it. It's weird. It's…'

'A miracle,' whispered Arliana. She dropped to her knees and bowed in front of the body.

The word spread across the entire gang like a wave. Soon, the entire chain gang

had bowed in a ring around the body. Some muttered prayers. Others reached out to touch the miracle body. Scabbs looked at Ander, wondering how the nasty Orlock would react. Ander looked at Grondle, perhaps seeking guidance.

Grondle slapped his hand against his forehead. 'Helmawr's rump,' he muttered. 'Guilder Tavis won't like this.'

Kal's torture had gone on for hours with precious few breaks. His mouth was dry and his tongue felt so swollen that he kept gagging on it. He had vomited twice as far as he could remember, and his lips had cracked from the stomach acid he'd expelled. He could no longer feel his shoulders, which was a blessing. His back and legs, on the other hand, felt like someone had built a fire on him, using his skin as kindling.

Crimson had returned every so often to pace around him and preach at him. He would step out of the dark into the pool of light around where Kal hung, and smile his gruesome smile. He would then pace around, preaching. Crimson had given up asking questions once he realised that Kal knew little about the whereabouts of Jobe Francks.

Kal had eventually promised to kill Francks for Crimson, but somehow the crazy preacher realised Kal was lying. 'That is your problem, Kal Jerico,' said Crimson at the time. 'You kill for profit, but never for principle. Heretic.'

'I kill… only when needed,' said Kal. 'Only when my life… depends upon it.' He found the strength to raise his head and looked Crimson in the eye. 'I'd kill you now… if I thought it would… shut you up.'

Snap.

And the beatings continued. The torturer was quite skilled. He only worked an area as long as the body could handle and then moved on. Kal's pain radiated from head to toe, but he had only passed out twice – at least as far as he could remember.

And so the night wore on, with Crimson pacing around the pool of light, extolling the virtues of fiery redemption. Kal almost wished for that release or, failing that, the chance to kill Crimson and stop his incessant sermon. Anything had to be better than listening to this madman for another minute.

'Your body and soul will burn away,' intoned Cardinal Crimson. 'The heretic Kal Jerico will be consumed, but only in consumption can a soul find redemption…'

Lights blazed on all around Kal and Crimson, bringing the sermon to a halt – for the moment.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ screamed Crimson. His head turned back and forth as he scanned the chamber. ‘Who intrudes on this holy inquisition?’

‘I am terribly sorry, your eminence,’ came the reply from behind Kal. He thought he recognised the slightly nasal voice.

‘What is it, Ralan?’ asked Crimson. A look that Kal could only guess was a scowl crossed the Cardinal’s face. It was hard to tell without lips, but the patches of skin on his cheeks and forehead wrinkled and his teeth grated together.

‘There has been some news on that, ahem, that other matter. Bad news, I’m afraid.’

Crimson snapped his fingers, which sounded like rocks breaking, and then curled his bony finger to motion the speaker over. The deacon who had commanded Crimson’s guards during Kal’s capture walked into view. The two of them huddled together and began talking in low voices.

Kal tried to listen, but only heard a few whispered words: ‘body… dome… Tavis.’ As Ralan gave his hushed report, Crimson’s face got redder and redder. It was an odd sight as the patches of skin stood out like velvet against the white teeth and exposed skull.

‘What am I paying these people for?’ he screamed at last and stormed off. The last thing Kal heard was, ‘Check back with Bitten…’

With Crimson gone, the torturer must have decided to take a break, because Kal heard him move off as well, leaving Kal alone – with the lights on. He scanned his surroundings, looking for a way out. He was hanging above a rocky dais in a huge cavern. Bubbling pools of acid or waste or something worse dotted the chamber below. To one side, a path led from the floor of the chamber up along the wall to an exit high above. He could also see other exits in the far wall beyond the pools.

There must be at least one more way out behind him, Kal reasoned, as Crimson and Ralan had just left in that direction. As he glanced around the room, something metallic glinted in the light, catching his eye. He searched for the source and saw it again, near the upper exit.

He turned to get a better look and saw Bobo stick his head out of a shadow and wave. Then he was gone. Kal smiled to himself. He might get out of this alive after all.

7: UNEARTHLY TROUBLE

‘Move it along, slave.’ A hand grabbed Scabbs by the arm and pulled him away from the miracle body. ‘Come with me. Now!’

The voice sounded familiar yet strange. As he stumbled away from the crowd of worshippers, Scabbs looked into the face of the guard. Then he looked again. ‘Yolanda?’ he asked.

‘Shush, stupid,’ hissed Yolanda. Then, louder, ‘Back to work.’

She pulled him toward the carts, which had been abandoned as soon as the body was discovered. ‘Move that cart,’ she commanded.

Scabbs looked at the cart. It was full of debris and had the iron beam he and Arliana had hauled off the body. ‘Can’t I move that one instead?’ he whined, pointing at a half-full cart behind it.

Yolanda slapped him across the face. ‘Move it!’

Scabbs rubbed his cheek and then grabbed the handles of the full cart. Leaning into it, he shoved with all his strength and the cart moved a few centimetres. ‘Don’t get lost in the part,’ he said with a grunt.

Yolanda smiled. ‘Good to see you, too,’ she replied softly. ‘Follow me,’ she commanded out loud.

Scabbs put his head down and strained against the cart. The cart rolled forward, gaining a little momentum. It was tough going, but he was okay as long as he kept it going. He followed Yolanda, who headed toward the dome entrance, and the Guilder guards.

‘Taking this cart out to dump,’ she said to the guards as they approached.

‘Slaves don’t leave,’ said one of the guards. ‘Grondle’s orders.’

Scabbs’s heart sank, but Yolanda replied quickly.

‘Grondle told me to get this cart out of the dome.’

The guards looked at each other. One shrugged, but the one who had spoken wasn’t so easily swayed. ‘Then have Grondle come tell me that,’ he said.

‘Otherwise he stays.’

Scabbs looked at Yolanda to see what she would try next. Her hands strayed toward her holsters. He decided to duck under the cart if she started shooting. It wouldn’t be necessary; Yolanda turned and grabbed Scabbs by the arm. ‘Come with me,’ she said. ‘We’ll go get Grondle.’

Scabbs gave a pleading look to Yolanda. He wanted to get out of there. Why didn’t she fight? His unasked question was answered as Yolanda pulled him away from the door and they passed four more Guilder guards marching toward the door.

As they walked back toward the carts, Yolanda said, ‘We’re going to need a diversion. There are just too many guards, and I don’t relish taking on Guilders. They have a bad habit of putting people in slaver camps.’

‘Tell me about it,’ said Scabbs.

She ignored his remark. ‘And I’m going to need help to get you out of here,’ she said.

‘Where’s Kal?’ asked Scabbs.

‘Jerico is MIA,’ she replied. ‘We’re on our own again.’ They stopped walking halfway between the entrance guards and the carts. ‘Look, you stay here while I go find help. Start a diversion if you can.’

Scabbs didn’t like this plan and said so. ‘I’ve been chained, whipped and driven to exhaustion. Get me out of here.’

Yolanda slapped him again. ‘Do as I say, slave,’ she said.

He looked up into Yolanda’s fiery eyes. She didn’t seem to be role acting anymore. ‘What kind of diversion?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Start a slave revolt.’

Scabbs glanced back at the crowd around the miracle body. It had grown substantially larger since they had left for the carts. ‘I can do that,’ he said.

Yolanda gave him a kick in the rump and headed back toward the entrance. Scabbs watched her go. She spoke to the guards for a moment and then one of them spun the wheel to open the door. Yolanda grabbed the cart and shoved it forward. Scabbs got an odd feeling of satisfaction watching her strain to move it through the door.

‘Hey,’ said Kal. It came out as barely more than a whisper. He coughed and spit some bloody phlegm onto the cavern floor. ‘Hey,’ he called a little louder this time. ‘Come here. I’m ready to talk.’

He heard the torturer scramble to his feet behind him and then the sound of

footsteps. The man came around in front of Kal. He was tall and lanky, not the squat, thick-armed brute Kal had expected. His close-cropped hair made his head look like a fuzzy melon. A half-smoked tox stick hung from his lips. He was almost comical looking, but the welts and cuts on Kal's backs and legs kept him from laughing.

'Whaddaya want?' asked the torturer. The tox stick bobbed up and down as he spoke.

Kal forced himself to stare directly at the man's eyes as he spoke. 'Drink of water?' he asked.

'Only if Crimson orders it,' he replied. The torturer turned to leave.

'How about…' Kal coughed a few times and then spat another wad of phlegm on the floor, just barely missing the man's boots. 'Tox stick?' he finished. 'Crimson can't argue… with putting fire in… my mouth.'

He tried to give the torturer his best puppy eyes but with only Wotan as a guide, he wasn't sure how effective it would be.

The torturer shrugged and pulled the stick from his lips and put it between Kal's. The ash on the end was longer than the stick, but Kal hadn't really wanted it anyway. He just needed to buy a little more time.

'One more thing,' said Kal.

'What is it?'

'Goodbye.'

Kal wrapped his numb hands around the chain holding his wrists and pulled himself up. At the same time, he lifted his knees and kicked out. His feet struck the man in the stomach, doubling him over and sending him stumbling back toward the edge of the dais.

Before he could regain his balance, the tall man's legs were swept out from underneath him by a smooth roundhouse kick. He fell over backwards, screaming, right into the bubbling pool below the dais.

'Nice kick,' said Kal.

'You too,' replied Bobo. 'Didn't think you still had it in you.'

'I'm stronger than I look,' said Kal.

They looked at each other for a moment. 'Want to get me down from here?' asked Kal.

'Huh,' said Bobo. 'I thought you could do it yourself.'

He walked behind Kal and a moment later, Kal felt himself falling to the floor. He crumpled to his knees and hugged his shoulders, kneading them with his fingers to massage some feeling back into them.

‘Found these,’ said Bobo. ‘Thought you might want them back.’ He dropped a pile of clothes and weapons on the floor next to Kal. ‘Can you walk?’

‘If not, I’ll crawl,’ he said as he grabbed his trousers.

‘And if you can’t crawl, I’ll carry you,’ said Bobo with a laugh. ‘Yeah, I know that old adage.’

Kal looked up at the small and wiry spy as he pulled on his clothes. Bobo was maybe a metre-and-half tall and his arms looked like twigs. ‘You’ll carry me?’ said Kal. ‘That I’d like to see.’

‘Okay, maybe drag is a better word,’ said Bobo with a smirk. ‘Up to you. Walk or drag. But do it quick.’ He glanced around the chamber.

Kal winced as he slipped his arms into the sleeves of his leather coat. He then picked up his pearl-handled laspistols and tested the weight in his hands. The muscles ached with the strain, but it would do. He twirled them both once and slipped them into the holster.

Next came the real test, though. He pulled one foot under him and tried to stand. The leather trousers rasped against his raw legs, but the muscles responded just fine. Kal gritted his teeth against the pain and rose to his feet. Standing with one foot slightly in front of the other, he flipped his collar with a flourish.

‘I’m ready,’ he said.

‘He has returned,’ called Jobe Francks as he strode through Hive City. ‘The Bowdie has returned. Come rejoice in the great renewal of spirit.’

At least one person’s spirit had been renewed already. Francks felt alive again. His purpose had returned, and his mission, after so many years lost in the wastes, his mission was nearing completion.

As he walked, Jobe felt like he had become one with the Universe. His senses extended out from his body in all directions. He could feel the air moving through every strand of his wild tangle of hair as he moved. The light from the roof of the dome warmed his skin. He felt connected to all the people around him, as they scurried to and fro on their way to jobs and homes.

He could feel their eyes upon him, hear their whispers and know their hearts. Hemma was late for work and worried about losing her job, but was amused by the odd man talking to the wind. Zubriski felt guilty because he got a promotion by stealing his friend’s idea and was intrigued by the thought of renewing his spirit. Darnell was simply trying to get through another day of drudgery and wanted to avoid eye contact. Ritto wondered about the strange man who seemed

to leave no footprints.

Francks looked down at his feet. Everything seemed normal until he realised he could see his shadow moving beneath his feet as he walked. His feet were no longer touching the ground. ‘Come see the miracle body,’ he called to those around him. ‘Come find the meaning that your lives have been lacking for too long. Follow me to the promise of a better future.’

Their stares gave him power. Their fears and strife and pain drained away as he passed. He felt that energy surge through his body. He glowed from within, basking in their lightened souls. Most went about their days afterward feeling a little lighter, a little better about their lot in life; perhaps simply amused by the strange spectacle. He could feel the word spreading out around him, infusing the consciousness of the Hive.

Some even fell in step behind him, hoping and wishing to find that better world he promised. Jobe Francks hoped and wished he had the strength to give it to them.

‘How long had you been watching?’ asked Kal. He found it helped to talk while walking as it kept his mind off the searing pain in his legs and shoulders. They hadn’t stopped moving since they left the cavern and every stride sent a new wave of pain through his body. The two had walked almost all the way up to Dust Falls, a deep settlement perched on the edge of a huge chasm. Once back in even that piece of forlorn civilization, they should be safe from Crimson’s men.

Bobo didn’t answer right away and Kal glanced down at him. The little spy gave him a sheepish smile. ‘All night, huh?’ said Kal.

‘I tried to get your attention every time Crimson left,’ said Bobo. ‘But that guy never stopped whipping you until that last time.’

‘Tell me about it,’ said Kal.

‘Are you in a lot of pain?’ asked Bobo.

Kal’s glare was his answer.

‘Sorry,’ said Bobo. ‘Of course you are. Once we get to safety, I can put something on your skin to help it heal – and to dull the pain.’

‘That’ll be good,’ said Kal through clenched teeth. They walked in silence for a while as Kal mastered his pain once again. ‘What have you found out?’ he asked at last. ‘Did Crimson let anything slip about Jobe Francks?’

Bobo screwed up his face. ‘He’s very tight-lipped, that one,’ he said. ‘At least when he wasn’t preaching at you or his followers.’

‘Scav,’ said Kal. ‘Nothing at all?’

‘A few snippets, that’s all,’ said Bobo. ‘I’d say he’s got at least two covert ops going on. One seems to have something to do with a body in a dome. I’m not sure if he’s trying to retrieve a body or hide a body.’

They entered the Dust Falls dome as Bobo gave his report and Kal breathed a sigh of relief. He needed to sit, drink a bottle of Wild Snake and figure out his next move. All those things could be achieved at the Dust Hole, a beaten and battered saloon at the edge of the chasm.

Bobo continued his report. ‘I’m fairly certain Crimson’s other operation involves getting rid of Francks. He may be the one behind the two assassins sent after the prophet.’

Kal stared at him. ‘Two assassins?’

Bobo nodded. ‘Yeah. After the first one was found dead in that alley, I heard reports of a second assassin being dispatched.’

‘Dispatched where?’ Kal looked around and found the entrance to Dust Hole. He moved off in a different direction.

‘That’s the thing,’ said Bobo as he jogged to keep up. ‘He was sent to Glory Hole, but then the last report I got had him heading into Hive City. Something about his target getting bitten or going to get bit? Didn’t make a lot of sense.’

Kal stopped just outside the saloon. ‘Bitten?’ he asked. ‘Could it have been a name? I heard Crimson say something about someone named Bitten.’

‘Could be,’ said Bobo as they entered Dust Hole. ‘My informants say the assassin was last seen in Old Town near the dome wall if that’s any help.’

Kal sat at a table and cringed as he pressed his sore flesh against the chair. ‘Looks like I’m going to Hive City next.’

Bobo grabbed a couple Snakes and sat across from Kal. ‘You want I should come along to keep you out of trouble?’

Kal grabbed the bottle and drained it before answering, letting the snake that gave the drink its name slide down his throat. ‘No,’ he said, spinning the bottle idly on the table. ‘Go back and keep on eye on Crimson. Let me know if you find out anything else.’

Bobo sipped at his own drink and fished in his trousers. He dropped what looked like a small rounded piece of rubber on the table. ‘Then you’d better take this,’ he said.

Kal picked it up and rolled it around between his fingers. ‘What is it?’

‘Latest thing from the Spire,’ said Bobo, smiling. It’s a communication device. Fits in your ear. With it we can talk no matter how far apart we get. It’s similar to the vox units Nemo uses, but less invasive.’

‘Where’d you get this?’ asked Kal. ‘Looks military.’

‘Better you don’t know,’ replied Bobo.

Kal put the communicator in his ear. It fitted snugly, but felt a little strange. ‘Great. Now, get back to Crimson. I need to know what he’s up to.’

Bobo pulled out a small tube. ‘What about the balm?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you want me to apply it to your back and legs?’

Kal took the tube and scanned the Dust Hole, checking out the local scenery: barmaids in low cut blouses and short skirts. ‘I think I can find someone to do that for me,’ he said.

As he walked back toward the crowd surrounding the miracle body, Scabbs had no idea what he was going to do. Kal made the plans. Scabbs just messed them up. That was his normal contribution anyway.

But Kal wasn’t here, so it was up to Scabbs. If he wanted to get out of this alive, he had to come up with something. It shouldn’t be too hard. He already had a mob. He just needed to turn up the heat.

He came up behind Grondle and Ander, who were both yelling at the workers huddled around the body. Scabbs was taken by how comical the two men looked from behind. Grondle’s large head was bright red, making him look like a bearded beet. Sweat flew off the loose hair poking out from Ander’s bandana, spraying his short boss with a sweat shower.

‘Back to work, ye worthless scavvies,’ said Grondle. ‘It’s just a dead body.’ He turned to Ander, with a pleading look on his face.

Ander snapped his whip a few times, lashing the nearest prostrate slaves. ‘Move it,’ he screamed. ‘I’ll whip you to death if you don’t move.’

They still had the whips, but the men had lost their power. The praying slaves completely ignored the men and the whip. They seemed almost trancelike on the ground.

Ander raised his hand again. Scabbs stepped in and grabbed his forearm on its way up. The tall ganger’s head snapped around and their eyes locked together. Ander’s eyes went wide in surprise. Scabbs tried to look determined, but down deep inside he was as surprised as Ander.

Before the Orlock crew chief could react, Scabbs reached in with his other hand and snatched the whip out of Ander’s hand. ‘You will not whip these people again,’ he said and strode past into the sea of kneeling slaves.

‘What the–’ started Ander.

Scabbs stopped, turned and raised his hands into the air. The barbed end of the

whip trailed on the ground at his feet. ‘Hear me, slaves,’ he called out. ‘This is a great day. We are witness to a miracle. Come and bow before the miracle body unearthed here today. Come bask in the glow of its salvation.’

As he faltered for words, Scabbs stole a glance at Ander and Grondle. The round foreman simply stared, his mouth slack and his eyes unfocused. Ander seethed and fumbled with the catch on his holster. Scabbs hurried on, getting an idea on the spur of the moment, a la Kal Jerico.

‘Rise up,’ he yelled. ‘Rise up and stand against the hand of tyranny and the fist of oppression. Rise up now. The miracle body will deliver us from evil. Rise up!’

The prostrate slaves looked up at Scabbs. Several scrambled to their feet. Scabbs walked among them, keeping bodies between him and Ander as he continued to preach. ‘They wish to keep us from the miracle body,’ he said, pointing at Ander and Grondle.

Several of the other Orlock guards had joined them. Ander talked and pointed at Scabbs, but he pressed on as the slaves continued to stand up around him. He noticed that the group had grown larger. Slaves from the other chain gangs had pushed their way down the hill to see the body.

‘This is our time now,’ said Scabbs. ‘We have freed the miracle body from its earthly prison and brought it into the light for all to see.’

The Orlocks advanced with whips, chains and pistols in their hands. ‘Get that scabby little man,’ called Ander.

‘But we must act now, my friends,’ called Scabbs. He backed up as the whips snapped into the crowd. Several gangers rushed toward him. ‘Seize your freedom and secure the path for the miracle, so we might share it with all the hive.’

The slaves stood their ground, but Scabbs could tell they still harboured too much fear of the whips, so he decided to use his. His arm flipped back and flew forward. The barbed tail of the whip snapped in the air behind him and slashed past him, slicing his cheek along the way but, at the other end of its flight, the whip connected with Ander’s face as well. When Scabbs pulled his arm back, the whip snapped again, tearing off a chunk of the Orlock’s tiny goatee.

It was like a shot of adrenaline through the crowd. The slaves erupted into action. Those nearest Scabbs clawed at the gangers trying to grab him, pulling them away and driving them to the ground. Others rushed forward, toward Ander and Grondle. The foreman turned to run, but he couldn’t get his girth moving fast enough and the first few slaves caught him from behind.

Ander backed up, firing into the crowd as he tried to retreat. Slave after slave

dropped to the ground, with scorch marks on their chests, shoulders and faces. Scabbs's eyes went wide in horror as he saw the price of his brilliant plan. Those Ander shot writhed in pain on the ground if they were lucky. Their wounds looked like ground up, broiled meat.

Ander levelled his pistol at Arliana, who rushed forward like a mad woman. Scabbs screamed, 'No!' and ran forward. His foot caught on a power cable attached to one of the light poles. He tripped and pitched forward into the dirt.

He heard a loud crack and a strange creaking noise, and looked up to see the pole tipping over. The mob scattered as it plummeted to the ground. The lights popped and flared with one last gasp of illumination before going dark.

Everything became quiet but Scabbs had no idea why. It wasn't pitch black. There were other light poles, just none near the body. He glanced around to see slaves and Orlocks alike staring back at the body.

Scabbs pushed himself back to his feet and turned around. The miracle body shimmered in the shadowy twilight, casting a soft bluish-white glow on the faces of all those gathered around.

Yolanda was tired. It felt like she'd been running back and forth through the Underhive all night and most of the morning, which was, of course, exactly what she'd done. At least during this trip she hadn't been attacked by Goliaths or kidnapped by Orlocks. That was a refreshing change from recent events.

'Damn you, Jerico,' she muttered for at least the tenth time this trip. 'Right now, I'd be counting my share of the last three bounties you squandered, if it hadn't been for you and your stupid dog.'

She ran past the spot where Gonth's gang had ambushed her the day before, being careful to check the nooks and crannies amongst all the extra supports for any hiding Goliaths. 'At least the return trip will be quicker and easier on the legs,' she said, once she was satisfied there was no ambush this time.

The plan was simple. She'd borrow the Malcadon rig from the Wildcats and use its web spinners to immobilise the Guilder guards. Then she could snatch Scabbs and get out with no fuss, or messy Guilder deaths. Yolanda didn't want to cross them. She'd had a bounty on her head before and didn't relish having to run from the likes of Jerico again.

Her brilliant plans all came crashing to a halt as she made the last turn before the Wildcats hideout. She jumped back around the corner and pulled out her laspistols. The street looked like a war zone. Peering around the edge of the building, Yolanda counted at least ten dead 'Cats strewn about and a couple

Goliaths.

Yolanda slipped around the corner and edged down the street, hugging the wall. There were 'Cat bodies lying in the gutter and hanging out of windows. The stench of blood filled the air, but the red pools beneath the bodies were still. The last drops had drained from them some time before she arrived.

The two Goliaths had fallen in a heap just outside the door to the Wildcats hideout. She could see a shotgun and a heavy stubber sticking out from beneath the bodies as she approached. Both dead Goliaths had bandoliers of frag grenades wrapped around their bodies as well.

With all the carnage and unclaimed weaponry lying out in the open, Yolanda despaired of finding any 'Cats alive inside. She inched toward the door, weapons trained on the opening. One of the Goliath bodies moved and she fired two blasts into its side.

A voice cried out from inside. 'Keep on coming. We can keep piling up your bodies.'

'Themis?' Yolanda called back. 'You're alive in there?'

'Yolanda,' came the reply. 'Thank the Emperor. Did you see any Goliaths on your way in?'

Yolanda peered over the half-wall at the edge of the hideout. Themis and a few other 'Cats hunkered down behind overturned tables, their weapons trained on the door. Two other 'Cats knelt by the dead Goliaths. When they saw Yolanda, they went back to work, trying to remove the behemoths from the doorway.

'It's clear out here,' said Yolanda. 'You can come out and clear your dead.' She holstered her weapons and moved to the door to help the girls heave the Goliaths out of the way.

Yolanda and Themis talked as they cleaned up after the battle. 'What happened?' asked Yolanda. She stripped the bandoliers off one of the Goliath bodies. They'd have to drag the huge gangers out of the dome eventually, as the rival gang might return to claim the corpses, but any gear left behind belonged to the victors – a victory being any battle you didn't run away from.

'Gonth and his gang arrived just before morning,' said Themis. She sliced through the bandolier to get it off, sawing into the Goliath's thick skin as she cut. 'We tried to take them in the street, but nothing stopped them until we retreated into the diner and concentrated our fire.'

Yolanda glanced around at the carnage. The remaining girls were hauling bodies to the Wildcat graveyard. She searched the faces of each dead Wildcat as they were carried past. 'Where's Lysanne?' she asked. 'She didn't…'

Themis shook her head causing her cascade of golden hair to shimmer around her head. ‘She’s shook up, but okay,’ she said. ‘She’s resting. I sent her out in the rig to slow them down. It’s the only thing that saved us. Otherwise they would have overrun the diner.’

Yolanda realised the implication immediately. ‘What happened to her?’

‘They must have had a grenade launcher,’ said Themis. She wiped her dagger on the Goliath’s back. ‘We heard a huge explosion. The whole dome shook. The rig crashed into my apartment above the diner’s kitchen.’

‘And she survived?’

Themis nodded. ‘That rig is tough. Saved her life. Of course, it won’t be much use unless we can scavenge some parts somehow.’

Yolanda felt a knot forming in her stomach. ‘This is all my fault, isn’t it?’ she asked. She wanted to blame it on Jerico again. It was his gambling that started the ball rolling, but *she* had brought the Grak gang down on the Wildcats.

‘We’re not pointing any fingers,’ said Themis. She began stripping the gear from the second Goliath. ‘They may have been looking for you. Or maybe they just wanted some payback for that fight in the tunnel. Whatever started this, we plan to end it. If it will ease your guilty conscience, you can help us take down Gonth and his gang.’

Yolanda nodded, but then stopped. ‘I… I can’t,’ she said. ‘At least not yet. You see, that’s why I returned. I’ve got a problem of my own. Scabbs is in trouble and I needed to borrow the rig. But I guess I’ll just have to do it myself now.’

Themis grabbed Yolanda by the shoulders and looked her in the eyes. ‘You’re a Wildcat, Yolanda,’ she said. ‘We stick together. And I know Lysanne would force me to help you anyway, once she heard Scabbs was in trouble. I don’t understand it, but that girl is sweet on him.’

‘He does grow on you,’ said Yolanda, and a smile almost flitted over her lips as the follow-up joke went through her mind. ‘But no, I can’t ask you to help. It’s Guilders and you don’t want any part of that.’

Themis stood and pulled Yolanda to her feet. ‘Come on in and tell me all about it,’ she said. ‘We’ll help you and then you can help us take on Gonth.’

Yolanda shook her off. ‘Did you hear me?’ she asked, a note of hysteria entering her voice. ‘We’ll be fighting Guilder guards. We’ll all be marked afterwards. I can’t ask you to do that, not you and not the Wildcats.’

Themis hooked her arm through Yolanda’s and walked into the diner. ‘Not to worry,’ she said. ‘We probably won’t survive the attack on Gonth’s hideout anyway.’

Kal looked at the open door with suspicion. In the underhive, an open door was commonplace. Actually, open walls were commonplace. No door whatsoever was more the norm than an open door, but when it came to Hive City, doors with numerous locks and barred windows were just common sense.

After all, thought Kal, they had to keep out the Underhive riff-raff out, didn't they?

So, when he'd finally found Jerod Bitten's hab, the open door had stopped him short. Something was amiss inside.

It had actually been all too easy to find the place. If he'd had Bobo with him, Kal was certain they would have spent the day sneaking around alleys to listen at windows, or distracting clerks at the post office to check mail records, or perhaps sitting in a dark room, watching the streets through the curtains. Kal had simply asked around.

Now, with the door ajar, and him on record with several locals as a stranger asking after Mr Bitten, Kal wished he'd gone the more circuitous, more devious route. Well, there was nothing for it but to continue on in his own unique style.

Kal drew his laspistols, kicked the door open the rest of the way and dived through. He rolled on the ground and popped to his feet. With his arms out wide, pointing his pistols to either side, he did a quick pirouette to scan the room. It appeared empty.

He was certain the move had looked impressive, but it had probably been a big mistake. First of all, there was nobody here to impress. Second, while Bobo's balm had done wonders for the pain, the skin on his back and legs was still raw, and the nerves painfully close to the surface.

Making a mental note not to move so quickly for a while, Kal took a step toward the rear door and tripped over the body in the middle of the floor.

'Aw scav!' he said as he fell. His laspistols flew from his hands as he clawed at the air. When he hit the floor, Kal bounced and then rolled away from the body, coming face to pale face with another corpse behind the desk.

Kal sat up and glanced back and forth at the two bodies. One was covered in a Delaque shadow cape, which made it tough to see in the dim light. He was young and athletic looking, but his head was turned a little too far around toward his back to be considered normal. 'You would be our second assassin,' said Kal.

The other was an older man with short-cropped, grey hair wearing a thick, luxurious robe which had been ruined by the pool of blood surrounding the body. 'And I certainly hope you are not Jobe Francks,' he said, 'for both our sakes.'

Kal stood and walked to the door, cringing at several new pains in his legs. He

noticed a trail of bloody footprints heading from the body to the door that he had missed during his grand entrance. He closed and bolted the door and then drew the blinds across the barred windows.

'So, three people were in the room and one left after blood was spilled,' he said, turning to face the deadly tableau. 'Let's figure out who you two are.'

Kal took his time searching the bodies and the rest of the hab. The cloaked man was obviously the assassin. He had no identification on his body, but the array of tools and weapons was a dead giveaway. Not to mention he was too young to be Francks. He assumed the old guy was Bitten. He was wearing bed clothes, which matched clothes Kal found in the closets upstairs. Plus, judging from the blood splatters, he had been sitting at the desk when he got stabbed.

'So, our Mr Francks survived,' said Kal. He breathed a sigh of relief. 'Now I just need to figure out where you went. Again.'

The books and ledgers on the desk were of little use. Kal had no head for numbers and the columns of tiny handwriting blurred together and made his head hurt after a while. He closed the ledgers and stacked them on one side of the desk.

Underneath one of the books he found a folded piece of parchment. Inside was a list of names and places written in the same small handwriting. Kal scanned the list. He recognised two names as the Cawdor gangs Francks had visited. Something about the other names sounded familiar as well. He'd just seen them in the ledgers.

Kal opened up the books one by one again. Each one held accounts for one of the gangs on the list. Yet there was one more book after he got through the list. 'What's in here?' he wondered out loud.

He opened the book and looked through it. Kal recognised a name here and there as Guilders he had done bounty work for in the past. One name appeared over and over that Kal recognised but couldn't place. That name was Tavis. 'Where do I know that name from?' he asked himself.

He noticed another piece of paper sticking out from underneath the open book. He pulled it out. It was an old, yellowed wanted poster. 'Jules Ignus?' asked Kal. 'What's the significance of this?'

He turned it over and noticed what at first looked like a small smudge in the corner. Looking closer, he saw it was more of the same tiny handwriting. Just two words, but they brought much of the past few days into clearer focus for Kal.

Written in tiny letters, almost too small to see, was a name: Cardinal Crimson.

Ralan despised his role in the organization. As Crimson's personal attaché, he'd had to do a lot of horrible and disgusting things over the years, from the daily applications of oil to the Cardinal's body to the running of petty errands such as fetching the holy foot-wrappings. His life was at best degrading, and all too often it became agonisingly painful.

The worst task though, was delivering bad news. That was how he had earned the hand-shaped acid brand on his neck and cheek. He touched the scar tissue as he walked toward the Cardinal's office. That piece of news had also involved the heretic Kal Jerico, as he remembered.

He reached the door but hesitated before knocking. Ralan always went through this battle with himself. To wait gave him some small respite before the coming tirade. To wait *too* long ran the risk of delivering the news too late, which could be worse and brought a worse punishment. He touched the scar again and knocked.

'What is it now?' screamed Crimson through the door.

Ralan opened the door. 'I have news about the heretics, your eminence.'

The Cardinal looked up from his lounge chair. 'It had better be good news,' he said. Crimson's robe hung open, showing his leathery skin and protruding ribs.

Ralan swallowed hard and pressed on. Best to do it quickly, like removing a bandage from a pus-covered wound. 'It is not, your eminence,' he said, and then pressed on quickly. 'The second assassin has failed and Jobe Francks is on the move once again.'

'The Emperor damn him to the abyss!' screamed Crimson.

'I'm afraid there is more,' said Ralan after the outburst. 'The heretic Kal Jerico was seen entering Bitten's hab.'

Crimson unleashed a chilling scream that rattled the door against its frame. 'I hate that man!' he said. 'How did you let him escape?'

Ralan wanted to protest that it had not been his decision to leave the heretic unguarded, but that statement would have been rewarded with an instant trip to the pools of redemption. 'I am sorry, sir,' he said instead. 'I have men ready to retake Jerico.'

Crimson paused from his ranting to consider the idea. 'Are the two heretics together?' he asked.

Ralan shook his head. 'Many people saw Francks leave Hive City, sir,' he said. 'The heretic Kal Jerico has not caught up with him yet.'

'Then watch him closely, but do not interfere,' said Crimson. He had calmed down considerably and a toothy smile actually flashed across his lipless face as

he drummed his bony fingers together. ‘He can lead us to Francks and we can take care of both problems at once.’

Ralan started to deliver the last piece of news, but re-considered and turned to leave. He almost made it to the door before Crimson spoke again.

‘You said many people saw Francks leave the City?’ he asked. ‘Why was that?’

Ralan’s heart fell. He turned. ‘Ah yes,’ he said, trying to paste an innocent smile on his own, scarred face. ‘I almost forgot. It seems Francks was preaching about the return of the body again, and this time people were listening.’

‘Listening?’ said Crimson. ‘Was that all?’

‘And following, I was about to say.’

Crimson now had a low, deliberate tone to his voice, which Ralan found more frightening than the screaming ‘Why this sudden interest in the ramblings of a crazy prophet?’

Ralan put his hand on the door handle, hoping to make a quick exit once he was finished. ‘They say he was floating, and even glowing, sir.’ He swallowed hard one more time and gave the last piece of news. ‘He claimed that the body had returned and promised to take them to it.’

‘Hold!’ screamed Crimson. He stormed across the room, his open cloak billowing out behind him as if battered by a stiff wind. He grabbed Ralan by the throat, his fingers digging into the scar tissue. ‘Forget Jerico,’ he said, his lipless mouth mere centimetres from Ralan’s face. ‘Get your men and follow me.’

‘Where?’ asked Ralan, wheezing to get the air to speak.

‘To kill Jobe Francks. I know where he’s headed.’

8: ON THE RUN AGAIN

Scabbs stood watching his people, quite pleased with himself. He even struck a pose, a la Kal, as the chain gang continued to move rocks – only this time they were using the rubble to build an altar and a bier for the miracle body to lie upon.

Of course, his pose probably wasn't quite as majestic as one of Kal's many stances. His tattered shirt and the ripped trousers that barely covered his bloody body weren't as awe inspiring as Kal's leather coat. Plus he kept taking his hands off his hips to scratch at loose patches of skin.

Still, he was fairly happy with what he'd accomplished in the last few hours. The glowing body had ended the riot. The guards pulled back, either afraid of the possibly radioactive corpse or simply not willing to engage its fanatical worshippers.

The slaves had turned to Scabbs for direction. Arliana had given him a pleading look and he found it impossible to let her down, but had no idea what to do. He looked around at the bodies lit by the glow of the miracle body. 'We should get the wounded, don't you think?' he asked.

They acted like it had been an order and began working. Flush with power, Scabbs ordered some of the slaves to fortify their position. Arliana had suggested they build the bier, and Scabbs agreed. The body was the focal point of the revolt and needed to be seen. Plus, it was now the only source of illumination in the area. He didn't mention that part, though.

They now had a low wall between them and the guards, and a supply of heavy, hand-sized rocks to hurl. Those slaves not working bowed in front of the bier, praying for salvation. Scabbs stood surveying his work, or rather their work. He had never felt so strong and vowed to never run from danger again; to stop relying on Kal and Yolanda to save him all the time.

But they were still prisoners and it was only a matter of time before Grondle

got reinforcements. As the lord of the slaves pondered these problems, he heard a commotion in the distance. This was it. Either more guards had arrived or Yolanda had brought help. He needed to be ready for either.

'People,' he called. 'Something is happening. We need to… what's the phrase? Oh right. Get to battle stations!' Scabbs felt he needed to end with some sort of flourish, so he set his legs apart and struck his arm into the air and pointed.

The slaves looked at him quizzically and then turned their gaze upward to see what he was pointing at. 'No.' he said. 'Get behind the wall and grab a rock.'

As the workers moved toward the wall, Scabbs backed up and took position behind the body. From there, he saw the guards, who had been standing outside rock-throwing range, pull weapons and prepare for battle.

Inexplicably, they lined up facing away from the slaves.

The commotion behind the guards grew louder. He heard shouts and weapons fire. The guards began to back up toward the slave compound, as if pressed from the front. It's Yolanda, thought Scabbs. Time for the diversion.

'Fire!' he called. Nothing happened. A few of the slaves turned to stare at Scabbs, and he realised a little of what it must be like to be Kal Jerico. 'Throw your rocks at the guards while they aren't looking.'

A moment later, rocks and small chunks of metal soared into the air from behind the wall. Most thudded harmlessly on the ground, but a few connected and while the damage was minimal, the effect was devastating.

As more and more rocks rained down on the guards, many of the Orlock gangers in the group dropped their weapons to cover their heads. Others ducked or broke ranks and ran. In a moment, only the Guilder guards were left to face the commotion, and they were quickly overrun.

But instead of Yolanda and the Wildcats, or Kal and his blazing laspistols, or Bobo, or anyone else that Scabbs might have expected, the group that broke through the guards' ranks consisted of Hive townsfolk led by a wild-haired man wearing a blue Cawdor cape.

They rushed forward, pelted by rocks as Scabbs was too dumbfounded to order a ceasefire, and jumped the wall. 'Stop,' screamed Scabbs, and even he wasn't sure if he meant his people or the newcomers.

Most of the rock throwers turned their attention back to the Guilder guards, who were too few to force their way through constant barrage. The townsfolk rushed to the bier and fell to their knees.

'Behold, the body of Bowdie, our saviour!' said the wild-haired man. 'He has been delivered unto us once again. May his message of hope never again be

buried by the deceiver.'

Scabbs looked at the old, grey-haired Cawdor. As he turned, Scabbs saw swirling cloud of white drifting through the man's eyes and felt himself falling into them. He shook his head and looked away. 'You must be Jobe Francks,' said Scabbs, focusing his attention somewhere just below the man's chin. 'My friends and I have been looking for you.'

Staring at the ledgers, Kal had figured some of it out. Crimson and Francks and Bitten were all intertwined somehow. Most likely Crimson had hired the assassins to kill Francks. He must know something about the Cardinal's past; something to do with a body. Crimson had muttered something about a body while torturing Kal.

Bitten was the link between the two. He'd obviously been helping Francks ever since he arrived, setting him up with places to stay. He looked at the wanted poster with Crimson's name written on the back. It seemed Bitten knew something of Crimson's past as well. But why had the Cardinal left Bitten alone until now if he knew so much?

'Tavis!' said Kal out loud. Crimson had also mentioned the Guilder's name. That's where he'd heard it before. Bitten's dealings with Guilders over the years must have provided him some protection. They were a powerful force in Hive City and the Underhive. Powerful enough to give even Crimson pause. Powerful enough that Bitten had been able to set up his own Cawdor gangs – gangs so loyal they were willing to harbour a fugitive from Crimson.

'But none of that tells me where Francks has gone now,' muttered Kal, looking at the list. 'He left this behind. Why? Bitten's death? Maybe, but I think it's something else. It has something to do with Tavis and the body, I'm sure. But what? Where? Damn, I need a break.'

There was a knock at the door. Kal pocketed the list and the wanted poster and crept across the room, avoiding the trail of bloody footprints as he walked. 'Yes?' he said.

'It's Jann,' came the reply. 'Is that you, Jerrod?'

Kal needed to deal with this quickly. He opened the door and slipped through, closing it behind him. There was a quite attractive older woman on the doorstep.

'Hi,' he said. 'I'm a… *business acquaintance* of Jerrod's.'

'Oh, are you two in a meeting?' asked Jann. 'I just need a moment.'

'He's not here,' said Kal. 'That is to say he's, um, gone.'

Jann's eyebrows furrowed. She was either confused or suspicious. Neither was

good for Kal. ‘I’m his new… bookkeeper. Jerrod just stepped out while I was going through the books.’ Best to keep the lies as close to the truth as possible; that’s what Kal always figured.

This seemed to ease her mind as the smile returned. ‘Well tell him to come over when he gets back,’ she said. ‘I simply must tell him about that strange prophet who went through the streets a while ago.’

Kal’s mind raced, but he kept his face calm. ‘Prophet?’ he asked.

‘Oh didn’t you hear him?’ said Jann. She reached out and touched his arm, as if to bring him into the fold. ‘This odd man with wild hair and strange eyes walked right through here this morning, preaching about the return of the body or some such nonsense.’

‘Oh?’ said Kal. He patted her hand and smiled. ‘How interesting. Where did you say he went?’

Jann smiled. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I joined the crowd for a while, but when he left Hive City, I stopped. He wasn’t that interesting. I don’t know why so many people were following him. But I know Jerrod takes an interest in that religious stuff, so I wanted to let him know. You’ll tell him, won’t you?’

Kal’s smile broadened. ‘I certainly will,’ he said, ‘just as soon as he returns. Thank you so much for coming by.’ He took her hand and brought it up to his lips before releasing it. ‘Really. Thank you so much.’

As Jann left, Kal turned and slipped back through the door. He waited a minute before leaving, but left and ran down the road toward the nearest dome exit. A crazy prophet trailing a mob of townspeople shouldn’t be too hard to locate. That was strange even by Underhive standards.

‘You need more guards?’ screamed Tavis. ‘What in Helmawr’s name is going on doing down there, Grondle?’

The foreman scratched at his beard and stared at the floor. ‘I don’t rightly know, Mr Tavis,’ he said. ‘The slaves found a dead body and revolted. Several of my men got hurt in the riot.’

‘If they can’t defend themselves against unarmed slaves, why am I even paying them?’ Tavis once again questioned the choice of Grondle as foreman. He’d come highly recommended, but the man was obviously incompetent. Perhaps his information had been tainted by jealousy. Not every guilder could afford his own dome and his rivals would love to see him fail.

‘They did defend themselves, sir,’ said Grondle. He began to stammer. ‘They… they killed many of the slaves. It was horrible.’

‘Why did they stop?’ asked Tavis.

‘Sir?’

Tavis drummed his fingers on the desk. ‘Why did your men stop killing the slaves?’ Grondle’s face showed Tavis the answer. His eyes went wide and his mouth opened in astonishment. The fat man obviously didn’t have the stomach for it.

Tavis rolled his eyes and sighed. ‘You ordered them to cease fire, didn’t you?’ he asked.

Surprisingly, Grondle shook his head. ‘No, sir,’ he said. ‘No. Mr Tavis.’ Grondle wrung his hands together. His discomfort was more pronounced than usual. ‘It was the body,’ he continued. ‘Everyone just stopped when it started to glow.’

Tavis stared at Grondle, unsure he had heard that last bit correctly. ‘Which body did what?’

Grondle started talking very fast, as if Tavis had pulled a cork from his mouth, and the whole story of the miracle body and the riot came pouring out. ‘After that,’ he said, wringing his hands again, ‘I told Ander to just keep an eye on the slaves while I come talk to you. I figure with a show of force, we can get the slaves working again. They have us outnumbered right now and seem willing to fight to the death over this miracle body.’

Tavis nodded and smiled. ‘I’m glad you came here personally to bring this to my attention,’ he said.

Grondle wiped one meaty paw across his forehead and Tavis watched in dismay as sweat trickled off the large man’s palm onto the recently-cleaned rug. ‘This gives me a chance to tell you two things,’ continued Tavis. ‘First, you’re an idiot. And second, you’re fired.’

Tavis stood and looked at the door. ‘Meru?’ he called. ‘Come in here!’

His assistant entered. ‘Escort this poor excuse for a human being from the premises, and then contact the captain of my guards. I will need several squads at my disposal within the quarter hour.’

Grondle looked at him with a furrowed brow, as if to say, ‘That was my idea.’

Tavis shook his head. ‘Your problem, Grondle, is thinking you can fix the problem by simply adding more guards to the site. That so-called miracle body has ruined the slaves, given them hope. You can never crush that out of them. No. We must kill them all – wipe the slate clean – and start over.’

As Grondle left the room, Tavis called after him, ‘And don’t come around looking for severance pay. If I see you again, you’ll be the one slaving away in

chains.’

Bobo halted in the dark and waited. He’d been following Crimson and his men for quite some time and it was getting tougher to stay close enough to see them without giving himself away. Long dark tunnels were great when you had to hide; not so great when you had to follow someone through them.

It seemed like his steps echoed for miles like claps of thunder. He didn’t dare light his torch in the unfamiliar tunnel, so he had to pick his way through, keeping a hand on the tunnel wall, with only the bobbing torches up ahead to guide him.

It had been easier at first. When Crimson stormed out of his office and ordered his personal guard to follow, Bobo had retreated into a side tunnel and found a hidey hole. Crimson and the gang marched by moments later with all the stealth of a Scaly.

He’d followed from a safe distance through the tunnel, comfortable that there was only one exit they were likely to use, as all others in the area led to the wilds – and the mutants who lived there – or back to Redemptionist holdings. Crimson was on the warpath, which meant heading into or through Dust Falls.

Tailing through a settlement was even easier. With people around, Bobo always disappeared into the background. He was so nondescript as to be nearly invisible in any group larger than two.

From there, Crimson headed into a tunnel that Bobo had heard was abandoned. After a while he realised why. The walls even near the settlement were badly cracked. Dust – jarred loose from his passing – dropped from cracks and settled on his head and shoulders. After the first ten metres, the tunnel got so dark he had to slow to a crawl.

He’d pressed on for a while, through twists and turns, stumbling on fallen debris and once running into a wall. After a moment, he realised the tunnel must have slid to the side about a metre during a hivequake.

So, now he waited. It was time to use the torch. The dust was still falling. He had to shake it out of his hair every few minutes or it mixed with his sweat and got into his eyes. He figured he could wait for Crimson’s gang to get out of torch sight and then follow their trail through the dust.

The light ahead finally winked out, so Bobo flicked a switch and his torch flared to life. The cracks in the walls were far worse in this section. In fact the cracks had become gaping holes where the concrete had failed completely, leaving nothing but a lattice of reinforced iron bars running through metal

beams. Beyond that was a black emptiness that even his torch couldn't penetrate.

'This is fun,' said Bobo, feeling less secure about his situation now than he did with the lights off. 'Sure, Kal, I'll help. No problem.' Bobo shook off the feeling of dread and moved forward, following the scuffling trail through the dust. He kept one eye on the floor and the other off in the distance, watching for Crimson's light.

Bobo made good time for a while until the trail disappeared. He flashed his torch ahead of him, but the tunnel simply ended in a huge, gaping hole. The floor fell away, leaving a jagged line of concrete and twisted rebar bent down into the inky blackness.

He inched his way to the edge and aimed his light all around. Past the walls and the shredded ends of reinforced bars, he couldn't see anything within the range of his light. If Crimson and his gang had descended into the gaping blackness, Bobo couldn't tell how.

Bobo decided it was time to call Kal. In fact, he probably should have let him know Crimson was on the move long ago. He tapped his ear to activate the communication device. 'Um… Kal?' he said. 'Kal? Do you hear me? Tap your ear to respond.'

'Bobo,' said Kal in his ear. 'What's going on?'

'I don't know how to tell you this,' said Bobo. 'But I just lost Crimson.'

Kal found it disconcerting to hear a voice inside his head and walk through the Underhive at the same time, so he stepped behind a pile of collapsed masonry as they talked. Bobo told him how Crimson and his goon squad had left the Redemptionist caverns and trudged halfway through the Underhive, and how he'd come to a dead end somewhere past Dust Falls.

'Well, I'm in Glory Hole now,' said Kal. 'It seems our Mr Francks was also on the move this morning, which may explain Crimson's march. I suspect Crimson hired your two assassin friends to kill Francks. I found the second one dead, by the way.'

'Why does Crimson want Francks dead?' asked Bobo, 'And why is Nemo so interested in keeping him alive?'

'I think the answer to both questions is information,' said Kal. 'This all has something to do with a body from Crimson's past. The Cardinal wants to keep the past dead and Nemo wants to dig it up.'

'Where does Francks come in?'

'I don't have all the pieces yet,' said Kal. He thought he heard a commotion

from down the street, but it might have come from Bobo's side of the conversation. It was difficult to discern internal from external. 'I need to get to Francks before Crimson, though.'

'Do you need some help?' asked Bobo. 'I can probably get to Glory Hole in thirty minutes.'

'No. Francks is leaving quite a trail, so I doubt I'll have much trouble finding him.'

'There he is!'

'Did you find Crimson?' asked Kal. 'Or Francks?'

'What?' said Bobo.

'You just said there he is,' replied Kal.

'No I didn't,' said Bobo.

'Get him!'

'Helmawr's rump,' said Kal. 'Gotta run!'

Kal glanced down the street to see a dozen Goliaths heading straight toward him. They were armed with everything from laspistols and shotguns to what he swore was his grenade launcher.

'How in the Spire did they get that?' he cried as he bolted out of the alley and down the street away from them.

'What's going on?' asked Bobo in his head. 'How did who get what?'

Kal panted as he ran. 'Can't talk,' he said. 'Goliaths.' Kal tapped his ear, hoping that would turn off the stupid device.

The sound of weapons fire behind him made Kal dive to the side. Bullets pinged the ground at his feet while dirt and concrete shards flew into the air where the las-blasts hit. He rolled to his feet and darted around a corner.

About halfway down the next street Kal skidded to a stop. The well-dressed debt collector was walking right toward him.

'Mr Jerico,' he called. 'You are Mr Kal Jerico, are you not?'

Kal thought the man had an oddly formal accent for a Van Saar but he didn't have time to ponder that right now. 'Sorry bub,' he said as he ran past. 'Don't have time to talk right now. Tell the Re-Engineers I'll have their money soon.'

The man raised a finger. 'But I don't understand…' he began. The rest of his sentence was cut off by the explosion.

Kal glanced back as he ran. Part of the street behind the debt collector had become a crater. Large chunks of debris rained down all around the poor little guy. He dropped to his knees and covered his head with his hands. Kal was pretty sure he heard the man whimper.

‘Bit of a sissy for a debt collector,’ said Kal. ‘You’d think he’d have some muscle with him.’

And that, Kal realised, was exactly what he needed. It wasn’t too far. He just might make it if his luck held. The weapons fire had stopped after the explosion, and Kal risked another glance over his shoulder.

The Goliaths tromped past the debt collector, making the little man look like a rag doll lying on the street beneath the giant gangers. ‘They do have some sense,’ said Kal as he turned back to concentrate on running. ‘They’re not willing to risk a murder charge on a civilian.’

Kal turned another corner and pulled out his laspistols. He needed to slow them down a little more for this to work, and this was the perfect chance; the only chance. About halfway down the block, Kal leapt into the air, spinning around as he soared. He fired four quick shots at the apex of his leap. They all hit within centimetres of each other.

The corner building he had just passed had an odd front you didn’t often see in the hive; mostly because all the older ones had fallen during hivequakes. The corner of the building was supported by a single column providing a covered entryway underneath.

The four shots chipped away at a cracked rock slab Kal noticed near the base of the column. His spin took him back around to face down the street. He hit the ground running, but heard no building-shattering boom.

‘Scav,’ said Kal. ‘Now what?’

Laspistols and shotguns blasted behind him again, and he knew it was only a matter of time before they tossed more grenades. Then he heard a rumble. Kal glanced back. One of the Goliaths must have tried to cut the corner, because he had smacked into the column, which now lay in a pile of dust at the giant’s feet.

A crack appeared in the wall above the Goliath and started to spread upwards at an alarming rate. The rest of the gang scattered as large chunks of masonry plummeted. Kal ran on. Only a few of the Goliaths had got past the chaos.

Now he had enough time. Two more turns and he was there. Up ahead was Hagen’s Hole, best and only bar in the settlement, home to more bounty hunters than any other spot in the Underhive.

Kal still had his laspistols in hand. As he ran past Hagen’s, he shot twice at the front door. He counted under his breath as he ran. ‘Five. Four. Three. Two. One.’

The door flew open just as the remaining Goliaths ran past. Four burly men charged out, weapons in hand ‘Nobody attacks Hagen’s!’ yelled one of the men. All four opened fire on the Goliaths.

Kal ran on, never looking back. He could no longer stop to ask directions from people who might have seen the mad prophet and his flock of body worshippers, but Kal thought he had a good idea which direction to go.

Bobo lost Crimson in an unused tunnel somewhere past Dust Falls. Before the Goliaths started chasing him, Kal had been following Francks's trail toward an unused tunnel heading out of Glory Hole. From what Kal remembered, that tunnel used to lead to Dust Falls. It seemed like too much of a coincidence.

'I'm close,' said Kal. 'I can feel it. I just hope I get there in time.'

Behind him, Kal heard a huge explosion. 'Oh scav,' he said. 'Those stupid Goliaths blew up Hagen's.'

'Do I know you?' asked Jobe Francks. The little man didn't look like much with his shredded shirt and pockmarked skin. Perhaps he'd been in some sort of accident. But Francks had lived most of his life trying not to pre-judge people by their appearance. Truly, after decades in the Wastes, could he do any less?

'My name is Scabbs,' replied the scab-covered man. 'I'm a bounty hunter. Well, tracker actually. Kal is the real bounty hunter. Kal Jerico. I'm sure you've heard of him. We're partners.'

As Scabbs continued talking, Francks looked past him to the glowing body of his dead friend. Bowdie had been placed on a pile of stone and metal with his arms crossed over his chest. His face looked peaceful, serene. He looked just as Francks remembered. Twenty years or more had gone by and Francks had become an old, wild-haired man, but in death, Syris Bowdie had remained young, vibrant and somehow alive.

'Wait until I tell Kal that I found you,' continued Scabbs. 'Well, I guess, technically, *you* found *me*. But that can be our little secret, right?'

There was a pause in the little man's constant stream of words. Francks looked back at Scabbs, who was now staring at him and the body.

'Why are you here?' he asked. 'I mean I'm glad I found you. Kal will be happy because we need you to help get Wotan back. Wotan is Kal's dog, you see. Well, a cyber-mastiff. But…'

Francks placed a hand on Scabbs's shoulder, and the talkative fellow immediately went quiet. Francks looked deeply into Scabbs's eyes and absorbed his pain and fear. The fatigue and tension of a stressful night drained away from his face, and his tired eyes cleared and brightened.

When he released Scabbs from his grip and his gaze, Francks could tell he was at peace. 'To answer your question,' he said. 'I am here for my friend. I am here

to bring his message to the world. I am but the messenger of hope. Syris Bowdie is that hope. His is the hope of the Universe.'

'But he's dead,' said a young girl standing next to Scabbs.

'Death is but one stage of life,' said Francks. 'There are others. There is more to life than simply living until you die.'

'What do we do next?' asked Scabbs.

Jobe Francks knelt in the dirt beside his friend, basking in the warmth of the friendship he had lost so many years before. 'For now,' he said. 'We wait.'

He looked at Scabbs and saw the fear and doubt returning. 'But we have to get out of here,' he said, a note of hysteria creeping into his words. 'More guards will come and then we will all join your friend in the next stage.'

Francks smiled. He could see the strength inside the little man, but knew that Scabbs still needed others to bolster that strength. 'All will happen as it happens,' he said. 'Do not fear. The Universe has a plan for us all. You will not die this day, of this I am certain.'

Scabbs smiled and heaved a sigh of relief. He began talking again as his nerves got the better of him. Francks didn't hear a word of it. His eyes had fallen back upon Syris. The clouds began to swirl around his pupils as the glowing body filled his gaze.

In a moment, the scene in front of Francks transformed. Syris's body lay in a crumpled heap. The bier and altar had disappeared, as had the crowd of slaves and townspeople. The pile of debris had been replaced by a steep-sided hole.

Francks looked up. He was in the basement of a blasted-out building. A light shone down upon him from the edge of the basement wall above. He squinted to look past the light. At last he could make out the shadowy face of Jules Ignus. He was smiling as he placed the explosive charge.

But when Ignus turned back to look down into the hole one last time, he transformed as well. His skin began to burn away. Huge patches across his body dissolved before Francks eyes, revealing scarred and reddened muscles and pitted bones beneath. His smiling face changed into a gruesome, lipless visage, and the skin around his eyes melted away, leaving the orbs to bob around in an empty space.

Francks felt like he was looking at the ugly spectre of death itself, but knew, somehow, that this was no dream, no metaphor for deeds from the past or visions of the future. This was the present. This was the here and now. The Universe had called him to action. This was his time to shine.

Jobe Francks stood and looked at Scabbs, who stopped talking again as he

became caught in the cloudy gaze. ‘I must leave now,’ he said. Scabbs nodded his understanding. ‘We shall not meet again, but I give you this. Keep it safe until it is time.’

He pulled a leather-bound book from beneath his cloak and handed it to Scabbs.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Scabbs.

‘To meet my destiny,’ said Francks. ‘To look into the face of evil and bring it my message.’

With that, Francks walked up the pile of debris, leaving no tracks or trace of his passing.

Crimson peered through the window of the dome hatch, and then spun the wheel. As he pulled the round door open, he motioned Ralan inside. The deacon’s eyes flitted back and forth, peering into the darkness as he crept forward.

‘Now,’ said Crimson, and he reached out to give Ralan a shove in the back.

The deacon stumbled through the door, slipping on some loose rocks and pitching forward onto the ground.

‘Be quiet,’ hissed Crimson through his bared teeth. As Ralan got to his feet, Crimson motioned for the guards to follow.

The eight men saluted as one and marched through the door in double file, making twice as much noise as Ralan had falling down.

‘Why am I surrounded by incompetents?’ said Crimson. He stared up at the ceiling, not so much appealing to a higher power as defying it to provide him with a reasonable answer to his query. He followed his men inside.

He could see the lights of the worksite in the distance, but little illumination found its way to this back door – and for good reason, he knew. As far as anyone in the universe knew, that door opened onto a large void in the hive. Whatever had been there dropped away in a hivequake long ago. Or perhaps it was just one of those odd empty pockets the ancient builders simply forgot about or built around.

Whatever the case, only he knew the secret to reaching this door – a narrow ledge ran around the void just below torch light range. Crimson had used this access point in his early days to amass a small fortune in artefacts that he then used to escape detection and start a new life when things heated up for Jules Ignus.

More recently, the back door had allowed access to his saboteurs, who would now face the pools of redemption for failing to keep the construction crews from

uncovering that abominable body.

'Blast that Tavis,' he said. 'This is all his fault. Him and his dome-sized ego.'

Ralan and Crimson's guards picked their way across the shadowy dome toward the lights. It became clear as they got closer that there were far more people in the dome than a simple construction site would account for.

Crimson caught up with his men when they came to a sudden halt. They stood above the construction site on a higher level of the dome. Below them, Crimson saw an odd assortment of people. Guilder guards stood at attention near the main dome entrance and walked in pairs around the perimeter of the lights. A small group of gangers dressed in chains and leather milled around between the guards and the work site.

But it was the worksite itself that got Crimson's attention. A large group of people, some well-dressed, others who looked like refugees from an Underhive bar, and a set of half-dressed slaves all knelt in a circle, their heads bowed in prayer. In the centre of the worshippers was a body lying in state on a crude altar, a body Cardinal Crimson had once vowed would never see the light of day again. He intended to keep that vow no matter the cost.

'Is that body glowing?' asked one of Crimson's guards.

The cardinal glared at him. 'It's just a trick of the lights,' he growled. 'Go get that abomination, and kill any of the heretics who try to stop you.'

Ralan opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something. 'They worship a false prophet,' said the Cardinal. 'They have been judged and will face the pools of redemption. Go!'

As he watched Ralan lead the guards around and down to the construction site, Crimson heard the snap of a stone crunching underfoot behind him. He turned and looked into the swirling, cloud-filled eyes of Jobe Francks. 'Still quick to judge and even quicker to send others to do your dirty work, eh Ignus?' he said.

'You will address me as Cardinal or your eminence,' said Crimson. 'Whatever you think you know about me, I am the leader of your faith. I would think you of all people – someone who claims to be touched by the Undying Emperor – would show some respect for my authority.'

'Respect for you?' said Francks. 'How can I respect someone who shows no respect for any living creature but himself? You are nothing more than a rat eating away at the edges of civilization. I should give you the respect reserved for such vermin – a quick and painless death. That is more than you deserve.'

Crimson took a step closer to Francks, turning slightly as he moved to hide his hand. 'What do you know about respect, wyrd?' he said. 'You've manifested

abominable powers, just like your dead friend down there. It is an affront to nature. You are the ones who should be exterminated for the betterment of society.'

'But then who would you rail against?' asked Francks. If he had noticed Crimson's furtive hand motions beneath his robe, he didn't show any sign of it in his face, and he stood as still as a rock. 'Without the wyrds and the mutants and the heretics, you would be out of business. Your only power comes from picking and tearing at the fringes of society to bolster the beliefs of the faithful.'

'They betray the natural order,' said Crimson. What little skin he had left on his face flushed with anger at the heretic's lack of understanding. 'They betray the strictures of Redemption.'

'You are the true traitor to the cause of Redemption, Ignus,' said Francks. 'You always have been, and your stringent interpretation of the words of the Undying Emperor will only lead you and your flock to ruin, never to the ultimate reward the Universe has in store for the rest of us.'

Francks's calm, almost placid face mixed with his heretical words enraged the Cardinal even further. 'The abominations must be cleansed from the universe if the faithful are to live in the grace of the Undying Emperor,' screamed Crimson. 'It is the word. Redemption is the fire. I am its crucible.'

He pulled a meltagun from beneath his robes and pointed it at Francks. 'This wicked world will be cleansed, beginning with you.'

Francks simply frowned and shook his head. 'I don't know what saddens me more,' he said. 'That you believe every word you say or that you think you can create a better world through murder.'

Crimson glared at Francks as he squeezed the trigger.

9: REDEMPTION

‘Well, this should be interesting,’ said Kal. He’d followed his instincts, and a fairly obvious trail, down a supposedly dead end tunnel. Luckily, the secret passage through the fake wall at the end lay open, and he’d been able to slip into the side tunnel with ease.

Now he’d come upon a round dome portal. Looking through, Kal could see a crowd inside including a large group of people on their knees bowed around what looked like a dead body.

Jobe Francks must be inside. That was the good news. The bad news was there were at least a dozen Guilder guards between Kal and the body.

He gave the wheel a spin and pushed open the portal. Stepping through, he was amused to find he had to tap the nearest guard on the shoulder to get his attention. Perhaps he should have simply slipped around the guards, but then that wouldn’t be Kal’s style.

‘Kal Jerico, bounty hunter,’ said Kal when the confused guard turned and stared at him. He gave the guard his biggest, most disarming smile. ‘I’m here to help. What’s the situation?’

The guard’s eyebrows wrinkled as his confusion deepened. Then he must have come to a decision, because he sighed and placed a hand on Kal’s shoulder. ‘Well, it’s the oddest thing,’ he said. ‘Since the workers found that miracle body, everything’s got totally scavved. Then this new group barges in and starts worshipping as well. We’re just waiting for word from Tavis…’

‘Seldon!’ yelled another guard, who stepped in between Kal and his new friend. ‘Who is this man and why are you talking to him?’

‘He’s…’

‘Kal Jerico,’ said Kal. He extended his hand as the other guard turned toward him. ‘Bounty hunter. I think I can help. Just let me take my bounty out of here and I’m sure everything will return to normal.’

The second guard stared at Kal from under a furrowed brow. He glanced down at Kal's hand before returning his gaze to his eyes. 'Leave now, bounty hunter, and you won't get hurt. This is a private guild matter and does not concern you.'

Kal flashed his smile again. 'Listen,' he said. 'I haven't slept. My entire body is one big welt, and all I want is my bounty. He just came in here with a crowd of followers. Let me take him and I'm sure the others will follow.'

Neither the smile nor the story seemed to work. 'Seldon, escort him out of here.'

Seldon grasped Kal below the elbow. With a quick twist, he turned Kal around and wrenched his arm into an extremely uncomfortable position. With a little more pressure, Seldon pushed Kal forward toward the open portal.

'Scav,' said Kal. 'They got here fast.' He ducked.

'Who got here fa–' asked Seldon.

The laser blast streaked over Kal's head. Seldon's body slumped to the ground with a dull thud. Kal dived to the floor by side of the door and kept rolling, figuring the next blast might encompass a larger area.

Behind him, he heard guards shouting and weapons firing. Several shotgun blasts replied from the Goliaths in the tunnel. By the time the first frag grenade exploded, Kal was back on his feet and running along the edge of the dome away from the door.

Several Orlock gangers stood between Kal and the body but after the explosion they moved toward the guards, the ends of their bandanas flapping behind their heads as they ran. Kal cut across toward the gathered worshippers as the battle heated up by the entrance.

Kal scanned the crowd for the wild-haired man, but didn't see anyone even close to that description. He did see a familiar face, though. 'Scabbs, you son of a rat,' he said. 'What in Helmawr's name are you doing here?'

'Kal,' said Scabbs. 'Great diversion. Did Yolanda send you?'

The immediate detour in the conversation made Kal pause a moment. 'Um,' he said. 'Yolanda?'

'Well, I was kidnapped and Yolanda tried to follow, but–'

Another explosion by the door made Kal turn. The Goliaths had pushed their way into the dome and now outnumbered the remaining guards.

'Whatever,' said Kal. 'We'll catch up later. That diversion will be on top of us soon. Did you see Francks? I'm sure he came in here.'

'He was here just a few minutes ago,' said Scabbs. 'He brought all these people to worship before the glowing miracle body.' Scabbs pointed at the bier in the

middle of the circling crowd.

Kal glanced at the bier and did a double take, finally taking a good look at it. The body not only glowed, the light coming from it seemed to pulse. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Now that’s just strange.’

He shook his head, trying to get the image out of his brain. The sounds of the battle by the door were getting closer. He looked at Scabbs. ‘Where is Francks now?’

Scabbs pointed toward the top of the pile of debris. ‘He went to face his destiny.’

‘Great,’ said Kal. ‘That can’t be good.’

A las-blast hit the ground between them. Kal thought it was a stray shot from the Goliath battle but then he glanced where Scabbs was pointing. Ralan and his Redemptionists scrambled down the debris pile. Ralan had a laspistol in his hand.

‘I’m really starting to hate that guy,’ said Kal, pulling out his own laspistols. He fired twice, pulverising two chunks of rock on the pile below Ralan. He glanced at Scabbs. ‘Crimson’s men are here,’ he said. ‘So Crimson can’t be far behind. I need to get to Francks now. I need a diversion… I mean another diversion.’

Scabbs smiled, which was somewhat disconcerting because Kal couldn’t remember ever seeing the half-ratskin smile before. Plus two large flakes of skin at the corners of his mouth fell away when he did it.

‘I have an idea,’ said Scabbs. He turned and ran through the crowd of worshippers. Kal took cover behind one of the townspeople, hoping Ralan wouldn’t chance hitting a citizen while Guilder guards were nearby.

Scabbs reached the bier and raised his hands. ‘My people,’ he called out, and Kal was amazed when the slaves raised their heads and stared at Scabbs. He pointed up the hill toward the Redemptionists. ‘Behold, the unbelievers,’ he called. ‘They come to desecrate the shrine. They come to remove the miracle body.’

A murmur ran through the entire crowd. Kal stared at Scabbs. The pulsating light limned his head and arms, making him look almost angelic. He shook away that image as well. This was Scabbs after all, about as far removed from an angel as a rat is from a human.

‘Rise up, my people,’ called Scabbs. ‘Rise up and fight the unbelievers. Do not let them near the miracle body,’

‘This can’t possibly work,’ muttered Kal. He watched in amazement as the bare-fisted townsfolk and slaves ran toward the heavily-armed Redemptionist

guards. One of the Redemptionists raised a rifle and took aim, but Ralan slapped the weapon out of his hands. He barked a command and they all holstered their weapons just before the crowd reached them.

Kal worked his way to the side and tried to climb up the pile, but it was too steep and the debris too loose. He needed to find another way. ‘Scabbs,’ he called. ‘We need to get to the top.’ He couldn’t believe he was even thinking about asking this next question. ‘Any suggestions?’

The air around Jobe Francks sizzled and blurred like mirages he’d seen in the Wastes. He felt his face and chest heat up. His nostrils filled with the smoky odour of charred hair. A ringing echoed inside his ears.

What an odd sensation it is to be burned alive, he thought. He felt that boils would soon erupt on his skin and then his organs would begin to cook. Francks felt himself drowning in the experience. It was almost welcome. Almost soothing. Life had been so hard in the Wastes. He’d lost everything years ago. Perhaps being burned to death was the fitting end.

Crimson’s screams penetrated his mind – something about needing more power or a malfunction. Was it supposed to take this long? Why wasn’t there more pain? A voice in Francks’s mind told him to fight, reminded him that the Universe wasn’t ready for him to die just yet. The thought seemed odd, almost amusing. ‘We all die, don’t we Syris?’ he asked the voice. ‘Why does it matter when?’

The answer came to him in a moment of absolute clarity. Death is no more than a single moment in time, a tiny blip on the fabric of the Universe. But the fabric is made up of all those blips. Each life adds to the tapestry, touching other blips and sparking new patterns to emerge and spread across the fabric like ripples in a pool. To cut a life short would tear a hole in the fabric. Redemption came only once the last stitch was sewn, the last pattern was woven.

‘You must endure,’ said the voice. ‘A while longer. You must finish the pattern.’

Suddenly, the heat intensified. Pain lashed through Francks’s body, screaming for attention from his brain. He reached out toward Crimson with his mind as he stretched his arm into the shimmering air. With a flick of his wrist, he knocked the weapon from the Cardinal’s hand. The air returned to normal around him and the heat in his skin began to dissipate.

‘You’ll find me harder to murder than your sacrifices, Ignus,’ said Francks.

‘If you’re so special,’ cried Crimson, ‘then why was your master so easy?’

‘Was he, Ignus?’ asked Francks. He looked down at the body of his friend.

‘Then why did you have so much trouble removing his body? He’s special, Ignus. Even you have to admit that now. Don’t you Ignus?’

‘Stop calling me that!’ screamed Crimson. He rushed forward and leapt at Francks.

The two men tumbled to the ground in a heap. Crimson landed on top of Francks and straddled his chest, his robe pushed up around his knobbly knees. Francks tried to roll to the side, but was amazed at the strength in Crimson’s skeletal frame. He was pinned and forced to stare up into the deathly apparition of Crimson’s face.

Scabbs led Kal around the outskirts of the battle between the Redemptionists and the body-worshippers. They stayed low, lest a stray shot from Goliath-Guilder battle catch them from behind.

‘I’m sure I saw it over here,’ said Scabbs. He glanced around for the ladder he’d seen Ander carrying earlier, but every scream from his left made him jump and turn toward the battle. Those were his people, and he had sent them against Crimson’s guards. He knew what those animals were capable of. He’d almost been sent to the bottom of the acid pits himself once. He wouldn’t forgive himself if the worshippers lost and got rounded up for redemption.

‘You sure you didn’t see it in a dream?’ asked Kal. ‘You did say you’d been knocked out last night.’ Kal carried his laspistols in his hands and periodically shot into one melee or the other. ‘Damn!’ exclaimed the bounty hunter.

Scabbs whipped his head around to look at the worshipper battle, expecting to see one of the slaves fall to Kal’s friendly fire. ‘What is it?’ he asked as he scanned the fight.

‘I lost sight of Ralan,’ said Kal. He waved his pistols back and forth in front of him as he searched for the missing Redemptionist. ‘That scavving deacon has been a pain in my backside all night.’

Scabbs watched the battle a moment longer. Many of Crimson’s guards had succumbed to the pressure of the riot. All Scabbs could see were worshippers beating on something at their feet. The guards still on their feet had pulled out their weapons again. They backed into a group and fired at any worshippers who came close.

‘Ah, found it,’ said Kal. He pulled the ladder out from beneath the wreckage of the light pole and set it up against a wall of concrete blocks; the last remnants of what used to be a building or perhaps just a basement.

Another shot rang out from the debris mound behind Scabbs. He turned to order

his people to hold back, but found the barrel of Ralan's pistol poking him in the eye instead. The deacon grabbed Scabbs by the neck and twisted him around into a choke hold. He pressed the gun into Scabbs's temple and whispered 'shush' into his ear.

Scabbs tried to call out to Kal, who was now halfway up the ladder, but couldn't do more than gurgle. Perhaps it was the sound. Perhaps Kal was psychic when it came to Scabbs. Or perhaps he just expected the sidekick to get into trouble. Whichever the case, Kal turned on the ladder and looked down.

'Ralan,' he said. 'I see you finally made it. How've things been since I left?'

'No jokes this time, heretic,' said Ralan. He tightened his hold around Scabbs's neck. 'Come down now or I kill your friend.'

'I don't think you want to do that,' said Kal. 'He won't be much of a shield when he's dead. You kill him then I kill you.'

'Then we just stay here while the Cardinal handles his business and then go our separate ways.'

Kal seemed to consider the words. He twisted around on the ladder and hooked one arm through a rung. His other hand brushed away the strands of hair that dangled around his face. 'I don't have time for this,' he said. 'Foot or groin?'

Scabbs could feel the arm around his neck slacken a little and Ralan pulled the weapon away from his head to point it at Kal. 'I don't understand,' said the deacon.

'Fine,' said Kal. 'I'll let Scabbs choose.' He stared right into Scabbs's eyes and nodded. 'Now!'

Scabbs pounded the soft arch of Ralan's foot with his heel and slammed his elbow into the deacon's groin. The deacon's gun erupted as Scabbs dropped to the side. At the same time, he heard a laspistol blast whip past his ear.

After he hit the ground, Scabbs looked up to see Ralan crumpled on the ground with a neat, round hole burned through his forehead. He glanced at Kal, who simply holstered his weapon and shrugged.

'Him or us,' said Kal. 'Not a tough choice, really.' He began climbing again, adding over his shoulder, 'Get his weapon. Go help your people.'

Scabbs picked up the weapon, but was thrown from his feet by a massive explosion. Worried about Kal, he looked at the ladder. It cracked in half and fell to the ground. Kal was nowhere to be seen.

He turned back toward the miracle body and saw Arliana's still form draped over it. He didn't know what had happened. Perhaps Ralan had got her. Maybe the explosion. Either way, it was obvious she had died protecting the miracle.

Now it was Scabbs's turn. He screamed a guttural, primal cry and ran back into the fray.

'There's weapons fire coming from the dome, Mr Tavis, sir,' said the sergeant.

'Well don't just stand there,' said Tavis. 'Deploy your men. I want that dome cleared by nightfall. If it moves, kill it.'

'But we have men in there as well, sir.'

'You heard my orders, sergeant.' Tavis grabbed the guard by the shoulders and twisted him around. 'I want my dome cleansed, top to bottom!' He gave the guard a shove down the tunnel and followed a few moments later once the squad had moved through the hatch.

Inside was bedlam. Tavis had expected a minor uprising between guards and slaves. What he saw was a war – a war with several armies and at least two fronts. And were those Goliaths in his dome? 'What in Helmawr's name is going on here?' called Tavis. Nobody answered.

'Secure this area,' called the sergeant. 'Form a phalanx and drive a wedge through those Goliaths. Cut their forces in half and surround them.'

Tavis was impressed with the sergeant. It was too bad he'd probably have to ship him off to the slave mines after this. He couldn't afford to have anyone left who had seen the supposed miracle body.

The squad dropped several grenades into the middle of the Goliaths, creating a huge explosion that rocked the ground. Those Goliaths not blown off their feet were staggered by the concussive force. The sergeant led the charge into the middle of the gang, shooting in a cross pattern to drive those left standing to the sides.

In a matter of minutes, the Goliaths had been separated into two groups, and once the squad linked up with the remaining Guilder guards on the other side, both groups were bound on two sides with the dome wall pressed up against their flanks.

Tavis jogged down the widening corridor. 'Excellent work, sergeant,' he called as he ran past. 'Now to see what can be done about those blasted slaves. Ander, bring your men. I will need your help.'

'Yes sir,' said the Orlock ganger. 'Time to cut the tail off that little rat for good.'

Crimson slapped a bony hand on Francks's chest to hold him down. He balled the other hand into a fist and smacked Francks in the face. It felt like getting hit by stack of razors. The sharp edges of Crimson's knuckles cut into his cheek. He pulled his hand back and punched again. Francks could feel trickles of blood run

down his face into his ear.

Crimson struck again. Francks's head rocked to the side into the dirt. Another blow followed and another. It was like a constant barrage of rocks falling during a hivequake, but there was no pain. Just a dull thud ringing in his ears as blow after blow rained down on him. Francks smiled.

'What are you smiling at?' asked Crimson as he continued pounding Francks. 'You enjoying this, you sick pervert? You like pain?' The sharp edge to his voice bordered on shrill as he shrieked at Francks.

'You can't hurt me anymore,' said Francks in between punches. 'You've caused a lot of pain in your life, Ignus. But your time is coming. The Universe knows what you are, and soon the world will know, too.'

Crimson grabbed Francks around the neck with both hands and squeezed. The skeletal fingers dug into his flesh like a knotted rope. Crimson's face was a patchwork of bright red skin stretched across bleached white bones and teeth. Francks felt like he was looking into the face of death. He laughed at the image, which enraged the Cardinal even further.

'No one laughs at me,' he screamed. 'Least of all a heretical witch. Prepare for your redemption, wyrd. Your laughter will echo all the way to the bottom of the acid pools.'

'I am ready for redemption,' said Francks. He could draw no breath, but could still speak. 'I am at peace with the Universe. It is you who must prepare. Your trials are just beginning.'

'Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!' screamed Crimson.

'Look at those people down there, Ignus,' said Francks. 'They have seen the miracle of the body. They will soon see you for the murdering little gangster you really are. Are you prepared for your own redemption? Because it is coming and now there is no way for you to stop it. You can't kill everyone.'

'Oh, can't I?' said Crimson. The Cardinal stood while holding onto his neck, dragging Francks to his feet. With surprising strength, Crimson lifted him off the ground. Francks let his feet dangle in the air. His moment was near. There was no stopping it now. No use fighting anymore. His pattern was nearing completion.

Crimson glared up into Francks's milky-white eyes as he held the taller man in the air. 'At the end of the day, I will still be Cardinal Crimson, and you will have joined Bowdie in death. Then we'll see who is laughing.'

Francks smiled again. He could feel the light of Bowdie warming his back and limning his head. 'I won't argue with you, Ignus,' he said. 'Syris always said,

“Never argue with a crazy person.” But you couldn’t bury Bowdie and you can’t bury the truth. We will rise up to defeat you. The truth will be my redemption and your downfall.’

Crimson moved one hand to Francks’s groin and lifted him over his head. He turned toward the edge of the pit. ‘You pathetic old man,’ he said. ‘The truth is over-rated. People don’t want truth. They want carnage. They crave excitement to give their miserable lives some meaning. They want death… as long as it’s someone else’s and they can watch it happen. I will win in the end for I am Cardinal Crimson, and I can give them exactly what they want. You can’t stop me. Nobody can.’

‘I believe I can,’ said Kal Jerico.

‘What in the Spire has happened here?’ asked Yolanda. She came to a screeching halt as soon as she entered the dome, and then backed up to the dome portal to get a better look.

Themis stood next to her in the doorway. ‘I thought you said it was just a few Guilder guards and some Orlocks.’

‘It was,’ she said. ‘Just a few hours ago. Now it’s a war zone.’ She scanned the worksite, looking for Scabbs, but there was simply too much confusion. ‘Look,’ she said. ‘All I needed was to get the Guilder’s men out of the way long enough to get my friend. Well, mission accomplished. Take the ’Cats and get out now before we all get drawn into this war. I think I can make my way through the chaos.’

Themis pointed to the group fighting to their right. ‘Isn’t that our friend, Gonth?’ she asked.

Yolanda wiped her dreadlocks away from her eye to take a closer look. ‘I think it is,’ she said.

An evil smirk played across Themis’s face as her eyes lit up. ‘You go get your friend. We’ve got a score to settle with that Goliath.’

Yolanda returned her friend’s smile. ‘Go get ’em, girl,’ she said. ‘But keep your back to the door and don’t get squeezed.’

As Themis and the Wildcats moved off to flank the Goliaths, Yolanda took a deep breath and ran through the lane between the two battles. She’d almost made it to the far end of the Guilder line when the leader stepped in front of her.

‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded.

This situation required skills Yolanda loathed to use, and yet she knew it would work all too well. She rolled her shoulders back slightly and turned and tilted her

head to the side. The effect of which was to accentuate her long neck and raise her breasts up just slightly in her skin-tight vest. She curled one lip up to give the guard a sly smile.

'Me and my girls are here to help,' she said. Yolanda turned her head to glance back toward the three-way battle, making sure her hair flipped around her face as she moved. When she looked back at the guard, she wet her lips. 'Do you suppose there might be a reward?'

'There, um, might be,' said the guard. He was totally mesmerised. His eyes had focused well below Yolanda's face and his mouth hung open slightly. Yolanda felt herself hating men for being so easily manipulated and hating herself for sinking to the level of one of Kal's barmaids.

'Well, why don't you go help them,' suggested Yolanda, 'and then we can discuss my reward later.' With this last line, Yolanda reached out and stroked the guard's cheek with a finger.

'Um, okay,' said the guard and he moved off, somewhat reluctantly, glancing back at Yolanda several times as he walked down the line.

She waved at him. 'You might want to help Themis,' called Yolanda. 'She just loves a man in uniform.' Yolanda watched the guard for a moment longer, realising that even if Themis didn't kill him, she'd probably just lost any chance at that reward.

'Oh well,' she said. 'It was worth the price.' She jogged off to find Scabbs. That was a man she could understand. He was a disgusting little rodent, which didn't differentiate him from most men, but he had simple needs: food, shelter, delousing. Yolanda shuddered and decided that after this bounty she needed to find new friends.

'Come on, girls,' called Themis. 'We have a date with destiny.' She pulled the ripcord on her chainsword and turned toward Gonth and the Goliaths. 'Fate brought us to this dome. Vengeance will carry us home again.'

'Orders, ma'am?' asked Lysanne. She pulled at the bandages around her hand and jammed a plasma pistol in amongst the linen.

'If it growls,' said Themis, 'shoot it. Avoid grenades if possible. We can't afford to harm the guilders. If any 'Cats come through this, I don't want a bounty on our heads.'

'But don't be afraid to use the Guilder's men as shields,' added Lysanne with a smile.

'That's why you're my second,' said Themis. 'You're always thinking.' She

turned to her gang. ‘For the fallen,’ she cried.

‘For the fallen,’ replied the Wildcats.

Themis revved her chainsword and strode into the dome. As she and the ’Cats worked their way around behind the battle, a guilder guard came running up to them.

‘Ladies,’ he called. ‘Hey! Girls!’

Themis stopped and glared at the approaching guard. ‘Did you say, “‘girls”?’ she asked.

The guard smiled a broad, stupid, male smile. ‘I heard you might need some help,’ he said. ‘Well, you girls stick with me and I’ll make sure you don’t get hurt.’

Themis licked her lips and smiled back. ‘You’ll make sure we don’t get hurt,’ she said.

The guard nodded.

‘Well, who’s going to keep you from getting hurt?’

Themis looked down at her rumbling chainsword. The guard glanced down as well, and his smile faded. With his attention on the sword, Themis snapped her leg up and out, kicking the guard a few centimetres below his belt. He fell to the ground, groaning.

‘Come on, girls,’ said Themis. ‘And remember what Lysanne said about using the guards as shields.’

Up ahead, Yolanda saw another three-way battle. Scabbs and his slave pals were caught between Redemptionists and a group of advancing Orlocks. There were a lot more slaves than she remembered – and many of them were better dressed than the average slave – but they were completely outgunned. And Scabbs seemed out of it. He sat by a couple of bodies lying upon some stones.

‘Time to even the odds a little,’ said Yolanda as she pulled out her laspistols. She let loose with a volley of blasts that hit the ground in front of the Orlocks. They stopped advancing and scattered, diving behind whatever cover they could find nearby.

She kicked over an ore cart and ducked behind it. ‘Scabbs?’ she called out. ‘You armed?’

Three blasts hit the other side of the steel cart and bounced off after she spoke. A moment later, Scabbs called back. ‘Yolanda? Is that you?’

‘What kind of stupid question is that, you son of a ratskin?’

Scabbs didn’t even reply. No sarcasm. Not even any pouting. Something must

be really wrong with the little man. Two more shots clanged off her ersatz shield. Yolanda knew she had to return fire soon or the Orlocks would move to flank her. The last two shots had come from her left so she rolled left and fired right. As she suspected, the gangers on the left had taken cover again, but she caught one sticking his head up on the right and plugged him in the shoulder.

'If you have a weapon, Scabbs, I could use a little help here,' she said as she scrambled back behind the cart. 'It's called a cross fire. But it only works if you fire as well. Whatever's wrong, push it down for now. Focus on the problem at hand. That's how you stay alive.'

Another volley of shots ricocheted off the cart followed by a single shot that came nowhere near her.

'I got one,' yelled Scabbs. 'I got one.'

'Great,' said Yolanda. She thought he sounded a little too happy about it, but people dealt with pain in many ways. 'Gloat less. Shoot more.' She rolled to the right and saw one of the gangers repositioning to get cover from Scabbs. She fired twice, hitting him in the leg and foot. He dropped to the ground and screamed. The odds were definitely getting better.

As Yolanda rolled back to safety, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye right before running into a boot. She looked up into the barrel of a pistol. At the other end of the weapon stood the Orlock ganger who'd kidnapped Scabbs. He was smiling.

'Don't even try it,' he said. 'Drop the pistols and maybe you live long enough to know the pleasure of Ander.'

Themis and Lysanne had worked their way around the guilder line, leaving the rest of the Wildcats behind their walking shields to provide cover fire. Working in tandem, the duo had already taken down two Goliaths.

Lysanne would light them up with a ball of plasma in the chest. This did little more than stun the hulking behemoths, but it gave Themis time to close to melee with her chainsword. Even with blades rotating at thousands of revolutions per minute, the chainsword would have trouble cutting through tough Goliath muscle, and their underlying bones were like bars of steel.

Themis didn't bother going for the vital organs in the chest or stomach. She aimed a little lower. One quick slash through a Goliath's loin cloth dropped them to the ground in a whimpering heap. It was then an easy matter to kick their weapons out of reach and leave them curled up in a ball in the dirt.

They made their way toward the next Goliath in line. Luckily, the Guilders and

the ’Cats provided enough distraction that their infiltration hadn’t been detected yet. Themis nodded at Lysanne. ‘Now,’ she said.

Lysanne grabbed her bandaged wrist to steady the plasma pistol and fired, but as she moved in behind the ball of plasma, a huge explosion rocked the dome behind them, knocking both ’Cats to the ground. Lysanne looked back through the guilder line to see a fireball erupt into the air.

‘What happened?’ called Themis.

‘Looks like someone in that other Goliath battle didn’t get your message about not using grenades.’ Lysanne rested on her good hand and pushed herself up to her knees.

The ground beneath them shook again. Dust rained down on them from the dome ceiling. Both women stayed on the ground.

‘One more blast like that and this whole place will come down on our heads,’ said Themis.

But Lysanne had other problems to worry about. As she struggled back to her knees, the Goliath she had shot reared above her. She raised her plasma pistol, but he slapped it away with a big, meaty hand. He kicked her in the chest, sending her flying back several metres. She landed on her back with a spine jarring crack.

The world around her went fuzzy. She shook her head to try to clear the gathering fog in her vision. The Goliath strode toward her, pulling out a shotgun and pumping a shell as he approached. Laser blasts and bullets slapped him in the chest and arms, but didn’t slow him down.

Then, behind the Goliath, Lysanne saw something even worse. Gonth had appeared from out of the smoke and dust. With a single, massive hand, he grabbed Themis and lifted her off the ground by the throat. His other hand held her arm out to the side. With a quick flip, he snapped her wrist, and the chainsword fell from her grasp. It jumped and flipped on the ground.

Gonth looked over at Lysanne and the Goliath standing above her. ‘Kill her,’ said the Grak gang’s new leader. ‘Kill them all. This one I’ll take home for a little fun.’

The Goliath lowered the barrel of the shotgun and pointed it at Lysanne’s face.

‘Do not presume to meddle in my work, heretic,’ yelled Crimson over his shoulder. ‘After I cast down this witch, I will turn my attention on you. Leave now and your redemption might be commuted… for a while.’

Crimson’s sleeves had fallen down around his shoulders, revealing his thin,

bony arms. Kal had no idea where the Cardinal got the strength to hoist Francks over his head and hold him there. Certainly, he couldn't last long. Kal just needed to keep him talking.

'It won't end there, Crimson,' said Kal. 'Or should I call you Ignus?' Crimson flinched at the name but still didn't turn around. 'Francks was right,' he said out loud. 'Too many people already know the truth.'

'You don't even know what you know,' said Crimson. 'That's always been your downfall, heretic. Too little knowledge, too late.'

Kal slipped his laspistols from their holsters, drawing them out silently. He wondered why Francks wasn't struggling. The man had killed two assassins with his bare hands. If he couldn't take Crimson, something must be wrong.

Kal continued talking. 'Let me see if I can get close. You murdered that glowing guy down there a long time ago and Francks here is the only witness. That about sum it up?'

Francks raised his head and looked at Kal. There was an odd gleam in his eyes and he smiled broadly. Kal mouthed at him, 'Can you fight?'

Francks simply shook his head and closed his eyes.

'There's more in this universe than life and death,' said Crimson. 'But I wouldn't expect a heretic bounty hunter to grasp the intricacies of philosophy.'

'I figure the rest of the story is all Redemptionist crap anyway,' said Kal. 'Hardly worth my time. But that man is coming with me. You can walk away or not. It really doesn't matter either way to me.'

Kal saw the exposed muscles in Crimson's upper arms tense. He was getting ready to throw Francks over the edge. Kal had to go for broke. 'I can drop you where you stand, Crimson,' he called out. 'One thing I am good at is shooting people. I can make you fall any way I want. Francks will survive. You won't.'

Looking back, it might not have been the right tactic to try with a crazed fanatic like Crimson. Faced with death or losing, a fanatic will almost always choose death.

Crimson heaved Francks over the edge and dropped to his knees. Kal fired, but his blasts flew futilely over the Cardinal's head. Crimson rolled to the side as Kal continued to fire. The Cardinal dived behind a half-wall as Kal rushed to the edge to see if the fall had indeed killed Francks.

The prophet lay on his back in a crumpled heap at the base of the wall. His right leg bent nearly double at the knee while his left arm twisted back at the shoulder and lay under his body. Blood pooled around the body and Kal could see a jagged rock sticking up through his side. But there was movement, and even

from this height, he could see the man's odd, swirling eyes.

Kal turned to advance on Crimson's position. He aimed his laspistols toward the half-wall. 'That was your third and final chance, Cardinal,' called Kal. 'You and your assassins have all failed. You're just not very good at killing.'

'You'd be surprised,' said Crimson. 'I'm just getting started.' He rose up behind the wall with a plasma gun in his hands. 'I left this here a long time ago for just such an occasion.' He jammed a power cell into the weapon and fired.

Kal dived to the side as a large stone beside him exploded from the released plasma energy. Shards rained around him as he hit the ground. He knew better than to get into a gunfight against a plasma gun. The energy shells were like grenades. You just had to get close. However, the next shot hit the top of the wall, blowing it apart around his hands, and dropping Kal over the edge.

10: OVER THE EDGE

Cardinal Crimson rushed forward and pointed his plasma gun into the pit. He twisted his head back and forth, searching frantically for any sign of the heretic, Kal Jerico. The heretic must die! Both heretics. Jerico and that crazy false prophet, Francks. They would ruin everything. All he had built. All he had worked and fought and killed for over the years would come crashing down if those two heretics got their way.

He could feel it all slipping away from him. His heart beat so loud it pulsed and rang in his ears. His face felt flush and he laboured to get enough breath, wheezing through his lipless mouth. His tongue was like a wad of sandpaper in his mouth, and his hands shook so hard he almost dropped his gun into the worksite below.

Crimson's eyes went wide as he focused on the scene below. There were so many people down there. So many witnesses to his defeat: his guards, the slaves and those idiotic townspeople. Past that a completely different battle raged with even more people coming to uncover his secrets; to get between Cardinal Crimson and his mission on this world.

And then there was Francks. The false prophet lay below him, broken, but still squirming, still trembling, still alive. 'Why are you so hard to kill?'

Crimson pointed the plasma gun at Francks, but his trembling hand made it impossible to aim. He grabbed the butt of the gun with his free hand to steady it and tried to squint, forgetting that he had no usable eyelids.

'The Emperor damn him to the depths of The Sump,' cried Crimson.

'You just can't seem to finish the job, can you, Ignus?'

'Who's that?' screamed the Cardinal. He waved his gun around and scanned the wall and the pit below. He checked over his shoulder as well. The voice seemed to have come from below, but he couldn't be sure. It sounded like it was right next to him. 'Is that you, Bowdie?' he called. 'What do you want from me? Why

can't you stay dead and buried like all the others?'

'You can never kill me,' said the voice. 'I am forever. I will haunt you to your dying day.'

That had definitely come from below. Perhaps it was Bowdie. Perhaps it was just in his head. It didn't matter. They all had to die now. Crimson fired his gun into the pit. The explosion nearly knocked him over the edge. 'Leave me alone!' he screamed. 'I'll kill you all. I will cleanse this place and raze it to the ground. Let's see you rise from that!'

He fired again and again, waving the weapon around randomly and squeezing the trigger to unleash powerful blasts of plasma in all directions. Shards of rocks, hunks of metal, and pieces of bodies flew into the air wherever the energy shells hit. Crimson laughed with gleeful abandon with every shot, dancing up and down the edge of the pit as he fired.

'I am the will,' he cried. 'I am the way. I am the holy rite of redemption. Feel my flame, feel my wrath and wither under my gaze. I am the will. I am the way…'

Yolanda wracked her brain for a sarcastic response to Ander's vulgar proposal, but the best she could come up with was, 'What, the pleasure of dragging your sorry butt in for the bounty?'

It was pitiful. With Jerico, she always had a zinger ready. It must be lack of sleep. She was off her game. That also explained how this idiot Orlock had got the jump on her in the first place.

'Last chance,' said Ander. 'Drop your weapon and call off your gang, or we'll wipe you out and dump the bodies in a hole. What'll it be?'

Ander had her in a bad spot. She was flat on her back and he stood behind her. His groin was too far away and she'd never get her feet around before he pulled the trigger. Yolanda hated to admit it, Ander had the advantage. But she'd rather die than give him the advantage he was truly looking for.

Yolanda loosened her grip, letting her pistols flop around her fingers. At the same time, she tensed her body for action. Perhaps a scissors move with her legs or a quick roll to the side to make him miss, followed by two quick gun blasts.

'That's better,' he said. His lips spread into a broad smile. 'Now, get up slow–'

The air above Yolanda sizzled. A bright light arced over her head, blinding her. She blinked away the tears that welled up and grasped her weapons. Now was her chance. If Ander had been blinded as well, she might get the drop on him.

As she aimed her weapons, Ander's pistol dropped from his hands and he fell to

the ground next to her. His mouth lolled open slightly and his eyes had gone wide in surprise, probably from the large hole in his chest.

'Did I get him?' called Scabbs.

'Yeah,' said Yolanda, turning away from the glassy-eyed corpse. 'Nice shooting. Feel free to gloat about that one. Took you long enough, though.'

'Still a little busy here,' replied Scabbs. 'I've got Redemptionists breathing down my back, you know.'

'Okay,' called Yolanda. 'Gloat later. Shoot more now.' She grabbed Ander's gun and stuck it into her vest. 'Cover me,' she called. 'I'm coming over.'

Yolanda crouched behind the overturned cart. When she heard Scabbs's laser blasts, she jumped over and dived into a forward roll. She came up blasting and sprinted in a zigzag toward Scabbs.

As she leaped over the low wall surrounding the slave encampment, a large chunk of stone exploded beneath her. She hit the ground hard and lay there for a moment.

'What in the Spire was that?' asked Scabbs.

Debris rained down around them. The worshippers panicked and began screaming. Some jumped the wall and ran off, heedless of the battles raging around them. Others curled into a ball and whimpered. Energy blasts exploded all around the work site.

'Plasma gun,' said Yolanda. She crawled to an intact portion of wall. 'Can't tell where it's coming from. Damn!'

'What's wrong?' asked Scabbs. 'Are you okay?'

'I just thought of the perfect comeback for Ander.'

Themis heard the snap of her wrist breaking over the whine of the chainsword. The pain shot up her arm like a laser blast. She tried to scream in pain but, with Gonth's hand around her neck, only a gurgle escaped her lips.

She pounded on his chest with her free hand, but he just laughed at her as he turned to leave. She could see the battle behind him. It appeared even more chaotic than before. The Guilder guards and her girls had broken ranks and were diving for cover. The Goliaths had regrouped and were starting to pursue.

Themis searched for Lysanne, hoping she had found some way to get out from under the barrel of Gonth's ganger. Then she saw her young lieutenant. She lay still on the ground, her wrap-around top covered in blood. The Goliath who'd been standing over her was no longer there. He must have gone off with the others.

She wanted to cry out. She wanted to weep for the loss of her girls, but the darkness invaded her mind. Lack of air was turning the world black around her. It looked like all was lost. Themis's eyelids drooped. She wanted to let go, let the darkness take her. But she knew what lay on the other side, and it wasn't death. At least not right away. She had to fight.

Grabbing hold of Gonth's hand around her throat, Themis pulled at his fingers and then his thumb. Just a little air would give her a few more moments. Maybe she could call for a retreat. Maybe she could find some way to get away from this brute. Anything was possible with just a little more air.

Lysanne rolled over onto her stomach, lifted her chest off the ground, and puked. She wrung blood and vomit from her hair and looked over at the dead Goliath next to her. One minute he'd been standing there ready to pull the trigger, the next minute his chest simply exploded. The head had dropped and rolled between her legs while blood spewed from the lower half of his torso all over her face and chest.

She'd been so horrified Lysanne froze, completely forgetting about Themis and Gonth. It was the most repulsive thing she'd ever witnessed, and she'd seen her fair share of battles. Lysanne pushed the bloody vision out of her mind and concentrated on saving Themis.

She grabbed her weapon and ran through the chaos toward Gonth. Themis didn't look good. One arm hung limp at her side while the other pulled at the monstrous hand around her throat. She'd stopped kicking, as if she had no fight left within her.

Gonth slapped Themis across the face and blood sprayed from her mouth. At that moment, Themis seemed to get a small gasp of air and then looked right at her. Lysanne saw a little fire still burning behind those fierce eyes.

Themis opened her mouth and forced one croaking word out: 'Grenade!' she called and held out her hand behind the Goliath's head.

It was little more than a whisper, but Lysanne heard it clearly enough. She also knew better than to question an order from her leader, even one that seemed suicidal. She popped a frag grenade off her belt, pulled the pin, and tossed it.

It was a perfect throw. Themis snatched it out of the air, pulled her hand back, and slammed the bomb into Gonth's face. He immediately dropped her and began to claw at his head. Themis pushed herself up with her good hand and scrambled away as Gonth danced around frantically.

When he turned toward Lysanne, she finally understood what had happened.

The grenade was lodged in his open mouth. He pulled and pulled at it, but couldn't get the bomb out past his teeth. Lysanne fell to the ground and covered her head with her hands. A moment later, the explosion rang out like thunder, and bits of bone and blood rained down around her again.

'Come on,' called Themis. 'We got what we came for. Get the 'Cats. This place is totally scavved.'

'Well, that could have gone better,' said Kal under his breath. He clung to the wall just below Crimson, who continued to rant and fire his plasma gun. Luckily, Kal had been tucked under a bank of pipes and beams when the Cardinal peered over the edge. Now the man was so berserk, Kal doubted the Cardinal had any idea where or even who he was anymore.

He just wanted to scare him away, not send him into a psychotic episode.

Kal inched his way down the wall away from the lunatic, his fingers and toes clawing at thin, mortar-filled cracks. A few more metres to the side and he'd be hidden from view all the way down the wall. It was slow going and his shoulders were numb again. He'd spent too much time hanging from his hands today.

'I've got to learn when to shut my mouth,' he said. Kal glanced over his shoulder to see the chaos caused by Crimson's tantrum. The guard lines had broken and the few remaining Goliaths moved freely through the chaos, thumping and shooting anything that moved. The Wildcats were more disciplined than the guards, and they seemed to be edging toward the door. Smart girls.

Kal climbed down the wall as he kept an eye on the various battles. If the 'Cats were here, Yolanda must be nearby. He found her a moment later. It looked like she was arguing with Scabbs while shooting at the last of the Orlocks.

The slaves and townsfolk were either catatonic or running for the exit. Those lucky enough to escape the plasma blasts and the Goliaths might actually make it back to civilization in one piece. One slave girl's body lay draped across the miracle body. She must have died protecting it.

As Kal neared the bottom, he noticed that Crimson's guards had regrouped on the hill after the slaves fled from the plasma gun. They seemed uncertain what to do next. They looked back and forth between the miracle body in the middle of the sniper zone and their boss, the crazed sniper himself. Kal couldn't care less which way they went as long as they left him alone. He needed to get to Francks.

He dropped the last several metres and turned to run down the wall to his bounty. At that moment, a voice blared above the chaos.

‘Stop this madness now!’ screamed the amplified voice.

Kal twirled around to see who the hell was stupid enough to use a voice amp in the middle of this maelstrom. It was Tavis. What in the Spire was he doing here? The Guilder stood between the chaos at the door and the chaos surrounding the miracle body. Perhaps he thought he could bring some order with the force of his voice and his presence. To Kal, he looked like a lightning rod for more trouble.

‘This is my dome,’ he yelled through the amp. ‘You are trespassers and I am well within my rights to have you all shot or sent to the slave mines.’

Kal didn’t think it was the kind of rhetoric that would win him friends or influence people, but the rest of the dome fell almost completely silent. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to hear what the idiot with the amp had to say.

‘Leave now or I put a bounty on all your heads,’ he said. ‘I can do that. I’m a Guilder and you… you are nothing. Nobody will even mourn your passing. Leave now. I want my dome back.’

Kal didn’t have time for this. He turned and ran toward Francks.

‘Leave,’ continued Tavis. ‘Do you hear me?’

‘I hear you,’ cried Crimson. ‘This was my dome before and it will be mine again.’

Kal stopped and stared at the Cardinal. He fired the plasma gun. Kal turned back to Tavis. The Guilder’s head, along with the amp and the hand that held it, exploded in a gory shower of blood, bone and plastic. The body stayed upright for a moment and then dropped over backward.

Kal was stunned. Crimson had just killed a Guilder, and on the Guilder’s property. He wished he had a pict camera to record it. He ran to Francks’s side. Along the way he noticed the Cardinal’s men had made their decision. They ran up the hill toward their spiritual leader, probably to hustle him out before the Guilder’s men took the law into their own hands.

‘Kal Jerico,’ said Jobe Francks. ‘I knew you would come.’

The bounty hunter stood above Francks, a look of deep concern on his face. It seemed to Jobe that *he* should be the one concerned as he could no longer feel his legs and it seemed impossible to even sit up.

‘How?’ asked Kal. ‘You don’t even know who I am.’

‘The tapestry is much influenced by your passage through this life,’ said Francks. His breathing was laboured and it took him a few moments to refill his lungs so he could continue. ‘You have touched a great many threads on your travels.’

‘Do you always talk like this?’ asked Kal. He smiled. ‘Or is this a special occasion?’

The bounty hunter kneeled down next to Francks and gently poked and prodded him. Jobe could have told him not to bother. His wounds were all internal and well beyond Jerico’s abilities to remedy, but he wanted the man to feel useful, so kept quiet.

‘I mean meeting me must be quite a treat,’ said Kal. He forced another smile, but Jobe could see the concern behind the bounty hunter’s sparkling eyes. ‘Especially for someone who’s been in the Ash Wastes most of his life.’

Jobe wanted to continue playing this game of wits, but he could feel his essence draining away. ‘There’s not much time,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid I won’t be able to come with you to see Mr Nemo.’

Kal raised his hands in mock defence. ‘I don’t know anything about…’

Jobe coughed and spit blood onto his new clothes. His lungs were filling, which made breathing difficult. He wouldn’t be able to talk much longer. ‘Please listen,’ he said. ‘This will all be for nothing if you don’t let me finish.’

Kal nodded. ‘I think I understand,’ he said. ‘Go ahead.’

He talked quickly, stopping every once in a while to cough up blood.

‘Your friend,’ said Francks. ‘The scabby one. He has Bitten’s journal. Every evil deed Ignus – Crimson – ever committed is there. I leave it in your care. I know you will do the right thing. Be careful, though. Ignus is well-protected. If you go to his lair again, you will die.’

Kal opened his mouth to protest or to ask a question, but then shut it again.

Francks continued. ‘You will know what to do when the time comes. We all must play our parts. I thought mine was to find Bowdie. I now realise I was brought here to find you. I leave the fight in your hands. Bitten carried it as long and as far as he could. But now truth has its rightful champion.’

‘I’m no champion,’ said Kal. ‘I couldn’t even save myself this evening. I sent Crimson into a homicidal rage, and I practically forced him to throw you to your death. Believe me, you’re better off picking another champion.’

Jobe smiled. His time was almost up, but he felt warm, contented, complete. ‘I didn’t choose you,’ he said. ‘The Universe did. And it has its reasons. This fight needs someone like you, Kal Jerico. And we both know there’s no one else quite like you to choose.’

‘I don’t know what to say to that,’ said Kal. ‘I’ve never had much stomach for Cawdor or Redemptionists. Too preachy and holier than thou for my liking. I try to take people as they are, and not change them. But I can tell you’re different

from Crimson and his ilk. Honest and decent. I would have liked to have had the chance to get to know you. I'm… I'm sorry I couldn't save you.'

'Don't worry about me,' said Jobe. His left arm was numb and it felt like someone had placed a concrete block on his chest. 'My mission is complete. Syris and I are done here. We can move on. We can have peace.'

He gazed into Kal's eyes and his vision clouded over. 'But you,' he said. His voice sounded far away, as if echoing down a tunnel. 'You won't be at peace until you find Wotan. I understand. A man needs his faithful companion. I cannot go with you to Nemo, but I can give you two gifts that might help.'

Jobe pulled Bitten's envelope from his pocket and held it up for Kal. 'Take it,' he said. 'I have no need for it where I am going.'

Kal reached for the envelope. When he took it, Jobe grabbed him around the wrist. The clouds in his eyes swirled from white to grey to black like a sudden storm. 'Here is your second gift.'

After a moment, Kal pulled away and blinked. 'What the scav was that?' he asked.

'Information,' said Jobe. 'Memories. A vision of your cyber- mastiff, Wotan. Find him. Go to him. Finish your mission. Good luck.'

And then it was time to go. The blackness crept from his chest toward his head. The visions swirled and danced in his mind. His life. Bowdie's. Crimson's and Jerico's. The entire tapestry. A scene in a bar hovered at the edges of his consciousness. He pushed the others away. This he wanted to see. At the end, he laughed and laughed and laughed.

He could hear Kal speaking to him from down the tunnel. 'What's so funny?' he said. 'What are you laughing at?'

'Nothing,' replied Francks, although he wasn't sure if Kal could even hear him anymore. 'You'll find out soon enough.'

The tunnel brightened in front of Jobe Francks. He looked back at Kal once more and smiled. He then turned to his side and saw an infinite set of tunnels all running parallel to one another, but all headed for the same light at the end. He could see Syris walking down the next tunnel and knew they would meet at the end – at the hub. And it was good.

'Kal?'

'…'

'Wake up, Jerico.'

Kal's face was slapped. By the length of the fingers and the force behind the

smack, he was certain Yolanda had done the slapping.

'What?' he asked. 'Why are you hitting me?' He sat beside Jobe Francks. Yolanda and Scabbs stood over him. Scabbs, at least, looked concerned.

'You've been sitting there for several minutes, Kal,' said Scabbs. 'We were worried.'

'The runt was worried,' said Yolanda. 'I just want to leave. Our friends the Goliaths are coming.'

Kal shook his head to clear away the fog. He looked down at Francks. Dead. How long? Had it all been a dream?

'*Now*, Jerico, or I leave you as a peace offering to the Goliaths.' Yolanda pulled Kal to his feet and pushed him toward the pile of rubble. 'Up there. Maybe we can circle around and get back to the portal.'

Kal let Yolanda lead for now. He tried to sort out what happened as they climbed the hill. 'My guns,' he said. 'I dropped them when I fell over the edge.'

'They're in your holsters, Kal.'

'Odd,' said Kal. 'And where did everyone else go?'

'The Wildcats retreated after Crimson went berserk,' said Yolanda. 'His craziness's guards hustled him away after he killed Tavis. The Guilder guards lasted a while, but now we're right back where we started, running from the scavving Goliaths.'

'And I've got my laspistols?'

Scabbs slapped him this time. 'Come on, Kal!' he whined. 'We need you out here with us. The Goliaths are at the bottom of the hill. We need a Kal Jerico plan to get out of this alive. There's no one quite like you at coming up with hair-brained schemes.'

Kal smiled. 'That's just what he meant, wasn't it,' he said. 'I'm Kal Jerico. I'm the hero.'

'Right,' said Yolanda sarcastically. 'I guess that makes us sidekicks, huh?'

Kal nodded, but he wasn't really listening. 'I've got an idea,' he said. 'You two keep running. Turn right at the top of the hill. Don't stop until you get to the wall of the dome. Bobo will know where to go from there.'

'Bobo?' said Scabbs. 'I didn't see Bobo come in with you.'

'He didn't,' said Kal. 'But he's up there. He came in through the secret back door.'

'Secret? What secret? How do you know all this, Jerico?' asked Yolanda.

'I don't know how,' said Kal. 'I just know. Now go.'

Kal stopped at the top of the hill. The Goliaths were about halfway up and

coming fast. Their long, thick legs made climbing the hill seem like running on level ground.

He grabbed his leather coat with both hands and pushed it open past his holsters. They were forty metres away. Kal blew gently on his fingertips and lowered his hands toward his guns. Thirty metres.

'Kal,' called Scabbs from behind him. 'You can't kill Goliaths with your las pistols. Come on. Run!'

'Oh can't I?' said Kal.

Twenty metres. Bullets and laser blasts flew through the air, narrowly missing the stoic bounty hunter. Kal drew his guns and fired four shots in rapid succession. Not a single blast hit the Goliaths. He hadn't even been aiming at them. Satisfied that it was enough, Kal turned and ran.

Behind him, he heard a loud crack, followed by a low rumble, and then a ground-shaking blast. Kal took a moment to glance over his shoulder and admire his handiwork. Large chunks of masonry and metal beams fell through the air as the ceiling and side wall of the dome collapsed on top of the last remnants of the Grak gang.

Kal smiled. 'I do have a certain style,' he said. 'A certain unconventional way of doing things, don't I?'

A few minutes later, he caught up with Scabbs and Yolanda, who stood next to Bobo. 'The back door is right over here, isn't it Bobo?' he asked.

'You're certain about this, Jerico?' asked Yolanda, for about the tenth time.

Kal shushed her. 'Yes, I'm certain,' he whispered. 'I see it all in my head. And don't ask me to explain how or why. I just do. Okay? Francks said it was a gift to help me get Wotan back.'

'You're dog is in there,' said Yolanda. The sarcasm was so thick he would have had trouble cutting it with his sabre.

Kal just nodded. He was tired of this discussion. He stepped out from behind the stalagmite where they hid and crept toward the cave opening. They were in a huge cavern two hour's hike out from Down Town – the deepest, darkest settlement in the Underhive. Kal kept close to the wall of the cavern, though not for cover so much as to avoid falling into the pool of sludge that covered most of the floor.

Yolanda and Scabbs followed him after a moment. He heard a scuffle behind him and turned to see Yolanda push Scabbs into the wall to get around him. 'And why would Nemo bring your dog all the way down to Hive Bottom?'

‘So the neighbours wouldn’t complain about his barking?’ suggested Scabbs.

‘And speaking of neighbours,’ said Yolanda. ‘Do you have any idea what kinds of things live in these caves down here? Mutants. Monsters. Things that make Goliaths look like kittens.’

Kal pointed his torch at a small niche carved into the wall ahead. ‘Screamer!’ he said. ‘Don’t get too close or you’ll set it off.’ He waded out into the sludge to avoid the proximity alarm. Two splashes behind him told Kal that the others had followed suit.

‘How did you know that was there?’ asked Yolanda.

Kal pointed at his head and kept moving forward. They zigzagged their way to the cave entrance, avoiding all the screamers. Kal switched off his torch. ‘Wait here for my signal.’ He said. ‘I don’t want them to see us coming.’

‘How will you see?’ asked Yolanda.

Kal didn’t answer. He moved into the cave with his eyes closed. If he concentrated, he could see every twist and turn in his mind. After a few minutes, he stopped and opened his eyes. Light spilled onto the floor from around the next turn. He waited, counting down from ten in his head.

When he reached zero, Kal slipped around the corner and came up behind the guard who had just turned to walk back into the lit chamber. Kal grabbed him from behind, wrapped his hand over the guard’s mouth and stuck the barrel of his laspistol into the man’s back.

‘Don’t make a sound and you’ll live. Understand?’

The guard nodded his head. Kal pulled him back around the corner and smacked him in the back of the head with the pearl handle of his laspistol. He lowered the guard to the floor and began counting again.

A few minutes later, Kal crept back to the cave entrance, switched on his torch and motioned to Yolanda and Scabbs to follow. He led them back to the edge of the lit chamber and crouched by the bodies of two guards.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Wotan is in there. There’s only two more guards and they won’t see us coming.’

‘How do you know?’ asked Yolanda.

‘Just trust me this once,’ said Kal.

He pulled out his pistols and stepped around the corner. When Yolanda came up beside him, he heard her stifle a laugh. Kal had to admit, it was pretty comical.

At the far end of the chamber sat Wotan chained to the floor. Beneath him lay one of the twin Delaque gangers employed by Nemo for grunt work. Wotan’s front paws held the twin’s leather coat to the floor on either side of his body. His

haunches rested on the ganger's groin.

The twin – Kal thought it was the one who called himself Destroy as he had a blue neckerchief around his neck – was in obvious discomfort.

Seek, the other twin, was flat up against the wall in front of Wotan. His arms alternately flapped in front of his face and groin as Wotan snapped and growled at him.

'Get him off me. Get him off me,' said Destroy over and over again.

'If I move, he'll kill me,' said Seek. 'Get him off yourself and help me.'

'This is all your fault,' said Destroy.

'My fault?' whined Seek. 'You're the one who got too close. I was just trying to help.'

'Some help you are. Why didn't you go get the guards?'

'You could have yelled for them yourself. It's not my job to get the guards. Besides, they're gone.'

'Gone? Where are they? Why didn't you tell me they were gone? I'm gonna kill you when I get out of this.'

'Not if I kill you first.'

Kal stepped into the room. 'Need some help, boys?'

The twins looked at Kal. 'Now look what you did.' said Destroy from beneath Wotan. 'You let Kal Jerico waltz right in here.'

'I did that? I did that? Why did you have to get so close to the stupid mastiff?'

'That's it. I am so gonna kill you.'

Yolanda fired her laspistol into the wall behind them. 'Would you two shut up?' she yelled. 'Or I'll kill you both.'

'Here's what's going to happen,' said Kal as he moved into the middle of the room. 'We're going to tie you up. We'll even knock you out if you'd like. Then, we're going to take Wotan and leave you with the credits I owe Nemo.'

'Credits?' asked Yolanda. 'You didn't say anything about giving them credits. Where did you get credits?'

Kal ignored her. 'Now I know you two will give this money to Nemo,' he continued, 'because it's probably the only thing that will save your life once he finds out you lost Wotan.'

'Fine,' said Destroy. 'Just get this crazy mastiff off of me. I can't feel my legs anymore.'

'Get him out of my face first,' said Seek. 'I'm in danger of losing my future here.'

'Wotan!' commanded Kal. 'Down!'

Wotan stopped growling and snapping at Seek's crotch and laid down on Destroy.

After he and Yolanda tied them both up, Kal reached into his pocket and pulled out the thick envelope Francks had given him. He took out a massive wad handful of credits and started counting. Less than a third of the way through the stack he stopped and put the rest back in the envelope.

He dropped the credits in between the twins. Then he got another idea, which made him laugh so loud it echoed around the cave complex for a minute. He turned to Scabbs. 'Give me the journal,' he said.

Scabbs looked at him blankly. 'Bitten's journal,' said Kal.

Scabbs resisted. 'A lot of people paid a huge price for this journal, Kal,' he said. 'People died over it. We can't just give it to Nemo. It's not right.'

Kal draped an arm around Scabbs's shoulders. 'I know you went through a lot these last few days,' he said. 'I can't imagine what it was like for you. But we have to do this. It's the next best thing to giving Francks over to Nemo. Better, really. All Nemo wants is the information, so let's give it to him. Otherwise, even with the money, he'll still come after us. Trust me. I think this is exactly what Francks would have wanted.'

'I don't understand,' said Scabbs.

Kal pointed at his head again. 'Just trust me for now, okay?'

Scabbs shrugged and pulled out the journal. Kal took it and picked up the money. He placed the credits in a pouch which he laid on top of the journal and dropped the whole package between the bound gangers.

'We're through now,' he said. 'Do you understand? The next time I see you two, I let Wotan off the leash. Make sure your boss gets this or Wotan and I will hunt you down like the rats you are.'

With that, Kal turned and strode out of the chamber into the darkness. On his way through, he made sure to pass by all of the screamers outside, setting them all off. A horrendous screaming wail reverberated through the cavern. It wouldn't last very long, but it would certainly drive the twins into another screaming argument. Kal chuckled as he jogged into the darkness, his faithful cyber-mastiff at his side.

The Hive City docks were a study in chaos. Hundreds of people hustled around in odd, unpredictable patterns, hauling goods to or from the transports; onto and off the docks or into the adjacent warehouses. Dock workers operated cranes, loaded crates onto skids, or just lounged on a convenient box while foremen ran

around yelling and pointing and yelling some more. Large metal cartons were moved into and out of the warehouses, while men with clipboards wandered around, checking lists and getting signatures from other men walking around with their own clipboards.

Add to that the working girls and purveyors of other nefarious goods and services who made the docks their home and office, plus the guards who patrolled the area to safeguard the transportation system, and the average day at the docks began to resemble a beehive; a beehive the size of a small city.

At least that's what Guard Creed always thought. It was fitting, too, he figured. This was a hive and the people in Hive City were little more than drones, moving through their lives with no purpose other than working for the queen – or in this case, Helmawr and the Emperor. And like drones, they got little compensation and had no prospects for a future that didn't involve working until they died.

The drones would never even get a chance to enjoy or even see any of the wonderful goods shipped through these docks where they toiled. The goods either flew up to the Spire for the pleasure of the nobles, or into orbit to be loaded into interstellar transports that would take the hive's goods to fascinating worlds where people weren't forced to live in hives and work like drones.

Creed had time for such idle thoughts because he'd been posted at the far end of the docks between a broken down warehouse and a berth that was now only used for personal craft, and it was a rare event indeed when a personal craft landed in the docks. The last time had been some noble coming down from the Spire with some famous bounty hunter. Creed hadn't been lucky enough to be on duty that day.

There had been that wild-haired, old man who had wandered through the docks a few days ago, but that had been on Juke's watch, and everyone knew Juke was a little crazy. This post would do that to you, if you let it.

So, Creed was understandably surprised when two old men wearing blue capes and orange body armour walked toward him, headed for the boarded-up warehouse across from his desk.

'Wait a minute, you old geezers,' said Creed. He put his hand on his pistol for emphasis. 'Where do you think you're going?'

'Home,' they said in unison. The men looked at each other and smiled.

'Well, you're not living in that old building. It's condemned,' said Creed. He stood up and moved to intercept the men, who were still walking. 'That's the rule. It's been a while since I read the notice on the wall over there, but I do

remember it saying “No Entry”.’

‘He can read,’ said one of the old men.

The other stared deep into Creed’s eyes and smiled again. ‘And he questions the order of the world.’

Creed was getting creeped out by the way the two men talked about him but not to him. And they hadn’t stopped walking, which made him back up as he talked. He stopped and pulled out his laspistol, levelling it at the one with the cloudy eyes. The old man just smiled and stared at him – or, more to the point, through him.

‘Turn around and head back to the City,’ he said. ‘Maybe you can flop at Madam Noritake’s, if you got credits. If not, find some abandoned building in the Underhive. This is my post and I don’t want any trouble.’

The cloudy eyes began to swirl and Creed became unsteady, dizzy. He felt like he was falling into them.

‘Put away the weapon, Creed,’ said the old man.

Creed holstered his weapon.

‘Stand back and let us through. We won’t be flopping in the warehouse today.’

The guard stepped back and returned to his desk. The world around him seemed fuzzy, as if he’d had one too many Snakes. Shapes moved through the swirls. He heard voices, but it seemed like they were a long way away.

‘Tell him to read the books,’ said one voice.

‘He will,’ said the other voice. ‘It has to be his choice to read or not. But he will. I can tell. I can always tell.’

A few minutes later, Creed opened his eyes and looked at the abandoned warehouse. He was a little worried that he might have missed something when he fell asleep – that’s what had got Juke fired – but as usual, there was nobody there and nothing happening. Just him and the loneliest berth on the docks.

‘This job is so scavving boring,’ he said. Then he noticed a couple books on his desk. He looked around to see who had dropped the books, but saw nobody around. He picked up the books and read the titles. One was called *The Universal Path*. The other was *Questioning the Truth*. Creed opened up *Questioning the Truth* and began to read.

EPILOGUE:

THE MESSENGER

‘It’s strange knowing what’s going to happen before it happens,’ said Kal. He stuck his hand out as the barmaid walked by and caught the bottle of Wild Snake that fell off her tray. He thought about patting her rear as she left, but his cheek hurt just seeing her reaction in his mind. ‘I don’t know how Francks lived like this. It’s a little disconcerting.’

‘I thought his gift was only supposed to help you get Wotan back,’ said Yolanda. ‘How long is it going to last?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Kal. He took a long swig of the Snake. ‘But while I have it, I should go back to Nemo’s gambling hole and clean up.’

Kal blocked Yolanda’s hand without even looking and took another drink. ‘Just kidding,’ he said. ‘With my luck, the gift would give out right as I made a big bet. No, I’m going to stay right here in the Sump Hole and drink with my friends – all of them.’ He patted Wotan’s head.

Kal pulled out the envelope Francks had given him. ‘Tonight’s on me,’ he said. ‘We’ve got money to spend and nothing will ruin this victory for me.’

‘Hey, Jerico–’ said Yolanda.

‘Yes,’ said Kal, pre-empting her demand. ‘You two can have your cut now.’ He counted out their shares of the Grak bounty and slapped two piles of credits on the table. ‘That still leaves enough for me to blow on this celebration.’

‘What I don’t understand,’ said Yolanda as she grabbed her share, ‘is where did Francks get this money and why did he give it to you?’ She snatched up the creds and stuffed them down her cleavage.

Kal couldn’t even imagine anyone dumb enough to try to steal her money from there. It’d be like sticking your hand in a bear trap. ‘That’s the best part about this party,’ said Kal, pushing that image out of his head. ‘It’s paid for by our good friend Cardinal Crimson.’

The other two just stared at Kal. ‘Near as I can figure, Crimson had paid Bitten to keep him quiet, and maybe for his part in setting up Francks for the assassin. Bitten had a change of heart and gave the money to Francks, but his past caught up with him in the end, anyway.’

‘What I can’t figure,’ said Scabbs, breaking his silence finally, ‘is why Francks trusted you with his deep, dark secrets about Crimson. You threw it all away, Kal. He gave me the journal and you just handed it over to Nemo. All those people died. Arliana died. And for what? So, the master spy could have dirt on Crimson?’

Kal let out a low whistle. ‘You’ve been holding that in for a while, haven’t you? I guess I owe you an explanation. Look, Francks told me I could only get Crimson from an angle, not head on. He even said I would die if I ever faced the Cardinal again.’

Kal ducked right before a bottle of Snake flew over his head and crashed into the wall behind him. He hardly missed a beat before continuing. ‘I didn’t think much of it at the time, but Francks could see things. I realised *that* down in the Hive Bottom. Plus he was easier to talk to than any Cawdor I ever met before. He was okay, and I wasn’t going to just ignore advice like that.’

‘So you gave his secrets to Nemo?’ said Scabbs again. ‘To Nemo of all people? What kind of a plan was that?’

Kal smiled. ‘A Kal Jerico plan,’ he said. ‘Nemo will use that information to slowly eat away at Crimson’s power base. He’s the only person in the Underhive powerful enough to hold that madman in check, and now he has the tools he needs to do it.’

‘Okay,’ said Scabbs. ‘Maybe.’

‘Plus, with the two of them feuding, neither one will have time to screw us over.’ Kal stopped talking for a moment and stared at the wall. After a moment, he took a quick swig of his Snake and got up. ‘I’ve got to leave soon. The debt collector for the Re-Engineers gang is on his way here again.’

‘The debt collectors are already here,’ said a gruff voice from across the room.

Kal looked up as two large, Van Saar ruffians pushed their way through the crowd to the table. They had no visible weapons but both of them looked like they could have given Gonth and Grak a run for their money in an arm wrestling contest.

'The Re-Engineers would like their money now,' said the one with the gruff voice. 'And don't tell us you ain't got it, cause we saw that stash in your pocket. You can give it to us now or we can take it after we break your arms and legs.'

Kal shrugged and pulled out the credits. As he began counting, he realised two things. First, he hadn't even got an image of them beating him to a pulp, let alone saw them coming before they spoke. Second, if these were the debt collectors the Van Saar gang had sent to collect for his guns, then he had no idea why that little guy had been hounding him.

After paying his debt, Kal dropped the empty envelope on the table and smiled.

'You're out of money, Kal,' said Scabbs. 'Why are you smiling? Did you get another vision?'

'No,' said Kal. 'Well sort of. I was just thinking about this little gem that I kept in reserve in case Nemo doesn't go after Crimson like I hoped.'

He pulled out a folded piece of paper and opened it up. It was the wanted poster he'd found in Bitten's hab. Tucked inside was a photo of Crimson shooting Guilder Tavis. 'Bobo shot this pict in the dome. It's from a vid of the entire battle. I wonder who might like to buy that vid and how much they would be willing to pay?'

All three of them laughed and Kal sat down again. He had not a care in the world beside getting drunk and celebrating his victory with his friends, his mastiff and perhaps a willing barmaid. Life was back to normal and he was perfectly content.

'Mr Jerico?'

Kal looked up. It was the squirrelly guy in the silk suit. He'd forgotten about that vision – his last, apparently. 'What?' asked Kal. 'What is it? Why have you been following me?'

'I have a piece of mail for you,' said the little man. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a single finger and smiled as he handed Kal a white envelope.

Kal took the envelope and turned it over and over in his hand. On the back was his name printed in ornate lettering with glittering, gold, ink. The front was sealed with red wax embossed with a strange signet design.

He looked at the messenger and then back at the envelope. 'What is it?'

‘It’s an invitation to a wedding, Mr Jerico,’ he replied.

‘Really? But I don’t know anybody who’s getting married. Whose wedding is it?’ Kal said.

‘Yours, Mr Jerico,’ the messenger replied, deadpan.

In the back of Kal’s mind, he heard Jobe Francks laugh.

LASGUN WEDDING

PROLOGUE:

DOUBLE JEOPARDY

‘Mayday! Mayday! This is Royal Transport X29. We are under heavy fire. I repeat. This is Royal Transport X29 taking heavy ground fire.’

‘X29, pull up out of their range, over?’

Jarl Demont, a veteran of countless battles, stared dumbfounded at the com-panel. ‘Scavving bureaucrat,’ he said. Another explosion rocked the small transport. Jarl wrestled the yoke as a giant fireball engulfed the view screen. His ear slammed against the headrest as the transport lurched to the side, leaving him with a throbbing headache and a horrible ringing permeating his brain.

‘That last one took out the port thrusters, Jarl,’ reported the co-pilot, Enri Sandovan.

Jarl shook his head to try to clear the bells and then glanced over at Enri. His friend and co-pilot had just said something, but the ringing in his ears had drowned out everything but his name.

In the cramped cockpit, the two men sat practically hip to hip, but that made it easier to reach all the knobs, switches and buttons lining the control panel arrayed before them. After twenty years of flying together, the questioning look on Jarl’s face obviously was enough for Enri. He reached past Jarl and flipped a switch, turning off the warning claxon.

‘Flame out, port side,’ he said. Even with the claxon off, Enri’s voice sounded

faint and far away. The yoke wrenched at Jarl's grip as the engine died.

'Enri!' cried Jarl as he began to flip switches. His voice sounded like a distant echo. He continued shouting so he could hear himself as he attempted to restart the engines. 'Contact that idiot at the Spire Docks. We need tactical support.'

With one hand holding the bucking yoke, Jarl set the port fuel injectors to neutral and tried a cold restart. Nothing. A contrail streaked across the dark clouds, curving right towards the front of the transport. Jarl slammed the yoke hard right. The missile sped past the view screen. It came so close he could practically read the lettering on the side.

An explosion in the rear of the transport made the ship buck violently. Jarl and Enri were tossed forward, their bodies straining at the harnesses. Jarl fought the yoke for a time, trying to get back to an even keel on just one engine.

After their harrowing escape, Jarl wiped sweat from his brow, mouthed a quick 'phew' at Enri and then returned to trying a cold restart on the port engine. He flipped a few more switches and then tossed a large lever between their black-booted feet. Nothing happened. He reset the switches and tried the lever again. Again, nothing. The engine was dead.

As he looked at Enri, a brief but bitter smile flitted across Jarl's face. It seemed his swarthy co-pilot wasn't having any better luck. Enri's olive-skinned face turned beet red and his straight black hair flew around his head like angry noodles as he screamed into the com. 'We're down one engine! Can't maintain altitude… No. We can't get out of range… They've got heavy weapons… Get us some damn support!'

The view screen once again erupted in flame as a rocket exploded just below them. The force of the explosion set off the claxons again. Jarl's hearing must have returned to near normal, because he almost unconsciously turned off the 'extremely helpful' close contact warning indicator.

After they cleared the fireball, Enri shook his head at Jarl. 'We're on our own,' he said.

Jarl scanned his instruments as the ship bucked and lurched through the air. Mixed in with the banks of switches and buttons, several dozen glowing dials showed the location of the transport and the condition of all its systems. What they told Jarl was that they were in deep trouble. Red lights flashed next to nearly every dial indicating some problem or another.

They had only partial power in the right engine and the left was completely dead. The rear cabin had depressurized, which meant their passengers were all now on canned air, which wouldn't last long. The air pressure in the cockpit was

also dropping, and it seemed the automatic fire suppression system had gotten fried in that last explosion.

All of that was survivable, assuming they could get past this rain of missiles. But the big problem was the fuel gauge. It was dropping at an alarming rate. And if they ran out of fuel, this flying brick would plummet to the ground. It wasn't like they had wings they could use to glide to a safe landing.

Assuming they survived a two-mile drop, Jarl didn't like the prospect of hoofing it through the Ash Wastes, let alone dodging whoever or whatever was down there shooting at them. One thing was for sure: with a single, partial engine and nearly depleted fuel supply, they couldn't climb up to the Spire docks.

'We've got to make it to the Hive City docks,' he said at last. 'It's our only chance.'

Jarl wrenched at the yoke, trying to control the bucking ship through sheer force of determination. He jammed the controls to the left and back to the right to dodge another incoming missile. 'See if you can coax any more power out of our last engine,' he said. 'And drop the landing gear. We're going in, one way or another.'

He slapped the com-link again and twisted the dial to change the frequency. 'Hive City docks,' called Jarl. 'This is Royal Transport X29 requesting – no, demanding – emergency clearance for immediate landing. Clear the scavving docks. We're coming in hot!'

Jarl banked the transport hard to the left and began to descend. Hive Primus loomed large in the view screen. He rarely saw this view, beneath the thick layer of acid-laden clouds. Above the clouds, the Spire gleamed in the sunlight like a white beacon pointing to the stars. Down here, the hive base looked like nothing more than refuse stacked in a huge heap.

Ash and dirt hanging in the air clung to the hive like a dingy coat. Instead of the gleaming architecture of the spire with its flying buttresses, domed protrusions and enormous windows, the hive bottom looked like a haphazard jumble of rockrete erected by a deranged architect. Sections stuck out at odd angles, while others seemed jammed in where they didn't quite fit. Jagged scars left deep shadows where large blocks had crumbled under the enormous weight of the ten-mile edifice.

The comm crackled as the response came in. 'This is Hive City. Please confirm your identity.'

'Helmawr's rump,' grumbled Jarl. He flipped the switch, prepared to tell the

comm officer exactly what he thought about his ancestry. He never got the chance.

Another explosion rocked the transport, throwing Jarl against the left side of the headrest. He had no chance to worry about his ears this time, for his stomach jumped into his throat as the transport plummeted from the sky.

'We've lost all power!' yelled Enri.

A roar of air from an enormous hole next to Enri nearly drowned out the multiple claxons that began blaring all at once. The control panel fried and sparked under Jarl's hands and smoke billowed from the rear of the small compartment as flames licked the walls just above and behind their heads. Enri frantically flipped switches and threw levers, apparently trying to find some combination that would coax the damaged engines back to life.

'I know!' said Jarl. 'Tell our passengers to brace for impact.' As Enri spoke into the intercom, Jarl flipped another switch to open a broadband channel.

'Mayday. Mayday. This is Royal Transport X29. We are dead stick. I repeat. We are dead stick and headed into the Ash Wastes.' He thought for a moment, and then, as he watched the grey desert zoom towards him, Jarl added. 'Tell the LC the package has been jeopardized. The package has been jeopardised.'

'Mr Jerico?'

Kal Jerico had had a rough few days. He'd lost a huge sum of money to his worst enemy, the master spy Nemo the Faceless, forfeited his metal mastiff Wotan as collateral, and been forced to hunt down an innocent man for bounty to repay the debt. Then, after saving the day, yet again, he'd just lost his last credit paying off another debt to two goons who would have much rather turned his face into ground meat than to take his payment back to their employer.

But Kal was alive and sitting in his usual chair in his favourite dive with his pet back and his two best friends – well, his two best associates, Scabbs and Yolanda – at his side. He had a bottle of wildsnake in front of him, prospects for another moneymaking scheme on the table and his eye on several buxom barmaids.

Life, for the moment, was good, and so when Kal looked up into the beady, bespectacled eyes of a squirrelly guy in a silk suit – the same weasel who'd been following Kal around during those rough few days – he didn't immediately pull out his laspistol and shoot the annoying little rat between the eyes; a decision he would soon regret.

'What?' asked Kal. 'What is it? Why have you been following me?'

‘I have a letter for you,’ said the little man. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a single finger and smiled as he handed Kal a white envelope.

A letter? Kal never got letters. If someone wanted his attention, they usually shot at him, or sent goons to rough him up, or, as in Yolanda’s case, simply smacked him on the back of the head. Kal took the envelope and turned it over and over in his hands.

His name had been printed on the back in ornate lettering with glittering, gold ink. The flap on the front had been sealed with red wax embossed by a signet design Kal didn’t quite recognize. Although as he studied it, Kal realized that some elements of the design bore a striking and frightening resemblance to the seal of House Helmawr; the seal of the ruler of Hive Primus, the seal of his father’s house.

This was not going to be good news. A dozen different scenarios flitted through Kal’s head as he stared at the ominous letter. It had obviously come from the Spire. The quality of the parchment and the fine, silk clothes worn by the squirrelly messenger attested to that. But the altered Helmawr logo presented any number of possible dilemmas.

The old man could be dead or deposed, which would leave a power vacuum and a struggle amongst Helmawr’s inner circle and his various illegitimate children, as well as the power brokers within the rival houses. This could then be an invitation to an execution – his, or a ploy by any number of people to curry his favour in the coming struggle for control of House Helmawr.

One of his ‘cousins’ could be trying to usurp their common father, and the logo was a not so subtle indication of that grab for power. Again, someone might want Kal’s help or might simply be sending a warning to Kal to not interfere.

Of course, Helmawr could have simply ordered a new logo. He was very nearly insane and prone to odd decisions and proclamations. This letter, then, could be the old man asking – no, ordering – Kal to do yet another favour for the family.

Kal shuddered at the last possibility, which he felt was both the worst and the most likely. He looked at the messenger and then back at the letter. He couldn’t make his hands open the envelope. ‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘It’s an invitation to a wedding, Mr Jerico,’ replied the Spire messenger. His pursed lips barely moved as he spoke. ‘Your wedding.’

Scabbs, who had just swallowed a huge mouthful of wildsnake, sprayed the table with the vile liquor. The worm from the bottom of the bottle squirmed and flopped around in the resulting puddle. Across from Kal, Yolanda doubled over in laughter, snorting like a pig wallowing in its favourite swill. She then whipped

her head back and howled like a wild animal, sending her dreadlocks careening around her tattooed head.

As Yolanda gasped for air between guffaws and Scabbs stared, slack-jawed, the last of the wildsnake dripping from his scab-covered cheeks and nose, Kal finally ripped open the envelope and pulled out the embossed invitation within.

Kal read the pronouncement printed in the centre of the card in flowing gold script: *House Helmawr cordially invites you to attend the wedding ceremony of its favourite son, and future ruler of Hive Primus and, by extension, all Necromunda: Kal Jerico*.

Kal thought the wording seemed a bit odd, but the feeling of dread that came over him as he read what could only be regarded as the obituary to his carefree, if constantly life-threatening, life drove all rational thought from his body.

Kal liked to joke that his style and good looks had some mystical qualities, that they somehow created the aura of luck that seemed to follow him through his many adventures and misadventures. And, to be honest, he'd gotten out of some situations that no mere mortal could have ever survived.

But when he was honest with himself, alone in the dark on the odd night that he didn't share his bed with a barmaid or 'friend' for the evening, Kal knew that what had kept him alive for so many years was a highly refined fight or flight response that he'd honed to razor sharpness over the years. He acted or, more often, reacted well before most men had the time to absorb and analyze the situation. He had a mental edge, a tingling sensation in the back of his brain that told him when to leave.

Kal pondered this survival ability of his as he swept through the swinging front doors of the Sump Hole at a full run. Unfortunately, this time, his danger sense had fired a bit too late. Upon hitting the street outside the bar, Kal ran full steam into a platoon of royal guards. He bounced off a barrel-chested giant with a square jaw, chiselled face and close-cropped hair, and fell unceremoniously in a heap in the dirt.

'After our last few encounters, I thought you might react, shall we say, rashly, Mr Jerico,' said the weasel. He stood over Kal and peered down at him through his tiny, square glasses. 'So I brought some support to our meeting this time. These nice gentlemen will escort you to the Royal Palace. Please do not struggle or they will be forced to…'

Kal kicked at the jarhead standing over him as he reached for the twin, pearl-handled laspistols at his waist. His hands never reached the weapons. The world began to go dark around the edges as a poison dart from a needler punctured his

skin. The last thing Kal saw before he blacked out was Yolanda, standing in the doorway of the Sump Hole, howling with laughter.

1: A SENSE OF LOSS

He watched the battle through a spyscope from a safe distance. The hood of his massive, black cloak kept drifting down over his other eye. He wished to be rid of the scavving thing as it impeded his movement and kept getting caught in his hands and legs as he had trudged across the Ash Wastes, but the discomfort of kicking the fabric away from his heavy, iron boots and constantly pushing the hood up onto his wide forehead were far outweighed by the need to keep the ash from building up on his joints and weapons. Without an ash cloak and the respirator that covered his wide face, he wouldn't last an hour in this desolate wasteland. Luckily, it wouldn't be much longer.

Muties had surrounded the transport almost as soon as it slammed into the wastes. The impact had created a trough fifty metres long. The transport lay half buried in ash at the end of the trough. A hundred muties, the barbaric, scavenging natives of the wastes, pounded on the sides with clubs made from iron beams or copper pipes or any piece of scrap metal they could salvage from the deteriorating exterior of the hive.

A dozen muties had climbed on top of the transport and begun banging on it, scratching at it, and even, it seemed, getting on their hands and knees and biting the metallic exterior. Amazingly, they had managed to pull up and tear off several metal panels, which they then dropped on top of their comrades below.

He marvelled at both their strength and the durability of their fingernails and teeth. It was said they could claw the bones out of a man's body and bite through his skull. He no longer doubted these claims.

But it was their small victory that precipitated the muties' ultimate defeat. As soon as the second panel hit the ground, the rear of the transport opened up. Las blasts sprayed out of the opening, dropping two dozen muties in the opening salvo. A squad of royal guards took up defensive positions around the door, dropping any who charged them. More las blasts ripped into the mutie ranks

from inside as well, followed by rocket propelled grenades that blasted holes in the ash dunes and sent mutant bodies flying into the air.

But he gave the muties credit. They regrouped quickly, moving out of range of both the interior and exterior royal forces. Then, after a deathly calm, the muties brought out their own artillery – rocks and chunks of rockcrete – that they launched through the air with just the force of their own arms. The projectiles hit the ash all around the rear guard. A single rock couldn't do any real damage, but the constant barrage had a cumulative effect, and the cloaked man saw at least two guards fall, wounded or possibly even killed, and dragged inside.

As the bombardment continued, the royals had no choice but to give up on their defensive position. Two squads charged out of the transport and fanned out around the sides. Their first target: the remaining muties on top of the transport. Once they took those out, a third squad climbed up to claim the high ground.

Several more royals dropped, screaming, with chunks of metal sticking out of their body armour or blood spewing from broken noses and slashed foreheads from lucky shots. But they were slowly gaining the upper hand.

A shuffling noise behind him made the hooded man turn. The leader of a ragged group of scummers, hired mercenaries the cloaked man had brought out into the wastes with him, stood impatiently behind him. He thought his name was Kyrian.

He could see little more than Kyrian's eyes beneath the slightly built man's cloak and respirator, but those eyes kept darting back and forth between him and the battle raging below them. 'Just give the order, sir,' he said with a half-hearted salute, 'and we'll move in on the transport.'

The 'sir' was more sneer than respect, and by the snickering of the other scummers behind Kyrian, the cloaked man was certain the salute was some private insult. The scummers had been told to obey the cloaked man; he was in charge of the expedition. They were little more than hired guns, and it seemed to irk Kyrian and the rest somewhat. The damn scummer had been calling him 'sir' ever since they left the hive.

He glared at the snickering scummers, almost daring one of them to make a move. Of course, the respirator and cloak minimized the power of the glare, and he couldn't tell if it had any impact since they were all covered as well.

He did notice several scummers drop their hands down to the butts of their weapons, and that satisfied him. If he couldn't get fear out of these killers then anger would suffice, so long as they took that anger out against the enemies they were being paid to fight.

They were only twenty strong, including Kyrian, but he'd been told they were the best. They certainly looked the part. The cloaked man hadn't seen such a large arsenal in many years. Each member of Kyrian's group had a lasgun as well as a smaller sidearm, and a full third of them carried heavy weapons, while the rest had a shotgun as a back-up. Before they'd donned their ash cloaks, he'd seen some impressive armour as well, plus a wide array of grenades and even a few chainswords. Still, the cloaked man would reserve judgement until he saw them in action. All of the advanced weaponry in the hive mattered little in inexperienced hands.

Kyrian gave him that odd half salute, again. It was starting to get quite aggravating. He growled a little before answering and was gratified when the scummer took half a step backwards. 'Give the muties more time,' he said. 'They can't defeat those royal scum, but perhaps they can thin out their ranks a little more before we move in.'

'We're not afraid of royal troops,' said the scummer leader. He cupped his hands over his eyes and scanned the distant battle. 'We can handle them.'

He pocketed his spyscope and stared at Kyrian for a moment before continuing. Was this scummer really that green? Where had they hired this idiot? 'You should be afraid,' he said, 'because you can't handle them; not an entire platoon anyway, and that's what they've got in there. We wait.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And stop calling me "sir",' he growled. 'And if I see one more salute, I'll rip that arm out of its socket and slap you on the forehead with it myself.'

Kal Jerico, Underhive bounty hunter, awoke in an unfamiliar bed. Of course, he rarely rose from the same bed twice and more often than not hadn't even made it to a bed before passing out from the night's festivities. Then there were the countless times out on the hunt when he'd been forced to bed down in the wilds of the Underhive, amidst vermin both human and animal, covered in muck and blood and other bodily fluids too horrible to think about.

But this was different, and yet familiar at the same time. For one thing, the bed moulded around his body, gently pulling him into the comfort of its folds. The cool, crisp sheets slid against his bare legs and chest like a soft caress. It was a far cry from the lumpy, sawdust-filled mattresses and burlap covers of the various Underhive dives where he normally woke up in the morning.

And then there was the light. A bright, white light permeated everything, reaching into every crevice of his brain. Even with his eyelids shut tight, it

seemed to assault him from all sides. Kal squinted as he opened his eyes, trying to keep the light out a little longer. He couldn't make out anything past his toes pushing up the covers into two little towers, but he already knew where he was. The soft sheets, the enveloping bed and the bright glare of natural light could only be found in one place in the hive.

He'd been kidnapped and transported to the Spire. Again.

He might even be in the same apartment that had served as his ersatz prison the last time his father had required his services. As his Underhive eyes adjusted to the direct sunlight, more and more of the room came into focus. A tapestry hung on the wall above him depicting Lord Helmawr directing a great space battle from the bridge of a huge ship – a scene Kal knew to be pure fantasy. To the side, a mahogany table held a bowl of real fruit and a pitcher of water so clear it sparkled in the sunlight. Beneath the bank of windows opposite the bed were several plush velvet couches. And, backlit by the bright sunlight streaming in behind them, three lovely ladies lounged on the couches.

Kal sat up, letting the sheet covering his naked body drop to his waist. 'Candi?' he asked. 'Brandi? Sandi?'

The girls rose to their feet almost as one. Blonde, brunette, and Sandi, the redhead. Their silk nightgowns shimmered, turning nearly transparent in the direct sunlight, offering tantalizing glimpses of the wonderful curves beneath as they slinked their way to the bed.

'We were wondering when you would wake up,' said Sandi.

Brandi and Candi just smiled and nodded as they crawled up the bed towards Kal and pushed him back down onto the sheets.

'So, whatcha wanna do?' asked Scabbs.

Yolanda glared at him. 'Don't start that again,' she warned. Her brow furrowed, making the gang tattoos snaking across her forehead and around both ears seem to pulse with intensity. Scabbs decided he'd better heed her warning.

He considered the runny, brown eggs and the black brick he supposed was toast on the plate in front of him and shrugged. 'Looks like the Sump Hole got a new cook,' he said.

'Somebody shot the last one,' replied Yolanda. She wasn't even looking at Scabbs now. She seemed to be staring at a spot on the wall far behind him.

'Again?' he said, tossing the fork onto the plate. It sloshed through the eggs and landed on the table, leaving a brown smear in its wake. 'Don't you think they'd get the message and find a better cook?'

‘This one *is* better,’ she said.

A silence descended on them, broken only by occasional whimpers from beneath the table. Scabbs peered down at Wotan. The metal mastiff hadn’t moved since Kal ran out of the bar the night before. The bartender had tried to make the dog leave at closing time, but it had growled and almost snapped the poor man’s hand right off.

Scabbs had told him the bar would be safer with a watchdog and that he’d try to get Wotan to leave in the morning. Now, he looked at the mastiff and wondered how he would accomplish that feat. Wotan must not have seen Kal leave, and Kal’d been in such a hurry, he had forgotten to give the mastiff any new orders. It was now following the last command Kal had uttered, which was ‘Stay.’

Scabbs looked back at Yolanda. She seemed almost as lost as Wotan. No. Not lost. There was something else there on her face. Disgust? Disdain? Anger? They all looked pretty much the same on Yolanda. Scabbs had always found her hard to read.

‘What should…’ he began slowly, and then continued more quickly as Yolanda’s brow furrows returned, ‘…we do with Wotan?’

‘What do I care about Jerico’s scavving dog?’ she said. Yolanda picked up the toast and whipped it at Scabbs.

He ducked just in time to avoid a concussion. Behind him, Scabbs heard the sound of glass shattering. He turned to see the toast imbedded in the wall behind the bar. The contents of several bottles of wildsnake dripped onto the bald head of the bartender.

‘You’re paying for those, Yolanda,’ he said. ‘I covered you on the cook, but broken bottles is bought bottles.’

The bartender took his brown-stained rag and wiped the remnants of the bottles onto the metal grate floor where, Scabbs knew, it would all congeal together into a thick paste that gave the Sump Hole the wonderful odour it had been named for.

Wotan whimpered again, bringing Scabbs’s attention back to the table. ‘We’ve got to do something about Wotan,’ he started again, ready to duck if the eggs followed the toast. ‘Or else, those bottles will be the least of what we owe here.’

Yolanda growled something vulgar and kicked her leg out under the table. The resulting dull clang was quickly followed by a scream of pain. ‘Damn Jerico,’ said Yolanda. She pulled her foot up onto her other knee and massaged the toes. ‘This is all his fault. Again.’

Scabbs remained silent. He knew better than to get in the way of this particular

tirade. ‘If it’s not Nemo and Crimson, it’s his scavving family. We go from crisis to crisis, always looking over our shoulders in case one of his enemies wants to take a pot-shot at him. And you know he’ll come out smelling like fresh, Spire air while we end up in the cesspool. Scavving Jerico.’

Scabbs hardly even listened. It was the same rant he’d heard a thousand times. He picked at a sore on his chin and considered his eggs. He was almost hungry enough now to eat them. Maybe he could get his toast back to sop up the brown yolk from the table. That might just soften up the black brick.

‘We never just go out and hunt down bad guys anymore,’ said Yolanda, continuing into the second verse. ‘It’s always family business and doing Nemo’s dirty work. Just once, I’d like to go on a good, old-fashioned bounty chase. Or a treasure hunt. We could go looking for the Mother Lode or even just a cache of artefacts.’

She stomped her foot down on the floor, shaking the table and with it Scabbs’s plate full of eggs. It clattered dangerously near the edge. Scabbs was torn between wanting to save his breakfast and wanting an excuse to not eat it. He decided to let the plate fall on the floor. The rest of the yolk sluiced through the grating followed by the grey outer parts. Wotan whined and chomped down on the plate, quickly reducing it to dust that mixed in with the eggs beneath the grating.

Scabbs was officially no longer hungry. But he was happy about one thing. Yolanda’s perpetual gripe was finally winding down to its inevitable conclusion.

‘We don’t need that family-obligated, danger-attracting, ego-inflated rogue, do we Scabbs?’ she said. Yolanda jumped to her feet, knocking the chair over, which hit the grating with a slosh and clatter.

‘Are we bounty hunters or are we sidekicks?’ She tried to strike an awe-inspiring, Kal Jerico pose, which would have succeeded if she hadn’t slipped on the slick Sump Hole floor and landed on her loincloth.

Yolanda pulled herself back up and slammed her fist on the table, which made Wotan jump to his feet underneath. ‘Come on, Scabbs,’ she said. She walked to the back of the bar and yanked a bounty poster off the wall. ‘We’re bounty hunters. Let’s go make some bounty.’

Yolanda stormed out of the Sump Hole, obviously unaware of the brown stain across the back of her loincloth. Scabbs wasn’t going to tell her, that was for sure. In fact, anyone who knew Yolanda well enough to make such a personal comment knew her well enough to keep that comment to himself, assuming he wanted to continue breathing.

Scabbs took one last look at Wotan and realized if he didn't leave now with Yolanda, the bartender would soon ask him how he planned to get rid of the mastiff. It only took the scabby half-ratskin a second to decide which wild animal he'd rather deal with. He slipped off the chair and slunk out of the sump hole. Yolanda had turned right and strode down the street. Scabbs pumped his little legs to catch up. Behind him, he could hear the bartender yelling at Wotan.

The hooded man had to admit it. The scummers were no slouches. Perhaps Kyrian, their leader, hadn't been all that naive when he'd said they could handle the royals. Still, their competence was no reason to enter a battle against two potential enemies.

Mutant bodies littered the ground around the downed transport as the mercenaries advanced on it. The wastes would claim the bodies by morning. Creatures far worse than muties roamed the ash after nightfall and what was not devoured or dragged off by carrion eaters would be consumed by the dunes themselves not long after.

The first barrage of weapon fire from the scummers had finished off or driven inside the remaining royals, but the battle was long from over. He counted fewer than ten royals amongst the dead. There would be that or more still inside.

The leader stood at his side again. The man could move quite silently. The hooded man reminded himself to watch this one closely during their remaining time together.

'They've closed the hatch,' he said. 'We'll set up the missile launcher to take it down. My men will move in to finish the job amidst the ensuing smoke and confusion.'

'No,' said the hooded man. He pulled at the cloak, the folds of which had once again caught on the metal beneath.

'But we should breach the ship quickly,' said the scummer leader. 'They are most likely waiting for reinforcements.'

'Exactly.' He stared at Kyrian, driving holes into the young warrior's forehead with his eyes. The scummer tried to maintain eye contact, and lasted longer than most men under his scrutiny, but eventually looked away.

'If military ships do arrive,' he continued, 'we'll need the launcher to defend ourselves from the greater threat. Besides, we can't take any chances of destroying the package. Find another way.'

He gave the scummer leader credit. The man only hesitated a second before replying. 'Fine,' he said. 'Any suggestions?'

He sighed. ‘Draw them out,’ he said, pointing a cloaked hand at the top of the transport. ‘It worked for the mutants.’

‘Helmawr’s rump!’ cried the bartender as the door closed behind Scabbs. ‘Where in the hive is that ratskin off to? He promised to take that scavving metal mutt with him. Damnation!’

The bartender, an oddly thin man named Roddy, with a shock of thick, black hair fluttering around his head, came out from behind the bar and ran to the door. Throwing it open, he stepped outside and looked up and down the street. Other than a fresh pile of cracked masonry that had fallen from the abandoned building across the alley, the shadowy morning streets were empty.

Grumbling, Roddy kicked open the swinging door and slipped back inside the bar. He smoothed down his apron and ran his fingers through the curly bangs that always threatened to fall down over his eyes. It was all mental preparation for the dangerous job he knew lay before him.

Wotan had nearly taken his hand last night, but this was business, and when it came to business Roddy had a determination rarely matched in the Underhive. Most bartenders were fat and jolly from constantly partaking of their own wares. Not Roddy. Every bottle in the place was bought and paid for. Even his waitresses and cooks had to pay for their own drinks. This was business and Roddy never mixed business with pleasure. Well once, but he’d regretted it ever since.

‘Never did get paid for that bottle,’ he muttered as he walked towards the table.

The metal mastiff had to go. It would drive off paying customers. Roddy knew that because it routinely snapped at patrons even while Kal Jerico was here to control it. Roddy had always left well enough alone because the bounty hunter brought in more business than the mutt drove away, but now it was him or Wotan.

As Roddy neared the table, Wotan began to growl. It was an unbelievably scary sound, reminiscent of a revving chainsword. It made you think that your arm was about to be cut off, which was pretty apt really.

‘Good dog,’ said Roddy in a sing-song voice. He saw the remnants of the busted plate and leaned back towards the bar to get another. He lowered the plate towards the table. ‘Here you go, Wotan,’ he said. ‘Want the plate?’

Unfortunately, he misjudged the mastiff’s reach. Wotan’s head snapped forward in a blur, and his metallic jaws clamped down on the dish, snatching it from Roddy’s grasp. A bizarre mixture of sounds came from beneath the table. To

Roddy, it sounded like the thrashing machine from his old factory grinding up the skeletal remains of a body that would never be found. The memory of that day made Roddy's stomach turn, and he immediately backed away from the table.

He swiped long fingers across his forehead to wipe away the beading sweat, and began to grumble again. A litany of complaints and epithets about Kal Jerico, Wotan and Yolanda escaped his lips in a matter of seconds.

And then Roddy, overcome by emotion for only the second time in his life, yelled, 'Dammit, Wotan. Why don't you just go and find that scavving Kal Jerico and leave me alone.'

'Wotan… Go… Find… Jerico.'

The metal mastiff's ear perked up, which somewhere down in the base of its mechanical brain it knew were nothing more than a bunch of gears responding to a subroutine in its programming that pulled on wires to rotate extraneous flaps on either side of its head back and forth.

But still there was an odd sensation of something akin to relief – almost joy – in hearing that command. Wotan now had a task, a direction to follow – a purpose.

'Find Jerico.'

The command processed across sensors and odd bits of wiring, through solid state transistors, deep down into the salvaged memory core of an ancient construct built in another age for another purpose. Out of that core came more commands. Simple commands like the ear perk and the ensuing tail wag and tongue lick, but also more complex commands that propelled the metal mastiff into action.

Wotan bounded out from beneath the table past the stick-like human cowering by the bar. For some reason that went beyond simple wiring and programming, he stopped and growled at the stick, taking one last snap that caught a square of the man's trousers and just a small patch of skin.

His mouth opened into a big grin and his tongue, a moistened scrap of rubber that ran on small hydraulic compressors, lolled out to the side as he ran through the swinging door out into the street. Behind him, the door clattered to the ground, ripped off its hinges by the force of the impact, but that didn't concern Wotan.

Another program began running in the background of his metal brain, and he put his nose to the ground to sniff the dirt. The same compressors that moved his tongue now drew air into his body, where it was analyzed in a small

compartment in his chest. Mixed in with the remnants of various waste products and the ozone-rich scent of laser fire were wisps of leather and hair gel.

Jerico. Kal Jerico.

Wotan ran off to the left, following the trail. He would find Kal Jerico, and nothing would get in his way. Nothing.

Kal needed to find his trousers. While he'd enjoyed the last couple of hours immensely, Sandi still hadn't gotten the chance to show him her much talked about grape trick, and a small niggling doubt had remained at the back of Kal's mind throughout all the shenanigans.

He'd found himself almost disinterested when Brandi and Candi had invited him into a bubble bath. Almost. And really, an entire bath filled with hot, clean water was nearly more exciting than the two voluptuous women lounging amidst the bubbles. That was a luxury you never saw below the Spire, not even in Hive City.

The enticement of getting squeaky clean in a hot bath, while at the same time playing dirty with a blonde and a brunette, proved too much for Kal. But the entire time he spent soaping Brandi's back while Candi ran her wet fingers through his braids and down his chest, he couldn't help thinking back on the last time he and the girls had enjoyed each other's company in this plush and quite comfortable prison.

It was a prison. A prison made to hold Kal Jerico inside, content to never try to leave. He probably could be happy here for a time. Fine, fresh food, clear water with no aftertaste burning the back of your throat, a soft bed, and even softer company; but it was a prison, and eventually the warden would come calling with a job he needed performed.

So, as the girls slept in the bed, their silk covered breasts rising and falling in a rhythmic and intoxicating dance, Kal pushed his impulses deep down inside and turned away from the bed to look for his trousers. He knew that at any moment Lord Helmawr or, more likely, one of his many lackeys would burst through the locked front door and escort Kal away from his heavenly prison. This time he intended to be dressed.

He eventually found a set of drawers hidden beneath the bed skirt. He eased the first drawer out as Sandi turned over in the bed above him. Her leg slipped off the edge of the bed, bringing her pearl-white thigh dangerously close to Kal's lips. The lilac perfume she wore wafted across his face, practically pulling him into the warmth of her exposed skin.

He shook off the intoxicating effects and closed the drawer. It had been empty. He moved to the next one and tugged on the handle. It didn't budge. He pulled a little harder. Still nothing. Kal braced his foot against the bed and yanked with all his strength. The drawer flew out, almost smacking him in the face. It soared over his head and clattered to the floor behind him, spilling his leather coat and trousers, which had been jammed inside, across the couches far beyond.

Kal glanced up as three heads full of thick, lustrous hair peered over the bed at him. He smiled. 'Good morning again, girls,' he said.

'What are you doing, Kal?' purred Sandi. 'You know you can't leave us, even if you wanted to.' She cocked her head and let a sly smile play across her lips. 'And we know you don't want to.'

Kal scooted away from the bed towards his clothes. It was just a little too tough to bluff the girls without his trousers on. 'It's not that I want to leave,' he said as he reached for the couch. 'I just know that at any moment, I will be pulled away from you.'

Brandi, the blonde, slid out from under the silk sheets and sauntered towards Kal. 'You can stay as long as you like, Kal,' she said. She bounced ever so nicely as she moved. 'You're the master and we're your willing slaves.'

Kal shook his head again and backed away like a wounded crab. 'That's not exactly true,' he said. His flailing hand finally found the leather trousers draped on the couch behind him. 'The real master here is Lord Helmawr, and we all jump when he says "how high".'

Kal thought about what he just said, and was about to reverse it, when he noticed the girls were no longer advancing upon him. He pulled himself onto the couch and draped the trousers over his lap before glancing over at them.

All three girls sat on the edge of the bed, faces cradled in their hands, crying soft tears and moaning, almost in unison. Kal slipped his legs into the trousers and pulled them up in one swift move as he stood. Snapping the tight, leather leggings around his waist as he crossed the room, Kal stood above the girls.

'What?' he asked, looking from one to the other down the line. 'What's wrong? What did I say?'

For a minute, the girls did nothing but sob quietly into their hands. Kal wanted to reach out and hold them, but worried this might be just another ploy to keep him from getting dressed.

Finally, Candi, the brunette, grabbed an edge of the silk sheets and dried the tears streaming down her face. She looked as if she were about to burst back into tears, when Kal put his hand on her shoulder. She looked up into his face and he

could tell that this was no act. The girls were truly distraught, and it had something to do with Lord Helmawr.

Kal looked deep into Candi's big, brown eyes. 'Tell me, Candi,' he said. 'Why are you so sad? What's happened to my father?'

'He's… he's…' she started, but couldn't seem to finish.

Kal sat down beside Candi and swept her into his arms. He held her tight and stroked her hair. 'It's okay,' he said. 'I'm here to help.'

'Lord Helmawr is… dead,' she said at last and began sobbing again.

The other two girls, whose wailing had dwindled to mere weeping, turned on the waterworks again. Kal looked at the three wounded women and knew his work here was just beginning.

One set of scummers toiled away at the loose panels atop the transport. The rest had hidden themselves amongst the mutant bodies behind the ship. From his vantage point just over a dune in front of the ship, the hooded man couldn't tell which of the rotting bodies hid scummers and which didn't. He had to grudgingly admit that these men were good at their jobs.

But as the scummers continued to peel away the plasteel plating, he began to wonder if this plan would produce the desired results. Using chainswords and the few melta bomb charges in their supplies, the team had made great progress in creating a breach hole. The melta bombs worked well on the plasteel hull, but would have had little effect on the reinforced rear hatch. This was the only way inside and, from his angle, it looked like they would cut through within minutes. If he were in charge of the royal troops, the hooded man wouldn't rush out the back and give up tactical advantage. He'd wait for the hole to open and then fight his way out on to the roof to gain the high ground.

He considered informing the scummer leader of his concerns, but decided not to bother. They would lose more men if that happened, but they would still prevail, and they were just mercenaries; not really anything to be concerned over.

A grinding noise echoed across the dunes as the reinforced hatch opened. Las blasts with accompanying tracers lanced into the mound of ash behind the downed transport. Dust and bits of dead skin and bone vaporized, sending an acrid cloud into the air.

The barrage continued for a full minute before stopping. Kyrian and his men maintained their silent vigil beneath their rotting shields. They were either well trained or dead.

The royal troops unleashed another salvo a moment later. This one lasted only ten seconds before troops began to rush out. They dived and rolled and crawled into defensive positions around the base of the transport. Once in position, the exterior soldiers took up the covering fire as the rest of the squad rushed out and found cover. He counted twenty in all – probably all but the officers.

Still, Kyrian's men held their positions.

The onslaught from the royals continued unabated. They fired in crossing patterns out in three directions from the transport, covering the perimeter with laser blasts and a few explosions.

After two minutes of continuous fire, a command emanated from inside. The royal troops inched out away from the transport, turned as one to face the ship, and began firing at the roof. An explosion engulfed the air above the transport. The hooded man almost felt sorry for the poor scummers trapped on top. He did not, however, feel anything at all for the royals as the ambush sprung up behind them.

The scummer leader and his men rose up from beneath the dead muties as the royals opened fire on the breach unit. As the explosion ripped through the air, deafening everyone in the area, the mercenaries opened fire. Half of the royals dropped before they even knew they were under attack.

When the other half turned to face their enemy they realized the error of their previous tactics. A fog of ash and burnt flesh lay between them and their attackers. As they fired blindly into the cloud behind the ship, the scummers emerged from the smoke at their sides, having moved to flanking positions after the first volley.

Moments later, the royal troops all lay in the wastes, holes burnt in their chests and heads, their bodily fluids mixing with the ash. The hooded man slid down the dune to the front of the transport.

'Area secured,' said Kyrian, with a certain sarcasm underlying the report, as if the fact was not evident from the carnage surrounding them.

'Good work,' he replied. 'Sorry about your men on top. But sacrifices must be made in battle.'

'Not to worry,' replied the scummer leader, 'I think you will find we suffered no casualties at all.'

Just then, five scummers emerged from the back of the transport, dragging several royal officers behind them.

'Passenger compartment secured,' one reported.

'Excellent work,' replied Kyrian.

The hooded man shook his head. His employers had obviously spared no expense at all on these troops. They had just taken out an entire transport full of royal soldiers with hardly a scratch.

He walked up to one of the royal officers. From the number of bars and medals on the man's uniform, he appeared to be the leader. He motioned to the scummer holding him to pull the officer to his feet.

'Captain,' he said. 'Where's the package?'

'Colonel,' replied the man, trying very hard to puff out his chest and regain some bit of composure. 'Colonel Shepard. Royal Guard. Serial number one-eight-nine-alpha-gamma-six…'

A huge metallic limb shot out from beneath the folds of the hooded man's cloak and grabbed the colonel. Long, claw-like fingers encircled the officer's neck. Hydraulic gears, metal plating and the hint of a weapon barrel could be seen on his arm, still partially shrouded in the cloak. With a casual flick of his wrist, he snapped the colonel's neck.

As the metal-encased arm disappeared back into the folds of the heavy, grey fabric, he turned to the next officer. 'Captain?' he said. 'Where's the package?'

Valtin Schemko, Lord Chamberlain and senior political advisor to Lord Gerontius Helmawr, looked up from the papers spread out on his desk and motioned the man at his door to enter. He welcomed the break from the tedium of his current duties, even though it meant dealing with Kauderer and the latest crisis to hit House Helmawr.

Hermod Kauderer, Master of Security and Intrigue for House Helmawr, swooped into the room like a hawk, which is exactly what the other senior advisors called him when he wasn't around. His angular face, sharp beak of a nose and icy, soulless eyes were more than enough to warrant the nickname, but his tendency to constantly scan his surroundings, as if searching for his next meal, was what really tended to put people on edge around him. Everyone feared Kauderer and what he could do to them with the information he supposedly had stored in his impenetrable office.

Everyone, that is, except Valtin. The two men had come to an understanding after some recent unpleasantries involving spies working right under Kauderer's slightly hooked nose. Kauderer had also dispatched a rogue spyrer unit into the Underhive at the time to further his own agenda. That unit nearly killed Valtin as he helped his uncle – one Kal Jerico – hunt down another Helmawr relative who had stolen vital information from the old man.

The fact that Valtin now possessed that intel, and Kauderer did not, had gone a long way to cementing his current political position as well as his ability to handle Kauderer without fear.

Valtin gestured to the chair in front of his desk. The house spy glared back at the Lord Chamberlain and, to his credit, only hesitated a moment before sitting. Kauderer enjoyed using his height to intimidate, so rarely sat in meetings. Valtin had broken him of that habit, at least in his presence.

'I can tell by the look on your face, Hermod, that all does not go well with our rescue efforts,' said Valtin. In fact, he could never read Kauderer's expression, as he had incredible control over his hawkish features. But with Kauderer, it was always a good bet that he came bearing bad news.

'As usual, you are correct, Lord Chamberlain,' said Kauderer. 'The last report from the transport suggested a renewed attack. The message was somewhat garbled. I have my best men working to decipher the text.'

Valtin wasn't sure, but he could have sworn Kauderer's hands fidgeted just below the top of the desk. Kauderer detested uncertainty when it came to information. Valtin allowed himself an inward smile at seeing a crack in the man's icy demeanour.

'More muties?' asked Valtin. 'I'm sure the colonel's men can handle those barbarians and their scavenged arsenal.'

'It is unclear, my lord,' said Kauderer.

Was that a twitch in his left eye? The stress seemed to finally be getting to Kauderer.

'The colonel reported increased efforts to breach the hull,' continued Kauderer. 'The transmission ended abruptly after that.'

Valtin ran his fingers over his recently grown goatee as he digested this new information. He had to admit he had no idea what to make of the situation, which forced him to relinquish some control of the conversation back to Kauderer.

'What is your assessment, Hermod?' he asked. 'What's going on down there?'

Kauderer's shoulders rose and straightened slightly, and it seemed his haughty demeanour took on a bit more shine. 'I believe whoever shot down our transport has now arrived to claim their prize.'

Damn,' said Valtin. 'How did this happen? What happened to security?'

Kauderer's glare returned briefly. 'Security on our end was airtight,' he said. 'I handled the negotiations myself, and no one outside this office even knew what was in that package.'

‘The merchant, then?’

Kauderer nodded. ‘We paid him a noble’s ransom for his silence, but we have limited control of off-world merchants. He must have talked.’

‘This would point, I assume, to one of the other houses?’ said Valtin, stroking his goatee again. ‘No one else in the spire would have the resources and no one outside Hive Primus would have a motive. What steps are you taking?’

‘I have agents on the way to interrogate the merchant,’ said Kauderer. ‘He’ll tell us what he knows, and then serve as an example to others to never cross House Helmawr.’

‘And the package?’ said Valtin. ‘How close are Katerin and his men? Will they reach the transport in time to secure the package?’

Kauderer shook his head. ‘It’s impossible to tell. All will depend on how long the colonel can hold out and how determined our enemies are to thwart us.’

Valtin nodded. ‘Keep me informed,’ he said. ‘I want to know the moment Katerin enters the transport.’ He looked down at the guest lists and table assignments spread out across his desk and shuddered at the thought of returning to that task.

‘We need that package, Hermod,’ he said, looking back up and staring at the house spy. ‘The survival of House Helmawr depends upon it. There is precious little time. The Kal Jerico gambit will only buy us so much.’

2: BODY COUNT

Captain Katerin strode down the aisle of his transport. He was a huge tank of a man, with a wide, almost plump head sitting on a squat neck, and a barrel chest with a bit of a spread beneath from too many years behind a desk. Many would say he was nearly as wide as he was tall, but not to his face, of course. That would be suicidal.

Even with the air blowers on full, sweat beaded up on Katerin's round, bald head and dripped down into the dense tangles of his beard, making it glisten in the muted lights in the transport. The sweat somehow also found its way past his wild, scraggly eyebrows and into his eyes. But Katerin didn't let it bother him – not today.

It wasn't just the importance of the mission, though. It was the thrill of impending battle, the adrenaline rush he always felt at the beginning of a hunt. Katerin was in his element, and as far as he was concerned, a little sweat just came with the territory.

Although born of noble blood, Aldous Katerin had always gravitated more to battle than courtly intrigue. It was an ironic twist of fate that his prowess in battle had led to his appointment as Captain of the Royal Guard and a position in the inner circle of House Helmawr. But Katerin never forgot where he'd come from and what was truly important – battle in the name of nobility.

'Aye, there we were, up to our necks in mud and blood and bullets,' screamed Katerin over the roar of the engines as he continued to regale his men with a war story. 'Then all hell broke loose…'

'Excuse me, sir,' said a guard sitting to his right. Katerin thought his name was Dwibbs or Debbs or something like that. The young guard's eyes were bright and attentive, a distinct difference from the rest of the troops, most of whom had heard this particular story a few times before.

'Yes, Dwebbs,' said Katerin, smiling at the newest guard.

‘Dobbs, sir.’

Katerin lost his smile and glared. He pulled a kerchief from inside his shirt and dabbed at the sweat on his forehead before replying. ‘Yes, Dobbs. What is it?’

Sorry, sir,’ he said. ‘Your story is riveting, but what exactly does it have to do with our mission?’

Katerin sputtered for a moment as the impudence of this green guard sent his blood pressure soaring, but two chortles from behind him turned his ire away from Dobbs.

He spun to see Mageson and Stein, the only other two nobles on the transport, leaning against a set of huge crates at the back of the transport. Try as they might, they couldn’t contain their laughter. After a moment, Mageson, a little wisp of a girl with long, curly hair and bright, green eyes, regained her composure and said, ‘Really, captain, give them the speech already. We have to suit up.’

As if to punctuate Mageson’s remarks, Stein, a powerfully built, but smallish noble with jet-black hair and a stern, lined face, pounded his fist on top of the crate next to him. ‘We don’t have much time,’ he said. ‘These rigs are a pain to get into.’

Katerin dabbed at the sweat on his forehead as he pushed his anger back down. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘The mission.’ He turned and looked at the double row of guards. Grim faces stared back beneath gleaming helmets. They looked like a set of stone statues with square faces and hard jaws. Their large chests and wide shoulders, accentuated by their armour, looked nearly identical all the way down the row. Fine specimens, thought Katerin. Now to scare the hell out of them.

‘Okay, you maggots,’ he growled. ‘Today we embark on the most important mission of our lives.’ He marched down the aisle, the guns at his hips slapping into the knees of the men on either side.

‘Some of you will die,’ he continued. ‘In fact, many of you may not make it back to the Spire whole. But that’s not important.’ He stopped and stared at them, the silence almost deafening despite the constant roar of the engines. ‘We are all in the service of House Helmawr. Our lives mean nothing compared to the safety and welfare of the House.’

Katerin marched back up the aisle, staring hard at each stoic face in turn. ‘What we do today we do to ensure the very existence of the House. Those who survive will be heroes. The names of those who die will be remembered for generations.’

He stopped at the end, just in front of Stein and Mageson. He now had the rapt attention of the entire squad. ‘But we do not fight for glory,’ he said, his tone

softening a little. ‘We fight for the lives of every member of the House. We fight so they may live. For if we fail today, gentlemen, the House will fall. And then none of us, not you nor any of your loved ones in the Spire, will be safe. So fight for them. That is what is expected of you.’

He could see Dobbs’s hand inching up a little at a time. The wrinkles around the boy’s eyes showed a mixture of apprehension and confusion as if he wanted to ask a question, but wasn’t sure he’d survive the asking.

Katerin remembered Dobbs’s previous question about the meaning of the war story. ‘To answer your question, Dibble,’ he said. ‘We are going into the fight of our lives. There will be confusion. There will be chaos. There will be death. But keep your heads and keep your eyes on the prize. We cannot let that package fall into enemy hands. If it does, we fail. We all fail.’

The hooded man tossed aside the limp body of the last royal officer. It flew through the air like a soiled rag, slapping into the scraped and blackened side of the transport before dropping to the ground.

‘He was most helpful,’ said the man. ‘Almost a pity I can’t afford any witnesses. Almost.’

He turned to the scummer leader. ‘Come with me,’ he commanded. ‘I have a package to retrieve.’

With that, he strode around the downed transport and pulled himself up and into the open hatch. His clawed, metal hand glinted in the muted light filtering through the toxic haze as he extended his arm out from beneath the folds of the cloak.

Inside, the ship was littered with bodies. The royals who had died during the earlier firefights were laid out neatly in rows to one side. A few mutant bodies lay where they had fallen. It looked like some of the savage beasts that roamed the wastes had rushed inside against the hail of weapons fire or perhaps dropped in from above the hatch. None of them had survived.

The cloaked figure walked through the cabin, ignoring the dead. The wastes would reclaim their bodies soon enough. What he searched for would be found at the far end, near the hatch to the cockpit.

Movement to the side flickered in his peripheral vision. He snapped his head around to see a wounded soldier, twitching but unconscious. A quick shot to the head left a small hole in the soldier’s temple and the twitching stopped. He decided to check the rest of the bodies for any signs of life. After a half dozen las blasts, he was certain there were no survivors.

A few moments later, he stood near the bulkhead at the front of the passenger cabin. The wall seemed solid enough. Rows of rivets held sections of the plasteel plating together. He counted five down and four over from the upper left corner of the wall, and placed his hand on the panel. It seemed no different from any of the others. He knocked on it a few times. There was a slight echo to the reverberation, perhaps from a hollow space behind the panel. He banged the panels around it and then the designated panel again. Yes. The vibrations were somewhat different.

'Now which rivet did that officer say to turn?' he mumbled. 'Ah yes.' His metal claws snuck out from the robes and reached towards the lower left corner of the panel. 'Three up from the corner,' he said, counting them with a single claw. 'Twist twice to the right, once to the left and three times to the right.'

He tried to grasp the rivet and turn it, but found it didn't move. He tried the rivet three up from the other corner to no avail. 'Damn,' he cried. 'That scavving officer lied. No wonder he was so helpful. I killed him too fast.'

Frantically, he tried all the other rivets. None of them moved an inch, not even when he applied all the strength his enhanced arm could muster. They were just too small to grab. He pulled out his laspistol and fired several times at the panel to no avail. One shot strayed and left a small hole in the next panel, but there was not a mark on the one that hid his prize.

The scummer leader appeared at his side. 'Problems?' he asked.

'Scavving panel is indestructible,' he replied. He continued to stare at the panel, straining his brain to figure out another way through. 'Do we have any melta bombs left?' he asked.

'Sorry, no,' said the leader. 'We used them all breaching the hull. We do still have the rocket launcher.'

The man shook his head. 'We can't afford the chance. The safe behind this panel holds a treasure worth a hive's ransom.'

The two men stared at the unblemished panel a little longer. 'You could just burn it out and take the whole thing back to the hive.'

The man shook his head again. 'With this much plating on the cover, the safe must weigh a ton or more.' But then he got an idea. His normal hand shot out from beneath the robes and clapped the leader on the shoulder.

'We don't need to burn out the whole safe,' he said, the excitement of an impending bounty putting a bit of a lilt to his voice. 'I just need to get more room for leverage.'

He snapped his laspistol out of its holster again and began firing at the edge of

the panel. Soon, the hole he'd inadvertently put in the panel to the side turned into a gaping wound in the wall. Bits of molten plasteel dripped along the ragged edge.

The robed man didn't even bother waiting for the metal to cool. He threw back the sleeve of his cloak to keep it from catching fire on the red-hot steel, revealing not an arm but an arsenal. His entire right arm had been replaced by a metallic contraption with a set of ten-centimetre steel claws attached at the end to use as a hand. Gears and pistons flexed the elbow with a small grating sound and the hiss of releasing air. The forearm section of the casing was enormous, easily larger around than the man's massive thighs. Barrels of varying sizes and lengths poked out from the casing just past his wrist, and panels all along his forearm hid weaponry away for easy deployment.

It wasn't the armoury he needed from his mechanical arm today. He needed its strength. The robed man grasped the edge of the pristine panel with his claws and pulled. At first, nothing happened. The gears whirred and clicked and the piston released a massive hiss of air, but the panel didn't budge. He practically pulled his head into the wall with the effort. Repositioning, he slapped a boot up against the wall and then made a few adjustments to the hydraulics on the arm.

He yanked back again. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead beneath the cowl and ran down his cheeks onto the respirator, but he could feel the panel begin to move. With a mighty yank, he ripped it from the wall, flinging it over his head as he fell backwards onto the metal grating.

The scummer leader, who was entirely too smart for his own good, did not offer to help the man to his feet. He simply smiled and said, 'Well done. An excellent plan.'

The robed man harrumphed at the scummer as he pushed himself off the floor and back to his feet. He looked back at the panel, which had crashed halfway through the deck grate. It was nearly thirty centimetres thick, tapering in from the exterior panel section to the inner, dark-grey edge.

He turned back towards the remaining panels to see a square box set in the wall. The box was the same dark-grey colour as the back of the panel. Reaching in, the robed man finally felt his prize in his gloved hand. He pulled it out and heard the leader's gasp. This was not an exclamation of amazement so much as one of disappointment.

'Don't worry,' he said, looking at the dull brown, leather satchel in his hand, 'What's inside this little package will pay for our entire excursion and have enough left over to make you and I very rich men.'

He tucked the satchel under his mechanical arm beneath the folds of his robes and turned to leave. As they walked towards the rear of the transport, one of the scummers, the one who had led the breach team, appeared at the hatch.

'Muties,' he reported.

'How many?' barked Kyrian.

'From the looks of it,' said the scummer, 'I'd say all of them.'

The robed man ran to the hatch and looked out. A massive cloud of dust spanned the horizon. Just in front of that cloud he could see dark forms moving. Even though they were still quite a way off, he could tell they were muties and not more royals. There was no structure to their formation. It was more of a mass of bodies. They weren't so much marching as shambling forward.

'They're muties, alright,' said the scummer leader. 'What are your orders, Mr Feg?'

Vandal Feg tossed back his hood revealing a scarred, pug-like face and muscle-bound neck. Hoses connected to his mechanical arm ran up over his head and down into his bulging neck and back. He focused the lens that had replaced his left eye on the mutant horde descending on their position and then flipped a switch at his wrist. A chainsword extended out from the casing and unfolded to an impressive length before whining to life.

'Kill them all,' said Vandal Feg. 'Kill them all.'

Somehow in the last hour, Kal had managed to lose his trousers again. He wasn't too worried about them at the moment. He had been too busy comforting the girls during their time of grief. On the upside, the girls had stopped crying over the death of Lord Helmawr; although Kal was certain he had heard a few whimpers in the last few moments. Of course, those could have been moans.

Candi and Brandi had fallen asleep after the last comforting session, but Sandi lay next to Kal, one arm draped over his chest, her head nestled atop his shoulder. Thick, red hair tickled at his nose while her long, delicate fingers traced intricate patterns up and down Kal's arm and across his bare chest.

While Kal could have stayed right where he was for another hour, enjoying Sandi's idle attention and the feel of her body cuddled up against his own, another thought popped into his mind, making him smile at the memory.

'Sandi,' he said.

'Hmmm?'

'The last time we were here together,' continued Kal, 'you told me about something special you do with grapes. Do you remember that?'

‘My grape routine?’ she said. For a moment, her caressing halted, making Kal almost sorry he had spoken at all. ‘Normally that costs extra. But you’re a special client, Kal.’

Kal beamed his trademark smile, even though Sandi wasn’t even looking at his face. ‘Cause I’m Kal Jerico? Underhive bounty hunter?’ he asked.

Sandi shook her head, making her hair flit around Kal’s face and nose. ‘No,’ she said. ‘You’re all expenses paid, just like last time.’

Kal tried not to let his ego deflate too much. ‘Oh,’ he said.

‘Not that we don’t enjoy your company,’ said Sandi quickly. ‘All three of us volunteered as soon as the contract came in.’

‘Well that’s something, anyway,’ said Kal. His heart just wasn’t into comforting anymore, though. It’s not that he hadn’t paid for comfort in the past. It was just that he hadn’t paid for it this time and that had made the experience feel different up until now. But business was business, and if he was all expenses paid, he might as well enjoy all the extras.

‘Why don’t you go get the grapes from that bowl,’ he said after a moment. ‘As I remember, last time we were rudely interrupted before you could show me that grape trick.’

Sandi crawled over Kal to get out of the bed and he marvelled again at just how soft and clean her skin was and how wonderful she smelled as she brushed past him. The barmaids and other women of comfort down in the Underhive felt, and smelled, like some nasty reptile from beneath Dust Falls in comparison.

Sandi tiptoed across the carpeted floor, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet as she moved, which made the rest of her body shake and jiggle in the most tantalizing ways. She grabbed the bowl of fruit and tiptoed back again. Kal, so intent on Sandi’s wriggling body, was startled by the voice that broke into the pre-routine show.

‘That will be all, Sandi,’ said the voice.

Sandi looked over towards the previously locked front door, bowed ever so slightly and retreated into the bathroom, still carrying the bowl of fruit.

‘Damn!’ said Kal as he watched her lithe form disappear into the next room. ‘Next time we start with the grapes.’

Kal turned over to face the intruder, not even bothering to cover up his body. ‘You know, nephew,’ he said looking up at Valtin Schemko, ‘The last man who interrupted Sandi and me turned out to be a traitor to the House of Helmawr. Barging in here, uninvited, may not be the best way to win my trust.’

Valtin stooped over, picked up Kal’s trousers, and tossed them towards the bed.

‘You are the one who was invited, uncle,’ said Valtin. ‘I sent the invitation myself.’

Kal grabbed the trousers out of the air and decided to slip them on. He suddenly felt a little too vulnerable. His nephew, who had seemed somewhat inept during their last adventure together, had obviously taken quite well to the political life of the Spire. He was calm, sure of himself and in control.

‘I wondered if you were behind that little prank,’ said Kal. He stood and buttoned himself up before continuing. ‘And while I can appreciate a good joke now and then, and I certainly enjoyed my time here with the girls, either tell me why I’m really here or send me on my way downhive.’

Valtin strolled over to the couch beneath the bank of windows and sat down before he spoke. It was an obvious ploy meant to infuriate Kal, and it was working. ‘All in good time,’ said Valtin, finally. ‘But first I have some bad news for you.’

Kal tired of his nephew’s little stalling games. He stormed over to the couch and stared down at Valtin, hoping to tower over him and put him off his game. It didn’t seem to work and just made Kal stare into the rising sun as it peeked over the noxious cloud layer below. Kal averted his eyes as little balls of light danced in his vision.

‘I know about Lord Helmawr’s death,’ he said. ‘Horrible thing, but hardly any of my concern. Just tell me who you want me to kill, and then I can laugh in your face and leave.’

But it was Valtin who began to laugh. ‘Poor Kal,’ he said. ‘You have no idea why you are here, do you?’

Kal had had enough. He grabbed Valtin by the shoulders, pulled him to his feet and kneed him in the groin. As Valtin Schemko, Lord Chamberlain of the most powerful House on all Necromunda, doubled over in pain, Kal Jerico, ticked off Underhive bounty hunter, picked him up at the waist and tossed him across the room onto the bed.

Brandi and Candi, who’d apparently sat up during the commotion, bounced off the bed to either side as Valtin fell between them. They both screamed and ran from the room.

Kal crossed to the bed, stepped up onto the mattress and sat on top of Valtin’s chest. ‘We used to be friends,’ he said, looking down into his nephew’s frightened eyes. ‘And that’s why you’re still alive. But if you treat me like one of your Spire lackeys again, I will kill you.’

Valtin raised his hands up to his face in surrender. ‘I’m sorry, Kal,’ he said. ‘It’s

so hard to turn it off. I have to watch my back all the time up here.'

'It's no different downhive,' snarled Kal.

'But at least you can see your enemies coming,' said Valtin. 'I never know if I'm talking to an ally or an adversary, so I must guard my words and speak in half-truths to make sure valuable information doesn't make it into the wrong hands.'

Kal considered letting Valtin back up. He wasn't such a bad guy, but he knew how the game was played. If he let up too soon, he'd lose control again. 'At least if you mess up, nobody dies,' said Kal.

'Don't be too sure of that,' said Valtin. 'Look, I'll tell you everything, but it's getting kind of hard to breathe, and I think the girls would probably like us to leave.'

'Will they be here when I get back?' asked Kal.

'If you'd like them to be,' said Valtin.

'Then you have a deal,' said Kal. He stood, making sure to put just a little extra pressure on his nephew's chest before stepping off the bed. He wanted Valtin to have a constant reminder of who was truly in charge in this room.

Kal pointed at the door, which he noticed Valtin had closed and locked behind him when he entered. 'Lead the way, nephew,' said Kal.

Valtin stood up with a twinge and then rubbed his palm against his sternum. He looked at Kal. 'Shouldn't you finish dressing first?' he asked.

'Right,' said Kal. 'Where are my weapons?'

'There he goes,' yelled Scabbs. He pointed up towards a catwalk running between two huge vent fans. The force of the air blew dead pieces of skin from his arm into his face. 'Don't shoot him in the head!' he added.

It was too late. A bolt from Yolanda's laspistol ripped through the air towards their quarry, a surprisingly fast ratskin who'd been scavenging around Glory Hole recently. He'd apparently looted the wrong person – a guilder by the name of Tritus – earning him a bounty on his head. The ratskin had broken the first rule of stealing: never steal from a guilder.

Amazingly, Yolanda's shot missed its mark, burning a hole through the grating behind the ratskin as he ran towards the far fan.

'Scavving ratskin,' she said. 'He swerved when he should have veered.'

Scabbs never understood more than half of what Yolanda said, but he knew she'd been shooting to kill. 'He's hardly worth anything dead, Yolanda,' he said. 'Try to aim low.'

The ratskin thief had almost made it to the other fan. Scabbs had no idea what their quarry was up to. The catwalk didn't go past the fan housing, and the blades would rip him apart if he tried to make it into the ductwork behind them.

Yolanda shot again as the ratskin reached the fan. The blast hit the metal housing just above the thief's head, sending a cloud of sparks into the air around their quarry. When it dissipated, the ratskin was nowhere to be seen.

Scabbs and Yolanda looked at each other. She broke the silence first. 'Well, go after him, Scabbs,' she said. 'You're a half-ratskin tracker. He's a ratskin thief. So track. How hard can it be?'

Scabbs was about to argue, but knew from long experience the futility of it all. 'Just make sure you shoot the right ratskin, okay?'

Scabbs scampered up the ladder. When he reached the top, the force of the air from the first fan blew a huge cloud of dead skin from his arms and face that slowly filtered towards the ground. He glanced down at the ground through the cloud, hoping for a reprieve. Yolanda pointed her gun at him and motioned him on, so he shrugged and trotted off towards the other fan.

When Scabbs got to the other end of the catwalk he began to laugh.

'What's so scavving funny?' yelled Yolanda from below.

Scabbs looked over the railing at his partner. 'Well, you got him… sort of,' he said. 'Come up here. I need help getting him out.'

'What?'

Scabbs just motioned for Yolanda to join him and turned back to their squirming quarry.

The side of the fan housing had a gash where someone had pulled back the plasteel plating. It was an escape hatch that led into the ductwork just past the fan blades. Their bounty had obviously been planning to use it to get away.

Yolanda's shot must have hit the housing just as their quarry tried to squeeze through, and the blast had either melted the metal or the impact had jammed it closed a little, making the hole just too small for the ratskin. He had one leg up to his groin and one arm up past the shoulder through the narrow opening. His head kept banging into the top of the crack as he twisted back and forth trying to get out.

Scabbs laughed again.

Kal sat in a comfortable chair with his boots resting on the edge of Valtin's desk. He'd pushed the chair around to the side to avoid looking into the sun behind his nephew. As they talked, Kal idly drew a laspistol and aimed it at various pieces

of art hanging on the walls and the statues on Valtin's bookshelves. Periodically, Valtin would cringe and Kal made mental notes of which objects were the most valuable to his nephew. It felt good to have his weapons back, and his trousers.

'So, Helmawr's dead and you need me to track down his killer, right?' said Kal. He mentally shot a painting of his father taking on an entire ratskin clan with his bare hands. In reality, the old man had probably been wearing his patriarch power armour and ripped the defenceless ratskins apart with his power claws, if it, or anything remotely like it, had ever happened at all.

'Not exactly,' said Valtin. When Kal's laspistol strayed over towards him he raised his hands. 'Let me continue,' he said. 'We have others working to uncover the assassins. Your role is more vital than that.'

Kal waved the barrel of his laspistol in a circle around Valtin's face. 'Get to the point, nephew.'

'I want you to assume the throne,' said Valtin. He ducked under his desk. After a moment, he peeked his head over the top and looked at Kal.

'You want my ass to do what?' asked Kal.

'Take the throne,' said Valtin. He crawled back into his chair, but kept low. 'Lead the house, with my help, of course.'

'Of course,' said Kal.

Valtin stood and faced Kal with his hands raised, palms forward to show he had nothing to hide. 'Look,' he said, 'The house needs a strong leader and I need someone I can trust on the throne.'

'You mean someone you can control,' said Kal.

'Not at all,' said Valtin. 'I had that with Gerontius. He was getting so senile some days he would order skull chips with tea.'

Kal laughed despite himself.

'No, what we need right now is someone strong enough to hold the house together before it tears itself apart in sibling rivalry.'

'The other heirs won't mind me stepping in?' asked Kal. He'd gone back to taking mental pot shots at the various art objects in the room.

'Oh, they'll mind,' said Valtin. 'They just won't do anything about it. Not openly anyway. You see, they're all afraid of you.'

Kal smiled. He liked the sound of that. 'Bunch of prissy Spire nobles afraid of the downhiver?'

Valtin shook his head. 'No, many of them are quite accomplished fighters…'

'Especially in their spyrer rigs,' said Kal, returning to the painting of Gerontius and the ratskins.

‘True,’ said Valtin. He sat down again. Kal could tell he was trying not to watch where the laspistol was pointing. ‘They can hold their own, but all of them were terrified of Armand…’

‘And I killed Armand,’ said Kal. ‘I get it.’

‘Exactly,’ said Valtin. ‘He’d never been bested, and you killed him while he was wearing his rig.’

‘It wasn’t exactly working at the time,’ said Kal. He holstered his laspistol.

Valtin laughed. ‘Funny, I always seem to forget that part when I tell the story. The point is that everyone assumed Armand would inherit the throne, so with him gone, you are the logical choice that should quash any House civil wars, which we can ill afford at a time when we are under attack.’

Kal stood and stretched. This meeting had lasted too long and he needed a drink. ‘So that wedding invitation was a ruse to get me into the Spire without arousing suspicion, huh? Not a bad idea.’

‘No,’ said Valtin. ‘The wedding is real. You may be able to control the heirs with just your good looks and reputation, but the other houses won’t follow the lead of a bastard child from the depths of the hive. So, we need to shore up your power base before you take the throne.’

‘Through marriage?’ asked Kal. Both laspistols had somehow found their way back into his hands. ‘That’s just not going to happen. You’ll have to put a lasgun to *my* head to get me to walk down the aisle.’

‘Can’t be helped,’ said Valtin. ‘To make this work, we need allies outside the house, especially in House Catallus. With them on your side, we can easily control the rest.’

Kal moved towards the door. ‘No scavving way,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to lead the house and I definitely don’t want to get married.’

Valtin came around the desk. ‘It would be a marriage in name only;’ he said, ‘and I promise it won’t last long. Once we root out the assassin and get through this critical time, you can abdicate. Until then, you can live with Candi, Brandi and Sandi – or have a different girl every night if you want. Plus the house treasury would be at your disposal, within certain limits, of course.’

Kal kicked the chair over towards him and sat down again. ‘Keep talking,’ he said.

‘Look what we have here,’ said Yolanda as she came up beside Scabbs on the catwalk, ‘A rat caught in a trap.’

The ratskin had made it halfway through a small crack in the ductwork. He

turned his bulbous head towards her as he struggled to get through. His large, fleshy ears twitched, as did the whiskers beneath his snout-like nose. If he had a tail, it was caught on the other side of the opening. Yolanda decided she didn't really want to know.

He stopped struggling long enough to spit at Yolanda. She grabbed Scabbs and pulled him into the path of the soggy projectile. 'Very funny,' said the trapped thief. 'I've never heard that one before.'

His words were oddly clipped as if making the consonant sounds took extra effort with all that mouth to work with. Yolanda pushed past Scabbs, who was busy wiping spit off his face. 'Listen, rat,' said Yolanda.

'My name is Sonny,' said the ratskin.

'Original,' said Yolanda. 'Do you have a sister named Girlie, too?' She thumped Sonny on the forehead. 'Listen, here's what's going to happen. I'm going to give your arm a good yank. Either you come unstuck and I take you in for the bounty on your head, or you don't and I shoot your head off and plop it into my sack.'

'His arm could come off,' said Scabbs.

Yolanda shot a glare back at her partner.

'I'm just saying,' said Scabbs as he wiped his hands on his trousers. 'That's a third option. His arm could come off. Depends on how stuck he is and how hard you pull.'

When Yolanda turned back to their bounty, she saw Sonny had renewed his efforts to push past the opening. He was now trying to duck his head down and get it through to the other side, and out of Yolanda's line of sight.

Yolanda spat on her hands and rubbed them together. Bracing her foot against the side of the air duct, she grabbed Sonny's flailing arm and gave a hard yank. Something definitely popped up around the ratskin's shoulder.

'Hey!' yelled Sonny. 'That scavving hurt.'

'At least your arm stayed on,' said Scabbs.

Yolanda let go of Sonny's arm and pulled out her laspistol and aimed it just below his chin.

'Wait,' said Sonny. 'I can tell you about another score worth far more than the bounty on my head.'

Yolanda kept her weapon trained on the ratskin, but didn't pull the trigger. 'I'm listening,' she said.

'I was working up near the Fresh Air Saloon last week,' said Sonny.

'Helping patrons with their wallets, no doubt?'

Sonny nodded, making his ears flop up and down. 'Anyway, some Orlock

gangers went up to this huge guy drinking by himself and began asking him questions. At first he just told them to go away, but they got persistent, like Orlocks do, and they got louder and louder, until everyone in the bar could hear the conversation…'

Yolanda pushed the barrel of her laspistol into the folds of Sonny's ear. 'Get to the point,' she said.

'They kept asking him about a big score outside the hive, some royal transport coming in with valuable Spire artefacts or something. Sounded like he was planning to bring it down and rob it. At least, these gangers thought he'd been looking for scummers.'

'Nobody can take down a royal transport,' said Scabbs. 'Shoot him, Yolanda. He's giving ratskins a bad name with that crazy story.'

'That's what I thought, too,' said Sonny. 'But this morning I was by the docks liberating some cargo, and I heard some guards talking about a royal transport coming in for an emergency landing, only no transport ever came in.'

Yolanda pulled her gun out of Sonny's ear. 'Who was this big guy in the bar?' she asked.

'I never saw his face,' said Sonny. 'He wore a cloak that covered his entire body. It looked like a tent it was so huge. But when the lead Orlock got up in his face demanding a piece of the action, the big guy swiped out with something under his cloak and ripped the ganger's chest open. I left right after that as I'm not too popular with the enforcers.'

Sonny looked back and forth between Yolanda and Scabbs. 'So is that information worth my life?' he asked.

'Possibly,' said Yolanda 'If it's true.'

'And if we can get the artefact away from that big brute and his mercenaries,' added Scabbs.

'I'll help,' said Sonny. 'And look, I'll let you have half of my stash.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of jewellery and coins. 'There's plenty more where that came from back at my lair.'

Yolanda took one look at the stash in Sonny's hand and then raised her gun and shot twice in succession. Sonny fell limp, still stuck in the cramped opening, with two round, smoking holes in his forehead. Yolanda reached out and grabbed the loot from his hand before it fell through the catwalk grating.

'Why'd you do that?' asked Scabbs. 'I thought his plan sounded pretty good.'

'It did,' said Yolanda. She pulled a pair of loop earrings from the pile of Sonny's loot. 'But these are mine. Scavving runt must have stolen them from me

last week.'

After pocketing the rest of the loot, Yolanda put her earrings back on. 'Funny,' she said, 'I thought Jerico's stupid dog had eaten them.'

'Oh scav,' said Scabbs.

'What?' asked Yolanda. She pulled out her sword and looked for an angle to get at Sonny's neck.

'I totally forgot about Wotan,' said Scabbs. 'We left him back in the Sump Hole.'

'Don't worry about it,' said Yolanda. 'It can't get into too much trouble there.'

Wotan stopped running. It wasn't that he was tired. That could never happen. At least not during the thousand year half-life of his power core. No, he stopped to let his processors deal with all the extra scents being drawn into his body.

He'd followed Kal's trail to the Hive City docks. It was a smelly place. Not that Wotan could differentiate between pleasant and foul smells. To him everything from the backside of a human to a hunk of mystery meat smelled the same – and in the Underhive that wasn't far from the truth.

But the docks held far too many scents for Wotan's analyzers to handle quickly. So he stopped and waited. As he sat, the metal mastiff looked around the area. To the left, the docks extended out to the edge of the dome. Ships and men and goods all moved around in a chaotic weave. To his right stood a row of buildings in various stages of repair. The one at the end sparked something somewhere deep in Wotan's memory core.

The mastiff released a short series of tinny barks that roughly translated in his software as, 'Jerico! Jerico! Jerico! Jerico!'

He ran off and bounded towards the building opposite the docks. As he crashed through the door, ripping a huge hole in the lower quarter panel, the name above the door made its way through the circuits towards his memory core: Madam Noritake's House of Fun.

Hermod Kauderer pressed a hidden switch that opened the door to the darkened room and stepped through. Only Kauderer could access the room. In fact, nobody else in the Spire even knew of its existence; nobody left alive anyway. It was tucked away in a windowless corner of the Helmawr estate with only the one door, which opened onto Kauderer's personal maze of secret passages.

He had always believed there were certain tasks best left to the experts, and as he was the resident expert on extracting information, he left this task to himself. Kauderer didn't particularly enjoy this part of his job. He felt that resorting to

torture meant someone somewhere hadn't done their job properly. In his business, there were many ways of obtaining information; most of which didn't leave the informant bloody and beaten and requiring of disposal.

Kauderer rinsed his hands in the basin he'd installed in the dead-end corridor just outside the torture room. He glanced at the unconscious man strapped to the chair in the middle of the room. The chamber's only light glared at the man from just above him, illuminating his still form. Thick, red blood dripped from his legs and back onto the floor, where it sluiced through the grating strategically placed beneath the chair.

The man's eyes had swollen shut and one of his earlobes hung against the side of his head, held on by just a wisp of dead skin. Dark streaks of red criss-crossed his face and chest, some from the whip hanging on the wall just inside the door, but most from the razor-sharp knife Hermod was currently cleaning in the basin.

'Well, I'm sorry to say that I believe you, Mr Blanco,' said Hermod. He re-entered the room, closing the door behind him, and crossed to the unconscious Spire merchant. 'You truly don't know anything about the assassins or the missing package.'

Mr Blanco didn't respond, but then Hermod didn't expect him to. The man had endured a great deal of pain and loss of blood in the last hour. If he had known anything, he certainly would have shared that information by now. It was a pity really. Hermod quite liked Mr Blanco. He'd helped Kauderer acquire most of the tools and accoutrements in this room.

'This is why I detest torture,' said Hermod. 'It's so unreliable.' He walked around the edge of the room towards a set of gears set in the far wall. 'Your name was given to my agents abroad,' he continued. 'Under torture, the off-world supplier of said package named you as his co-conspirator. I couldn't believe it, but I had to find out the truth. So, here we are. I was right. Although I'm sure that's of little value to you now.'

Hermod pulled one lever, which opened a large hole in the grating just in front of the chair. He pulled a second lever, which released the shackles holding Mr Blanco to the chair. A third lever tipped the chair forward slightly. Mr Blanco moaned slightly as he slid off the chair and fell into the hole.

Hermod waited a few minutes for the small flash of fire that just reached the top of the hole, signifying the body had made it to the furnace. A wisp of smoke rose through the grate as Kauderer flipped the lever back to close off the hole.

'Yes,' he said. 'Truly a pity.'

Kauderer left the rest of the mess for later. He just couldn't face cleaning

Blanco's blood from the chair and floor right now. Besides, he needed a new plan. He'd just incinerated their best lead. The problem was that the information he needed was most certainly located somewhere within the Spire, and he was far too recognizable to get it through subterfuge.

Plus, most of his agents were off-world tracking down that leak. Those still stationed within the Spire had been on duty so long they had already been detected by the agents of the other houses. The spy business really was a small community. As Hermod walked the dark corridors back towards his office, he realized that what he needed was a rogue agent. Someone completely off the Spire radar. Perhaps an Underhive asset.

As he palmed open another secret door and stepped into the back corner of his office, it hit him. He knew the perfect spy for this job. Small, unassuming, blends into the background in every crowd, and fairly trustworthy for an Underhive spy. Now, the only matter was how to invite Markel Bobo to the Spire without rousing the suspicion of all the other houses' spy masters.

He snapped his fingers. 'Of course,' he said. 'The wedding.'

3: TARGET PRACTICE

Markel Bobo hadn't had any rest in weeks, and precious little time for food either. So the soggy, reconstituted noodles and the slab of mystery meat on his plate actually tasted good. He sat in an overstuffed chair, sinking his slight, one-and-a-half metre frame into the soft cushions.

The chairs were one of the reasons he made Madam Noritake's his home away from home. The other was heading up the stairs across the parlour. Her name was Jenn Strings. She had short-cropped, not-quite-blonde hair that bounced every so slightly when she walked. Even though Jenn was one of Madam Noritake's girls, she somehow managed to retain an air of innocence about her that pleased him. Plus she was one of the few girls in the Underhive shorter than Bobo.

Jenn smiled back at Bobo as she led her latest client upstairs. She held up her hand with the fingers splayed wide and mouthed the words 'Five minutes.'

Bobo looked at the client, a fat Van Saar merchant, and laughed. That was information he might just be able to use someday. For Bobo was in the information business. His main employer, House Helmawr, kept him busy enough to afford the extended stay plan at Madam Noritake's – something he hoped to enjoy with Jenn during this week off.

He sometimes freelanced for the various Hive City families, so he made a mental note of Jenn's client for later use. He was about to go through his own client list to see which of his regulars might be interested in a little Van Saar dirt, when the door to Noritake's exploded inward.

The bottom of the door blew off the frame and flew across the room. Before Bobo could even move, Wotan bound into the parlour, coming to a skidding halt near Madam Noritake's desk. The little, yellow woman screamed a stream of epithets that would have made dockworkers pause.

Coming out from behind the desk, she brandished a metal baton she kept close

at hand for unruly clients. Wotan stood there, apparently not worried about the tiny lady with the big bat. He seemed to be sniffing the air, which seemed odd to Bobo, since it wasn't a real dog, just a metal machine of some sort.

He'd asked Kal about Wotan a couple of times, but the bounty hunter refused to talk about it. He said something about 'payment for some family obligations', but Bobo never did get the whole story.

Madam Noritake hadn't stopped screaming and, somehow, hadn't run out of new curses to throw at the metal mastiff. Bobo assumed she must have heard a lot of swearing in her life, but he was still impressed. She finally gave up on yelling and waving the baton around in the air, which was usually enough even for the drunkest clients, and swung the club at Wotan.

That turned out to be a big mistake. The mastiff, which had seemed to be completely unaware of the danger, turned his head at the last moment and caught the baton in its mouth. Madam Noritake screamed in terror as Wotan bit down. The metal club snapped into three pieces. One section fell on the floor while Madam Noritake raised the other back into the air. Just a few centimetres were left above her hand.

Wotan spat out the third piece and then ran up the stairs. Bobo waited for what he knew was about to happen next. Sure enough, he heard screams of terror and yells of rage from above. Those second yells quickly turned to fear as Bobo heard Wotan's sharp, metallic bark.

A moment later, many of the girls in Madam Noritake's employ came streaking down the stairs followed by several men, all of whom were struggling to pull on their trousers without falling down the steps. The last man down the steps was the Van Saar merchant. Bobo felt an odd sense of glee when he saw a trickle of blood running down the man's leg from a gash in his backside. He'd obviously not moved quickly enough when Wotan came at him.

'I'm going to kill that Jerico,' screamed Madam Noritake. Her small, but oddly wide, yellow face had turned almost red. She pulled at her straight, black hair, balling large bits of it in her fists. When she let go, the sides looked like a tangled mass of conduit running down the dome wall. 'Can't somebody get that stupid metal mutt out of my house?'

All eyes turned to the only man left in the room. Bobo shook his head. 'Uh uh.' he said. 'Only Kal Jerico can handle Wotan, and then just barely. Besides, I'm on vacation. Go find Jerico if you want that dog gone.'

He turned away from the group of half-dressed women, deciding to get back to his meal, but found instead a thin man in a silk suit sitting in the chair next to

him.

'That's exactly why I am here,' said the stranger. He pushed his wire-rimmed glasses back up his face with his forefinger. 'To take you to see Mr Jerico.'

'What the…' said Bobo. 'How'd you get there?'

Markel Bobo prided himself on two things. First was his ability to blend into every situation without being noticed. Unlike Madam Noritake, he kept his looks and his dress so nondescript that there was never anything for anyone to remember about him after they saw him. The second point of pride was that nobody ever snuck up on him. If Bobo didn't know you were there, then you just weren't there.

He closed his eyes and tried to disbelieve the bespectacled little man. It didn't work.

'I walked in during all the commotion,' said the stranger. 'I have an invitation for you.' He tried to hand Bobo an envelope.

Bobo looked back at the girls, wondering if one of them – probably Jenn – was pulling a joke on him. But they were all whispering and pointing up the stairs. From above, Bobo could still hear Wotan romping about from room to room. Occasionally something would fall and break, prompting a new set of curses to escape from Madam Noritake's mouth.

Bobo looked back at the stranger. 'You open it,' he said. 'I don't trust strange envelopes from stranger men.'

The stranger slipped his finger under the flap and Bobo noticed it had been resealed at some point. It seemed odd, but he just filed the information away. The man pulled out a thick card and handed it to Bobo. On it he read: *House Helmawr cordially invites you to attend the wedding ceremony of its favourite son, and future ruler of Hive Primus and, by extension, all Necromunda: Kal Jerico*.

'If you would come with me, Mr Bobo,' said the man. 'I can expedite your travel through the wall into the Spire.'

Bobo stared at the card and then at the silk-suited stranger. 'This is a joke, right?' he said. 'No way that Kal Jerico is going to be ruler of the hive.'

'Our future lord is already in the Spire,' said the man. 'Why do you think his metal friend is running loose and terrorizing Hive City?'

Bobo shook his head. 'Well, thank you very much for the invitation, but I'll find my own way into the Spire, if you don't mind. I don't go on trips with strangers. It's, um, bad for my health.'

The man rose from the chair and bowed. 'As you wish, Mr Bobo. Simply

present your invitation at the wall and you shall be allowed entrance. I now bid you adieu. It would be best if I left before Mr Jerico's mastiff returns to this floor.'

Bobo glanced back up the stairs and nodded. 'Me too,' he said but when he turned back around, the man in the silk suit had vanished.

Vandal Feg rotated the ring of weapon barrels mounted on his metal arm one turn clockwise. 'Another power pack depleted,' he grumbled. 'Time to bring out the big gun.' He truly appreciated the upgrades he'd bought for his mechanical arm. His previous losses to that pain-in-the-rear, Kal Jerico, all stemmed from letting the bounty hunter fight on his terms.

Vandal should have been able to crush puny Jerico's head with his claws, but Jerico had a knack for getting out of tight spots. Next time, he'd shoot the scavving son of a ratskin and everything around him before he could get away. Then maybe, he'd have some fun with his chainsword.

Mutant bodies piled up around Feg and his band of mercenaries, but there didn't seem to be any end in sight. A sea of muties surrounded them, ebbing and flowing out past the tops of the dunes on all sides. The transport was lost in the dust behind them. They had moved off, hoping it was the transport the mutants were after.

'They smell the meat on our bones,' said Kyrian. He fired methodically back and forth in a sixty-degree arc, dropping an enemy with nearly every shot. It didn't seem to matter as two more moved in for every one that fell.

'How can they smell anything?' asked Feg. 'They barely have faces, let alone noses.' He looked at a corpse lying nearby as he locked the largest barrel in his arsenal into place on his arm.

What skin was left on the face of the mutant was a mass of scar tissue and pockmarks. Most of the fleshy parts – ears, nose, cheeks – looked like they'd been ground down, exposing cartilage and bone underneath. Vandal had been told the constant wind-whipped ash blowing across the wastes could rip the flesh off a man. Now he believed the tales.

'There,' he said, getting the two-inch barrel securely locked into place. 'This ought to thin things out a little.' Flexing one of his long claws triggered the weapon, which discharged a frag grenade with a loud 'thwoomp'. Before the first grenade hit, he turned and fired a second one over Kyrian's head.

'Down,' called the scummer leader. As one, the mercenaries, who were arrayed in a rough circle around Feg, knelt.

The kneeling scummers continued firing as Feg unleashed explosive rain on the encroaching mutants. The frag grenade rounds detonated one after another in a circle around them. Pockets of muties simply dropped to the ground as searing hot bits of metal ripped through their ranks, flaying what little skin they had left from their bodies.

'Heavies,' called Kyrian. 'Concentrate your fire to the east.' Those to either side of him switched to their heavy stubbers and filled the area in front with a hail of screaming bullets, creating a curtain of fire that sliced through the scavvy ranks. The scummers arrayed in a circle behind Feg widened their firing arcs to keep the muties coming from the sides at bay. Those men were now fighting a losing battle, so Feg launched several more grenades to each side to thin out the attackers.

He glanced forward, ready to berate Kyrian for leaving their flanks so exposed, but then saw what the scummer leader had noticed. The mass of muties in front of them ended at the top of the next dune. He raised his arm and shot his remaining grenades in a cluster just beyond the leading edge of the horde.

'Move on my command,' yelled the scummer leader. As the first grenades blew up, he called out, 'Forward!'

Feg flipped a switch and held his arm up while the chainsword flipped out and screamed to life. All around him, the mercenaries continued firing as they moved forward in a tight diamond formation. Feg stopped and turned, taking up position at the rear point of the diamond. He slashed out with his raging chainsword as muties rushed forward towards the retreating mercenaries.

They flailed at him with their bony hands. Some wielded hunks of metal or even rusted swords, but most simply attacked with their long fingernails. One even tried to bite him, but picked the wrong arm. Feg smacked the biter in the face with his mechanical elbow, sending him flying back into the grasping arms of his comrades.

Fingers, limbs, heads and dismembered torsos littered the ash around Feg as he walked backward with the group of mercenaries. Besides the heavies at the apex of the diamond, who were blazing the trail, all the other scummers had switched to melee weapons. Their job was to keep the crushing mob of muties at bay long enough for the formation to break through the back line.

'How are we doing?' called Feg above the roar of his chainsword.

'We have another problem,' said the scummer leader.

Vandal glanced over his shoulder. It looked like they were getting close to the edge of the horde, although some on the flanks seemed to realize their plan and

were heading towards the rear. ‘What’s the problem?’ he asked.

‘Up above.’ He pointed skyward.

Feg looked up. ‘Oh scav,’ he said. The wail of his chainsword had drowned out the roar of the military transport coming in for a landing.

The scummer leader pulled the rocket launcher from his back, unfolded the stock and loaded their remaining rocket.

‘Hold,’ said Feg. ‘I need you to punch me a path through to the top of that dune. I have to be free of this horde before that transport lands.’

The leader looked at the transport and Feg could see him come to the same conclusion. The military markings meant the transport had an extra layer of reinforced plasteel. It would be thicker than the door to the safe. The rocket launcher would be next to useless against it. He saluted, and said, ‘Yes sir.’ This time, Feg thought the scummer really meant it.

‘Prepare for launch,’ he called. ‘Covering fire!’

The leader aimed the rocket launcher and pulled the trigger. The missile tore through the ranks of mutants. Those unlucky enough to live through the impact fell to the sides, their bodies charred and burning from the rocket’s flame. The rocket exploded near the top of the dune in a huge ball of fire. Black smoke billowed up just behind a massive cloud of white ash from the dune.

The scummers concentrated their fire on the edges of the opening made from the rocket’s path as bodies tossed into the air from the explosion dropped out of the smoke and ash. Clutching the satchel in his left hand, Vandal Feg scrambled up the dune, cutting down any muties foolish enough to try to get in his way. As he disappeared into the black and white cloud, Feg altered direction, coming out on the other side of the horde but running parallel to its rear echelon, away from the transport.

He felt confident his chainsword and the prospect of royal blood would keep the horde off him long enough to get away. Besides, while the muties might be fighting to survive, Feg fought for a much more important purpose: money.

‘Valtin,’ pleaded Kal, digging his thumbs into his eyes, ‘we’ve been at this for over an hour. I’m beginning to regret agreeing to this scavving marriage.’ He stood and paced from the chair to the door and back again. He didn’t know what hurt more, his brain or his backside. At the moment, it was a dead heat.

‘We don’t have a lot of time,’ said Valtin. ‘I’ve got to prepare you for courtly life. You know, take off some of the rough edges before you make your first public appearance.’

‘I know. I know,’ said Kal. He plopped back into the chair, putting his backside in the lead for the moment. ‘But, it’s really not that tough.’

Kal ticked off the points on his fingers as he went down the list. ‘First, I don’t kick the Earl of House Ulanti in the groin if he spills wine on my shirt. Second, as much as I would like to, I should refrain from giving the Duchess of House Greim an open-mouthed kiss upon meeting her. Third, should the princes of House Ty and House Ko’Iron get into a duel, I should certainly not begin taking bets on who will live and who will die. Fourth, under no circumstances should I shoot any member of House Catallus, as we are trying to curry their favour. And fifth… hmm, it seems there is no fifth, so I guess its open season on House Ran Lo.’

Valtin clapped his hands three times. ‘Very funny, uncle,’ he said. ‘But there’s more to political manoeuvring than simply not killing people.’

‘Look,’ said Kal, ‘I don’t know anything about surviving in this political quagmire. That’s your job.’ He stretched out his legs and propped his feet up on a pile of papers at the edge of Valtin’s desk. Closing his eyes and dropping his chin down onto his chest, he added, ‘For my part, I will try my best to suppress my urges to kill or kiss or bet on everything that crosses my path.’

‘Kal…’ started Valtin.

Kal opened one eye. ‘I’ll be a good boy,’ he said. ‘I’ll stand up straight, not spit, wash behind my ears, and bow when I meet people. Okay? Can I get some rest now? My head hurts…’

Valtin jumped to his feet. ‘No. No. No!’ he said, shaking his pen at Kal. ‘I told you this already. You don’t bow when you meet people. You never bow. You’re the Lord of the Hive. People bow to you…’

His tirade was cut short by a knock at the door.

‘What?’ screamed Valtin. ‘What is it?’

Kal glanced over his shoulder as the door opened a crack. Valtin’s assistant peeked her head just inside the room. ‘I’m sorry, sir,’ said the girl, a slight quiver in her voice. ‘But you wanted to know when that, um, thing was happening.’

‘Yes,’ said Valtin. He dropped the pen on his desk. ‘Yes, of course. Thank you, Cait.’

Valtin moved around from behind his desk. ‘I have another meeting,’ he said to Kal. ‘Can you find your way back to your quarters?’

Kal smiled. Not only was he getting a break from politics class, he got to go to break with his favourite classmates, Candi, Brandi and Sandi. ‘I’m sure I can manage,’ he said. Kal dropped his feet off the desk, taking most of the stack of

papers with him. As he followed Cait out the door, Kal added, ‘Make sure you knock when you come back for me.’

He practically skipped his way through Cait’s office, stopping only when Valtin’s assistant said, ‘Have a good morning, my lord.’

My lord. Kal actually liked the sound of that. He looked back at the cute, young girl. She had a round face with just the tiniest hint of baby fat still present. Her brown hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, accentuating her round face and long neck. Cait’s eyes shone brightly as she smiled at Kal and he sensed something behind those eyes. She was a smart girl. Of course she would have to be to rise to personal assistant to the Lord Chamberlain. He filed that away for later.

‘I certainly will,’ said Kal. ‘I have a date with some grapes and nothing will keep me from that bowl of fruit this time.’ He opened the door and stepped out into the corridor but hadn’t the faintest idea which way to go.

‘To the right, my lord,’ called Cait. ‘Up one level and then follow the corridor around to the left.’

Kal waved and started down the hall. The directions had sounded easy, but after a while of following the corridor through many twists and turns and side halls with no stairs, he decided it was time to retrace his steps.

As he turned to find his way back to Cait, Kal saw a shadow move around the corner ahead. It was subtle, and he almost missed it. Life in the Spire had already dulled his survival sense. He hadn’t checked behind him once while walking the corridors. That would get you killed in the Underhive, as someone was always trying to sneak up behind you.

Kal flattened his back against the wall and slid his sword out of the sheath. He inched down the corridor, keeping an eye on the corner. He heard nothing, but was certain someone had ducked out of sight just as he turned. Perhaps it was just Cait, coming to help him find his way. With Kal’s luck, it was more likely to be someone coming to kill him or worse, collect a debt.

Then he saw the shadow again. But it wasn’t a shadow so much as a wrinkle in reality, as if the wall had folded over on itself for a moment. Kal stopped. He wasn’t sure what had just happened, but felt certain it didn’t bode well for him.

He continued to stare at the spot, but began backing up just in case. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw another wrinkle. This time it was like a shimmering light against the windows to the side.

He turned, just in time to see the barrel of a gun peek out from the folds of shimmering nothingness, seemingly floating in mid-air.

‘Oh scav!’ said Kal.

‘Give me a low pass over that battle!’ said Katerin into the cockpit. He couldn’t fit through the door as he had donned his Orrus rig. His massive, tank-like body had doubled in size in the armour and he loomed in the doorway. He’d had to order Dobbs to open the door for him, as his huge gauntlets couldn’t do anything more delicate than smash holes in walls.

‘No way,’ said the pilot. ‘We’ve already lost one transport today.’

‘I’m not asking,’ yelled Katerin. ‘I’m ordering. I need one… No. Make that two, low passes – now!’ The order given, he turned his back on the pilot and left the cockpit, grumbling about ‘flyboys’ and ‘chain of command.’ He turned to his men. ‘Heavies to the rear,’ he called.

As the men moved to take position by the rear hatch, Katerin turned to his second-in-command, the female noble named Stache Mageson. The slight wisp of a girl, who’d claimed the role of his second through determination and warrior instincts he hadn’t seen since his own early days, now looked like an avenging angel in her Yeld spyrer rig. The rig’s wings, which were currently folded behind Mageson, provided sustained flight. They were also razor-sharp, making for a nasty surprise on strafing runs.

‘Mageson,’ he said. ‘Launch during the second pass. Provide covering fire as the troops hit the wastes and air support during the assault.’

‘I’ll cut ’em down to size,’ she said, extending her wings out to their full length. The razor-tipped edges cut into the plasteel wall next to her.

‘Careful, Mageson,’ snapped Katerin. ‘These rigs aren’t military assets. They’re on loan from the Lord Chamberlain himself. Considering the importance of this operation and the fact that one royal transport has been shot down already today, he deemed it prudent to allow their use. That’s why you and Stein are on this mission. I needed three nobles for the three rigs: you, me, and Stein.’

‘Where do you need me?’ asked Stein, whose aids had just finished strapping him into his Orrus rig. Like the rigs, Stein was also on loan from the Lord Chamberlain; some young noble who, like Mageson, had recently risen into a position of authority in the house. The fact that he always had a smile on his face and that he had become an indispensable aid to the Lord Chamberlain, made Katerin instantly suspicious of Stein.

‘Stay with the rest of the guard,’ said Katerin, ‘and help in their advance through the enemy.’

‘Where will you be, Captain?’ asked Mageson. She seemed surprised Katerin

wouldn't be leading the charge into battle.

'I'll meet you both in the middle.' Katerin smiled despite his worries about Stein. He didn't even mind the sweat beading on his brow.

'Beginning our first pass,' called the pilot.

As the transport tilted forward into a dive, Katerin tromped to the rear. When the transport levelled out again, he pulled a large, red lever. The entire rear wall of the transport creaked open from the top, lowering on hydraulic pistons to each side. He and his heavies crept forward as the wall turned into a ramp.

'Fire,' called Katerin to his men as soon as he saw the rear lines of the enemy muties.

A dozen grenade launchers unleashed explosive rounds at the same time. A moment later, twelve explosions ripped through the mutant horde.

'Fire,' said Katerin again, and watched as another dozen frag grenades arced out into the muties.

He could see those near the explosions begin to panic, as the savages ran into each other to escape the barrage.

'Fire,' said Katerin. A third salvo flew out of the transport, hitting close to the front edge of the mob of muties below. He turned and called out to Mageson.

'You direct the grenade launchers on the next pass,' he said. With that, Katerin pushed his way through his men and stepped off the end of the ramp.

Wotan padded down the stairs again. Some odd subroutine in his mechanical brain had ordered his mouth to open up and his rubber tongue to hang out the side. A small piece of the fat man's trousers still clung to his front teeth.

The women all moved back and some screamed again as he jumped onto the landing from the third step. He ignored them, although part of his vision routine ordered one eye to keep the small lady with the yellow skin in sight at all times.

He was searching for someone else. He'd heard a male voice say Jerico's name shortly after he bit the fat man. The voice had registered as familiar in his memory core, but the sample had been too faint and brief to lock in a positive identification.

He scanned the room. There were still a few half-dressed men standing in the corner, desperately pulling on trousers or shirts or shoes. He'd seen all of them upstairs. Then he saw a small man with short-cropped hair, pale skin and slightly rumpled, brownish clothes, just outside the door. Wotan's memory circuits completed a quick scan and found a match. Bobo.

Wotan barked a single, sharp, tinny bark. The girls screamed again and the

little, yellow lady advanced on him with the remnant of her stick. He turned and growled. The lady gasped and crumpled to the floor. Wotan leaned over and licked her face before turning towards the door and loping off after Bobo, stopping briefly at the door to gain the little man's scent.

'Read those directions, again,' said Yolanda. She looked up and down the docks, her brow furrowed so hard the wrinkles threatened to swallow her gang tattoo. Scabbs could tell she was lost, but like Jerico she was too proud to admit it or ask for help. The two of them were so much alike it was no wonder they couldn't stand each other.

'It's not so much directions as code,' said Scabbs. 'It says "Big Score – HC docks, third column, last row, at the wall. Enter at loose board, keep right, except for final left". Sounds like gibberish.'

'But that gibberish is our only lead to the Spire artefact Sonny told us about.'

'Maybe you shouldn't have killed him so fast,' said Scabbs. He kept reading the note they'd scavenged from Sonny's belongings. It seemed like a wild goose chase to him.

Yolanda ignored the comment and walked back towards the docking bays. She stood with one hand resting on the hilt of her sword and the other fingering the laspistol on her other hip. Scabbs thought it looked like a very Kal Jerico pose. A breeze from a passing transport even made her leather loincloth and vest flutter slightly. Scabbs smirked, thinking: Kal couldn't have done better.

'This is the third row,' she said, 'but I didn't see any loose boards back there.'

Something in that statement sounded odd to Scabbs. He looked at the note again and slapped his forehead. A cloud of dead skin fluttered down onto the note. 'Not third row,' he said. 'Third column.'

He looked around a bit to get his bearings. 'Ah, I've got it. Follow me.'

'About time,' said Yolanda.

Scabbs led the way down to the very end of the docks. The warehouses at the end looked as if they would fall over if you leaned on them. They weren't much more than sheets of thin metal tied or, rarely, bolted to poles driven into the floor of the dome. None of them looked like they had seen much use in the last decade or more, and the area was completely deserted.

'This looks better,' said Yolanda.

'Down here, I think,' said Scabbs. He walked down the last row, counting the narrow alleys between warehouses. 'One, two, three. Right here.'

The warehouse backed up to the dome wall. The door had been nailed shut with

a plasteel barricade. A sign on the boards stated the warehouse had been condemned and closed by order of the dockmaster.

Yolanda pushed Scabbs out of the way and pulled at the boards. Nothing moved. As she pulled out her laspistol, Scabbs cleared his throat.

'Ahem,' he said. Yolanda held her gun at the ready, but looked back at Scabbs. 'You need to think like a ratskin, not an Escher.' Yolanda glared at him. 'Try lower,' he added.

She waved him towards the door. Scabbs moved in, pulled at the bottom of several boards, until one of them rotated up. As the board turned, he heard a click from inside and the door, barricade boards and all, opened towards him.

They moved in and Scabbs closed the door behind them. He slapped his hands together twice and smiled, but both self-congratulatory actions were lost in the darkness of the abandoned warehouse.

'Now what?' asked Yolanda.

Scabbs snapped his fingers. 'This is the old smuggler's entrance,' he said. He began picking his way towards the back of the warehouse, towards the wall of the dome. 'Kal and I tried to find these guys a few years back, but we never figured out how they moved their goods into and out of the hive. There must be a tunnel back here some…'

Scabbs fell into a hole in the floor. He skidded down a steep slope, coming to rest a few dozen metres below the warehouse. 'Found it!' he said. 'Watch the first step…'

Above him, Scabbs heard a yelp and then the sound of another body coming down the slope. Before he could cover his head, Yolanda slid into him, her big boots kicking him twice in the head as she tried to slow herself down.

Scabbs truly wanted to say something witty and sarcastic about her big feet, but he was too busy falling unconscious.

Kal dove into a side corridor just as the floating laspistol fired. A chunk of plaster vaporized behind him as he rolled forward down the hall. As he came to his feet, Kal looked at the sabre in his hand and wondered why he'd brought a sword to a lasgun battle. He had no time to switch weapons now.

He looked back over his shoulder, but saw nothing there. Kal had seen stealth tech before. The Yeld spyrer rig somehow bent light around itself, rendering it basically invisible. If he was up against a spyrer, Kal knew he was totally scavved.

As he zig-zagged down the corridor, another las blast hit the wall next to his

shoulder. He dived to the right and rolled again. As he came up, Kal twirled around and threw his sword back towards the invisible assassin. He didn't really expect to hit anything, but even a momentary dodge might make his pursuer pause long enough for him to make the next corner.

The audible 'oof' from behind Kal came as a complete surprise. Not only had he hit, but the assassin had felt the impact. This was no spyrer. That changed everything. Kal concocted a plan as he came to the next corridor intersection.

As he rounded the corner, Kal grabbed the wall to help him turn more sharply. With his free hand, he tugged at his leather coat, slipping it off one shoulder. He skidded to a halt with his back to the wall as the jacket slipped off his other shoulder. He grabbed it by the lapels and waited.

Kal tried to control his breathing, both to mask his location and to calm his nerves for the upcoming fight. A moment later, he saw the shimmering air come around the corner. He flung the coat into the air towards the shimmer. As the coat fluttered towards the invisible assassin, Kal whipped his hands around and down towards his holsters.

He either missed the mark or the assassin was quick enough to sidestep the heavy, leather coat. Instead of landing on the invisible assailant's head, it looked like it glanced off a shoulder. In that instant, before the coat slid to the ground, Kal could see the outline of half of the assassin's body.

Kal's laspistols were already out of the holster. With his arms outstretched, he leaped to the side, firing three times with both weapons as he flew through the air. Two las blasts scorched the air above Kal as he hit the ground next to the far wall. As he rolled away from the battle, trying to get back to his feet, Kal heard a thud behind him.

He came up, both laspistols aimed down the corridor, but saw nothing. He scanned the corridor for the shimmer, his muscles ready to spring should he see the assassin's weapon. Then he saw it. Not the weapon or the shimmer, but a pool of blood on the floor that seemed to spread of its own accord.

'Oh scav!' said Kal, rushing forward. He grabbed his coat from the floor just before the blood reached it. As he flipped the coat over his back and slid his arms into the sleeves, Kal kicked at the air above the spreading blood. He hit something soft. He kicked again, harder this time, but got no reaction.

'Now, let's see who you are,' said Kal. He bent down and poked around in the air, and felt something soft, like silk. As he pulled at it, he saw the air shimmer around his hand. Kal yanked on the cloth and pulled it away, revealing a dead female wearing Delaque body armour.

‘Nice gadget,’ said Kal, looking at the shimmering cloak in his hand. He fumbled with it, trying to determine which end was up, so he could put it on. Something heavy pulled at one end. He reached around until he felt a small box-shaped object hidden in an inner pocket. ‘Aha!’ he said. ‘A holo-projector. I wonder how you turn it off?’

When he hit the ground, Captain Katerin sunk into the ash up to his waist. Unperturbed, he launched two explosive bolts from his wrists into the dune and then simply climbed out of the hole.

Katerin moved in, launching his own explosives ahead of him to clear a path. Those muties who weren’t already running from the area turned and advanced on him. He caved in the face of the first with a single blow from his hydraulic-powered punch. Ahead, the transport flew back over the horde, dropping waves of frag grenades on the enemy army.

He back-handed one coming at him from the side, cracking numerous ribs and sending the poor wretch flying into the side of the dune, where he lay in a crumpled pile. A third and fourth beat on Katerin’s armour with chunks of metal. He grabbed the two attackers around the necks, raised them off the ground, and slammed their heads together before dropping them. He stepped on their still forms as he moved forward, pressing them down into the ash.

Katerin glanced up just as Mageson flew out of the transport. She immediately went into stealth mode. Katerin smiled and turned back to his various assailants. The rag-clad, club-wielding mutants posed no threat to him in his spyrer rig. He slapped a couple away that tried to skewer him with rusty swords. He thought they looked like walking zombies with their spindly arms and sunken faces. Their stomachs were distended and their leathery skin had a horrible pallor from the toxic air they were forced to breathe.

But they didn’t scare Katerin. He dispatched several more with a sweeping roundhouse punch. He’d never believed in monsters. Five more came at him and he calmly launched a bolt into the one in the middle. When it exploded, the concussion and flying bone fragments took down the other four. What Katerin believed in was the power of an army; an army with guns.

‘Ready on our end,’ said Stein over the com. ‘Meet you in the middle.’

Let’s hope we find more than muties, thought Katerin, or else we’re in the wrong place.

Almost in response, the mutant horde thinned ahead of him as more and more of the degenerates ran off or turned on their own dead for an easy meal. As the

muties dissipated, Katerin saw the mercenaries at the centre of it all. He'd known this was no mutie attack. There was just no way those savages could have brought down a transport.

The question was, how much heavy munitions did the mercenaries have left? Only one way to find out. Katerin launched two explosive bolts towards the mercenaries. They immediately scattered, returning fire as they dived for cover. Several laser blasts splayed across the force field surrounding Katerin's armour. 'Okay,' he said, a small smile creeping over his face. 'Now this is more like it.'

His bolts exploded right where the mercenaries had been standing. He wasn't sure, but he thought one or two of them got caught in the blast radius. He moved in as the barrage of laser fire continued to pelt his armour. He launched two more bolts at the closest mercenaries. They didn't have time to get out of the way and the blasts ripped through the exposed flesh around their armour.

Unfortunately, his bolt launchers were almost depleted, and he wanted to reserve at least one in each arm for an emergency. So, it was time for close quarters. As he lumbered forward, one of the laser blasts finally found its way through the force field, hitting his power unit. He watched as the shimmering field surrounding him disappeared.

'Oh scav,' he said. The big problem with the Orrus rig was its slow speed. He simply couldn't cover the remaining distance quickly.

Twin streaks of red light descended from the sky, burning through two more of the mercenaries. Katerin saw Mageson's smile as she flew over. He could almost feel the adrenaline dripping off her.

Half of the scummers turned their weapons on Mageson in her Yeld rig. With their attention now divided, Katerin launched his last bolts into the group and advanced in behind his shots. The explosions helped cover his charge and he reached the first scummer before he could get another shot off. He grabbed the man's head in both hands and squeezed with all his hydraulic-powered might, crushing the man's skull in seconds.

He dropped the body in the ash and moved on. A few laser blasts impacted his rig, but the armour held. Although it was starting to get warm inside as the metal heated up around him. Only five remained, and none had fired anything more than lasguns. Katerin hoped they'd used up their heavy weapons bringing down the first transport.

Two more laser beams from above thinned the scummer group to three. Katerin struck one with his gore-covered hand, spraying the man's face with blood as he caved in his nose. A second blow from his other hand went right through the

man's armour and chest, lifting him off the ground as Katerin's fist impaled him.

After the impressive punch, Katerin's arm was wedged inside the scummer's chest, held in place by the sundered armour. He turned to see the last two advancing on him. Both had dropped their lasguns and pulled out shotguns. One had an empty rocket launcher strapped to his back.

'Your force field is down,' said the one with the rocket launcher. A smile spread across his face. 'And I don't think I can miss your face from here.'

He pumped a shell into the chamber, aimed, and fired the shotgun. Katerin swung the impaled scummer around in front of him. The shotgun blast slammed into the back of the dead man, dislodging it. The bloody body slipped off his arm into the ash. 'I think you missed,' said Katerin.

He advanced on what he now assumed was the leader. The other scummer pumped his shotgun and aimed. Before the man could fire, an explosion burst over his back, ripping through his armour and sending him sprawling, face-first into the ash.

'Sorry I'm late,' said Stein, adding, 'I almost missed the fun.'

He raised his arm towards the scummer leader and fired just as Katerin yelled, 'No!'

The leader smiled and tried to salute as the bolt hit his armour. His arm only made it half way to his forehead before the explosion tore through his body.

'Damn,' said Katerin. He looked around at the carnage. While at one level, it was gratifying to tear through an enemy force with such precision, he knew their mission hadn't been simply to kill everything.

'Stein, Mageson,' he said. 'Start checking these mercenaries to see if any of them are still alive. I don't see the package. And if the package is not here, we need someone to interrogate.'

4: THE LIVING DEAD

Kal picked his way back towards Valtin's office. After figuring out how to use the holo projector, Kal had slipped it into his own pocket and moved away from the grisly scene. Being practically invisible at least made him feel a little safer. Of course, he wondered how the assassin had made it into the royal estate in the first place, and why Valtin hadn't assigned him any guards yet. These were two questions he planned to ask while sitting on his nephew's chest.

He looked down where his legs should be and was gratified that all he could see was a slight shimmer. Then Kal smiled as he thought of the fun he could have with Cait before surprising Valtin in his office.

When Kal reached Cait's office, she wasn't there and he heard voices coming from behind Valtin's door. He moved to the doorway and listened. One voice was Valtin's and the other sounded familiar: one of the other advisors he'd met on his last trip to the Spire. There was also a third voice that sounded tinny, like it was coming through a speaker.

Valtin said, 'So you don't have the package?'

'There's no sign of it,' said the tinny voice. 'It appears to have been removed from the transport by force.'

'And none of the mercenaries had it?' asked the second voice in the room, which had a clipped, staccato cadence as if each word had to be definitively completed before the next one could start.

'We are still searching, but it appears to have disappeared.'

'So you let it slip through your fingers?' asked the staccato voice. The accusation hung in the air.

Before the tinny voice could respond, Valtin cut in. 'Gentlemen,' he said. 'We do not have time for this. Katerin, go find that package. Do whatever it takes. Tear the Underhive apart if you have to, but do not return without it. Do you understand?'

‘Yes, Lord Chamberlain,’ said Katerin. ‘We will sweep through and find the thief.’

There was a soft click and Kal noticed the absence of a hissing sound that had accompanied the tinny voice.

Valtin continued talking to the other man in the office. ‘There is still the problem of Kal Jerico.’

Kal leaned in at the mention of his name.

‘I have a man coming in to help with that, Lord Chamberlain,’ said staccato. ‘He will have very explicit instructions on how to deal with the problem.’

‘Good,’ said Valtin. ‘I don’t know how long I can keep Kal in the dark. He can be very persistent when it comes to protecting his, shall we say, assets.’

‘Do not worry, Lord Chamberlain,’ said staccato. Kal thought he heard just a little extra emphasis placed on Valtin’s title each time the man said it, as if it was painful for him to say. ‘I shall handle the situation before Kal Jerico knows what you’re doing to him.’

‘Good,’ said Valtin. ‘Make sure you do.’

The conversation seemed to have ended because Kal heard one of the men walking towards the door. He decided it was time to leave and slipped out of Cait’s office back into the corridor. There was more going on here than he knew, and it was obvious he wasn’t going to get any information from Valtin. His nephew had already lied to him twice – once under threat. So, now it was time for Kal to learn the truth on his own.

Scabbs woke up in the dark with a horrible headache. He had trouble remembering where he was and what had happened. His arms and legs burned and itched as if they had been scraped raw, and not by his own scratching. A sliver of light above him beckoned to him and, as he climbed, the last few hours began playing back in his mind: Kal’s disappearance, Sonny, the ratskin thief, and then his sudden descent into the hole at the back of the abandoned warehouse.

As he scrambled up the ever steeper slope, Scabbs called out, ‘Yolanda? Yolanda? Where are you?’ He waited a few moments for a response, not really expecting one, and then, once he was certain she wasn’t around to hear, Scabbs yelled, ‘You scavving Escher. I hope you’re up to your hips in ash and muties by now!’

If this had been the first time that one of his two bounty hunter partners had left him lying unconscious in a hole, Scabbs might have been even more upset, but it

was a common enough occurrence when running around with Kal and Yolanda. He didn't really blame them. In the Underhive, the first rule is to look out for yourself. Everyone else is secondary. He tried not to feel too abandoned and concentrated on getting himself out of the tunnel. Then maybe he could go back to the Sump Hole and drink something to take care of his headache.

After a few minutes, he reached the top of the slope. He could see the dim warehouse above him as light from Hive City filtered through gaps in the walls and ceilings. The lip of the hole in the floor was at least ten feet over his head. He felt around on the wall of the hole, trying to find some handholds. What he found instead was a ladder.

A few seconds later, Scabbs sat on the floor at the back of the warehouse holding his throbbing head. He wondered if he should follow Yolanda, but wasn't sure if she had continued down the hole or not. Plus, she had the only light beam. His half-ratskin eyes were better than a human's in the dark, but not good enough for poking around in uncharted areas between domes. You never knew when you might come across a chasm caused by a hivequake.

Scabbs had just decided that the best course of action really was to head back to the Sump Hole for a drink when he heard someone scrambling up towards the ladder beneath him. Before he could call out for Yolanda, though, he heard a low-pitched grunt from below.

'Unnh,' he heard. And then, 'Helmawr's rump, I hate this part.'

Now, Yolanda had a fairly husky voice, but this person was quite definitely male and, from the volume and resonance, Scabbs thought it was quite a large male. In fact, the voice sounded oddly familiar and gave him a sudden chill running up his back to the nape of his neck.

Scabbs then did what Scabbs did best – he hid. He scanned the warehouse for something he could duck behind, but it really had been abandoned. He couldn't see anything nearby except the walls and some poles that supported the roof. The corners were quite dark, though, and if whoever came out went straight for the door, he might have a chance huddled in the shadows.

As the intruder climbed the ladder, Scabbs tiptoed to the furthest corner and curled up in a ball, keeping his arm over his forehead to keep the light from reflecting off his eyes.

A large head surrounded by shoulder armour peeked up through the floor, just barely fitting through the hole. In the dim light, Scabbs could see something else encircling the head, but wasn't sure what it was. The next thing out of the hole was a massive arm that definitely did not look human.

Scabbs gulped down a gasp, suddenly aware that Underhive monsters often had excellent dark vision. But the next hand and arm out of the hole looked normal, man-sized. Scabbs wondered if it might be a spyrer, and now worried about photo-contacts. He put a hand on the butt of his laspistol, knowing full well it would be next to worthless against a spyrer.

The rest of the hulking figure exited the hole, and the terrible truth of who now had Scabbs quite literally cornered dawned on the little half-ratskin. 'But you're supposed to be dead,' said Scabbs to himself as he gazed in pure terror at Vandal Feg.

He must have moved or made a sound at the surprise of seeing Feg because the giant man with the mechanical arm who had sworn vengeance upon both Kal and Scabbs with what was supposed to be his dying breath turned and looked into the corner.

Scabbs closed his eyes and prayed to the ratskin ancestors, to the undying emperor and even to Kal Jerico.

By the time Wotan hit the street, he'd lost Bobo in the crowd, even though most of the people outside Madam Noritake's rushed away from the mastiff when he crashed back through the door. Of course, from Wotan's perspective, everyone looked tall, even the short spy in the plain, grey clothes.

The mastiff rarely relied on sight for tracking anyway. The air analyzers built into his torso had been state of the art when they'd been scavenged for his creation, and were still far better than just about anything in the hive. As nondescript as Bobo might be to the human eye, he couldn't escape Wotan's nose. The combination of cigar smoke, cheap perfume off that girl upstairs and a certain oily musk the analyzers couldn't quite place made Bobo shine like a beacon of malodorous light.

Wotan padded off down the street, following Bobo's heavy scent. People moved out of his way wherever he went, but the streets were so crowded that he was like a bubble of soap in the basin of grease that was Hive City. The pocket of space that opened in front of Wotan closed up behind him just as quickly.

He followed Bobo as the little spy meandered back and forth through Hive City. Even though the trail seemed haphazard to Wotan's visual sensors, his altimeter detected a near-constant increase in altitude as Bobo led him through dome after dome. In fact, one tunnel connecting domes contained a spiralling, thirty-degree ramp curved around itself at least ten times before opening back up into the next dome. If the mastiff had been a flesh and blood dog, it would have been panting

and huffing by the time Bobo came to a stop at an enormous wall.

The wall was so massive Wotan saw it several minutes before he finally noticed where Bobo had halted. The little man stood at the back of a large queue of people who all seemed to have some odd interest in the enormous wall ahead of them.

The giant wall reached up at least a hundred metres. As Wotan stared at the massive barrier, he discerned something interesting – it was a huge door. To each side, one metre-diameter hinges corkscrewed their way up the wall, running nearly to the top. Far above him, the outer edges of the doors curved towards each other, meeting in a triangle far up the side of the dome.

An intricate spiral pattern inlayed into both doors had grown dingy and encrusted with greasy dirt, grime, rust and worse effluvia over many centuries, but Wotan's enhanced visual cortex could reconstruct most of the design. The symbols were meaningless to the mastiff's memory core, though, so it simply stored the information away.

Of more interest were the ranks of guards on patrol, walking up and down the lines of people. He could discern no pattern to their movements or to those people they pulled out of line to subject to a wide array of dehumanizing procedures.

Most were allowed back in line, at the back of course, but some were hauled off to one of several buildings to the side of the huge wall. For as long as Wotan stood there, tongue hanging out while his mechanical canine brain attempted to sort out the procedure for getting through the doors, none of the people taken into the side buildings ever exited.

People who reached the front of each line handed over papers to another set of guards, who asked them questions, sometimes for many long minutes, while looking at the submitted papers. After a while, Wotan cocked his head and the servos in his face made a metallic eyelid raise slightly. None of the people at the front of the line ever got to go through the wall. Many of them wandered away from the great wall, but quite a few simply got into another line.

As Bobo neared the front of the line, Wotan moved forward, ready to spring into action should the door finally open. Bobo handed over a piece of paper, which the guard looked at for a few moments as he asked questions. Then he called over one of the other guards, who came and looked at the paper over the first guard's shoulder. That guard called another and soon, all of the lines had stopped moving as the guards took turns looking at Bobo's paper.

Wotan sat down, getting bored with the entire process. Somewhere deep down

in his brain, he felt the urge to scratch his back, but there were no neural pathways for that particular command from his memory core to his legs, so he simply ignored the urge.

Then all of the lights in the plaza began to flash and sirens blared into life. Several guards surrounded Bobo and moved him away from the crowd, while the rest of the guards pulled out their weapons and formed a line between the wall and the queues. The line of guards pointed their weapons at the crowd and began moving forward, pushing them all back away from the wall.

The crowd tried to push back, but after several got shot and fell to the ground, the rest turned and ran. Wotan growled and barked as people ran past him, but for the moment they didn't seem terribly worried about the metal mastiff and his razor-sharp teeth.

Once the last of the crowd passed Wotan, he saw the wall had opened and that Bobo was walking through. Wotan stood and ran towards the open wall just as the blare of the siren changed pitch and the wall began to close. The guards had relaxed and let the barrels of their weapons drop slightly, but immediately brought their guns back up and aimed at Wotan.

Wotan stopped, but not because of the guns trained on him. No, this was something far worse. Deep down in his processors, another odd command had been activated. The neural pathways for this command had been connected, and the metal mastiff had no choice but to comply with the mental order.

The slightly higher pitch of the blaring siren as the wall closed had triggered the response and try as he might to fight the urge, Wotan found himself sitting down, raising his nose up to point at the top of the dome and howling.

Katerin stepped out onto the Hive City docks. One of the scummers had survived the assault, but just barely. His leg had been blown off by the captain's bolt launcher, and he wouldn't last the night. At first the scummer wouldn't talk. Katerin was amazed by the man's loyalty, but when he'd been reminded about what happened to injured creatures in the Ash Wastes at night, the scummer had been more than happy to tell Katerin everything he knew in exchange for a quick, clean death before the spiders came.

And so they had piled back into the transport and headed for the Hive City docks, chasing after some one-armed mercenary named Vandal Feg, who the dying scummer said had taken the satchel and run off before their first pass over the battlefield.

Katerin had decided to keep his spyrer rig on. It was a calculated risk, he knew.

Hive City residents didn't take kindly to Spire nobles rampaging through their streets in rigs. That type of thing might be fine in the lawless Underhive, but in the City there were rules, and one rule was that they all hated anyone from the Spire interfering in their daily lives.

But that was exactly why Katerin had decided to wear the rig. It would cut through the lengthy process of complaints and protests he expected from the Hive City officials. There would be hell to pay later, but that wouldn't be his problem.

Behind him, the royal guard hustled off the transport and began spreading out onto the docks in groups of three. 'Slam and sweep,' he called. 'Break open every locked door; check every corner. No lethal force unless absolutely necessary, but nobody leaves these docks unless I say so.'

An official-looking man with a clipboard and wire-rimmed glasses sitting on top of his bald head rushed over towards Katerin. 'What in the hive is the meaning of this?' he asked.

Katerin held up one, armoured finger, almost poking the man in the cheek, and glared for a moment before turning back to his troops. 'Mageson, give me an aerial view. Stein, guard the entrance. Nothing gets past you. Understand? Use any means necessary to keep this dock locked down.'

The bald dock official sputtered and fumed. Keeping his finger poised in front of the man's eyes, Katerin slowly turned to look at him. The man's face had turned bright red from his neck to the top of his head, but Katerin wasn't about to let the man go on the offensive.

'What is your name?' demanded Katerin.

The sputtering turned into an open-mouthed exclamation of surprise. 'Bwah…' he started, before regaining his composure. 'I am Remor Donne, comptroller of the Hive City docks. You can't…'

'Excellent,' said Katerin. He turned and walked a few metres away. 'Just the man I need.' He looked back at Donne and waved him over. He waved his hands at the docks, which his troops were already busy searching. 'I am Aldous Katerin, captain of the royal guard… Lord Helmawr's royal guard. My troops are here to search for a fugitive. I expect your full cooperation in this matter.'

The controller raised his own finger and opened his mouth to protest, but Katerin took that moment to drape his heavily armoured arm around Donne's shoulders. He let just enough of the weight of the rig rest on the man to exert pressure throughout his entire body. He smiled at Donne as he cocked the bolt launcher, which was right next to the man's ear, to load an explosive bolt into the

firing chamber.

'You can't do this,' said Donne, his voice hardly trembling at all.

Katerin was actually quite impressed when Donne finished his thought, and with much more authority in his voice than most people could muster with a loaded bolt launcher so close to their head.

'I just did,' said Katerin. 'Consider the docks under martial law until further notice. You can either help this process end quickly or you can spend the next few days explaining to Herr Kauderer why you hindered this operation.'

Kal snuck out of Cait's office just as a freakishly tall man with an angular face and a long, sharp nose opened the door adjoining Valtin's office. Now Kal remembered the hawkish man. He'd been in the room during Kal's meeting with old Helmawr during his last visit to the Helmawr estate. Some other high-ranking official in his father's inner circle. He hadn't said anything during the meeting, but it was obvious to Kal that he normally dominated any room he entered.

Kal bumped into the door frame as he looked back at the hawkish man. The man's eyes immediately darted towards the door as he stood stock still. He searched the area and Kal was certain that he'd see the shimmering air surrounding him. He tried to slip around the door frame as silently as possible.

'Who's there?' said the hawk. 'Guards!' he called. 'Guards!'

As usual, luck was with Kal Jerico, for at that moment, a woman screamed. This wasn't a 'Sweet Emperor, there's a rat in the room,' scream. This blood-curdling howl continued like the wail of a siren, completely drowning out the hawk's call for aid.

The scream echoed through the halls, but as it continued, Kal could tell it was getting closer. Then, from around a corner down the hall came Cait, running and flailing her arms, and screaming like she'd been stabbed in the gut – a sound Kal had heard all too often in his life; had even made on more than one occasion.

Cait had no blood on her that Kal could see. She moved much too quickly for someone with a stomach wound. The hawk ran out into the hall, quickly followed by Valtin. Kal backed away from the scene before the hawk remembered the shimmering air and turned to look for him.

As he turned the corner, he heard Cait scream. 'She's dead… Someone… I don't know who, but she's dead. There's blood everywhere!' and then the crying started.

Kal thanked his luck and jogged off in the opposite direction. As he ran, Kal

wondered what he should do next. He couldn't trust anyone up here, not even Valtin it seemed. He was all alone and someone wanted him dead. Well, okay, that made it a normal day, but he was out of his element in the Spire. He had no idea where to start looking for answers.

At the very least, he needed a safe haven where he could hole up and think things through. Normally, he'd retreat to the Sump Hole; his office of sorts. He'd sit, have a few wildsnakes and wait for an idea to hit him – or some barmaid's brother – whichever came first. But here in the Spire he had no refuge, no office.

Then it came to him. The last time his father had screwed up his life, they'd taken him to a private chamber where the crazy, old recluse had holed up; Helmawr's private office. With the old man dead, and Kal next in line, the office belonged to him now, didn't it? And it had the added bonus of being secluded and a secret to all but Helmawr's most senior advisors. It was the perfect place for Kal to catch his breath and figure out his next move. Now, if he only had some idea how to get to that secret room.

Kal stopped and tried to get his bearings. The estate was like a maze and he'd never been very good at directions; that's what Scabbs was for. 'Damn,' he said. 'I could really use that son of a ratskin right now.'

Scabbs pulled his knees into his chest, trying to get just a little smaller as he hid in the dark. Feg stared into the corner for a moment, but then continued to scan the room. Maybe he hadn't seen him.

'I know you're in here somewhere,' said Feg. 'Come out so I can kill you quickly and quietly. Otherwise it's going to hurt. A lot.'

Scabbs began to shake from head to toe, which sent a cloud of dead skin into the air around him. Before he realized it, he breathed some of the skin flakes into his nose, and sneezed.

Feg whirled around, snapping his mechanical arm out to the side, and activated his chainsword. A thousand tiny blades began spinning along the length of the sword as he moved towards the corner. 'Okay,' he snarled. 'You asked for it. Here comes the pain!'

Scabbs aimed his laspistol at the hulking monstrosity coming towards him, but knew that no matter how many shots he got off, it would do little but make Feg even madder. He squeezed the trigger anyway, hoping beyond hope that some of Kal's luck might have finally rubbed off on poor old Scabbs.

He aimed for the eyes. It seemed the most reasonable thing to do. But his hands were shaking so hard that the las blast shot well over Feg's head, blasting a hole

in the thin metal roof.

'Ha ha,' said Feg, and Scabbs could see the glee in his eyes. 'There you are, you little rodent.'

Scabbs wasn't sure if Feg had seen his face in the flash of light from the las blast or just assumed anyone hiding in a dark corner was likely to be a rodent. It didn't matter. He needed to move. As Feg advanced, Scabbs darted forward.

Feg must have heard him, because the huge chainsword sliced down in a long arc. Scabbs got inside the reach of the weapon just in time and continued on, scrambling on hands and feet right through Feg's legs.

He got out the other side, but behind him the huge bruiser had turned and swung his screaming chainsword down towards the ground again. Scabbs darted to the side, but the sword caught him in the foot, leaving a long gash below his ankle.

He screamed and rolled to the ground, slamming up against the back wall. As Scabbs lay there, writhing in pain, Feg advanced, raising his chainsword up high for the final strike. Scabbs closed his eyes and muttered a silent curse at Kal and Yolanda.

Feg smiled, his face lit by a beam of light coming through the hole Scabbs had shot through the roof. Before he could strike again, the door behind Feg exploded. Plasteel shrapnel pelted the room as three royal guards entered. They levelled their weapons at Feg. 'You're coming with us,' said one of them.

'That's where you're wrong,' said Feg. 'You're the ones going straight to the sump.' He rushed at the guards, revving his chainsword as he ran.

Scabbs thanked his lucky, Kal Jerico, stars and crawled over to the hole. Before dropping out of sight, he glanced back at the fight. One royal was already down and the other two were backing towards the door. Scabbs slipped over the edge, going head first into the hole. He tucked and rolled down the slope, hitting his head on something hard and sharp as he barrelled down the tunnel. As he came to a stop, his foot and his head screamed in pain, but at least he wasn't dead.

Quite some time later, Kal found a familiar set of stairs and headed down. He felt he was finally getting close and was fairly certain he wouldn't find himself going past Valtin's office a fourth time. At the bottom of the stairs was a curving corridor with no windows. As he moved down the hall, he could tell he was winding around some large central space.

A moment later the door came into view. He knew it was the right door by the two guards standing at attention outside. The door was closed, so Kal couldn't

just slip past the guards cloaked in his shimmering, light-bending field. Technically, they were his guards, so he didn't think killing them was a good idea, either.

Then he had a thought. He snuck up next to the near guard. He got so close he could see the wax built up inside the guard's ear. It was actually pretty disgusting and Kal considered reporting the guard to his superiors, but he had something much more fun in mind.

Reaching carefully around behind the guard, Kal poised his hand just above the hilt of the man's service sword. Then, with one quick movement, he shoved the pommel down, forcing the sheath up and over, smacking the other guard in the leg.

'Ow,' said the injured guard. 'What'd you do that for?'

Kal slipped back away from the guard.

'Do what?' asked the first guard.

'Don't give me that,' said the second guard. 'You just hit me with your sword.'

Kal moved around behind the second guard, who had turned to face the first guard.

'I did no such thing,' said the first guard. 'You must have dreamt it.'

'You saying I was asleep on duty?' asked the second guard.

Kal got ready.

'Wouldn't have been the first time.'

'Why you…'

Kal shoved the second guard in the back. The guard lurched forward, throwing his arms up defensively, and ended up hitting the first guard in the nose as he fell on top of him. As the first guard went down, he brought his knee up into the groin of the second.

In a moment, they were both on the floor, rolling over each other trying to get one another into a head lock or scissor their legs around the other's torso. One landed a nasty punch to the midriff of the other, and Kal heard a loud crack as one guard's head smacked into the floor.

'That was too easy,' mumbled Kal as he stepped past the now bruised and bloodied guards and opened the door. 'I need better guards if I'm going to stay here much longer,' he added after entering the darkened chamber beyond.

Kal didn't know what to expect when he got into Helmawr's private office. If he was lucky, the old man's desk would still be sitting at the far end of the chamber with a comfy chair, and, perhaps, a bottle of the Spire's finest liquor stashed away in the bottom drawer. More than likely, all he would find inside

was Valtin waiting for him. His nephew had an annoying habit of showing up unannounced.

What he didn't expect – never even dreamt of, or would have ever guessed – was that he would find the body of Lord Helmawr lying on a bed. There, in the back of the room where the old man's desk once stood in that single pool of light, now sat a large bed bathed in white light holding the unmistakable figure of old Gerontius Helmawr, lying with his arms folded over his chest as if placed there to lie in state.

Except this was no audience chamber. It was a secret room that only the most senior members of House Helmawr even knew existed. As Kal walked towards the bed, he noticed something else odd about this situation. There were tubes connected to the body that led to upturned bottles hanging on pegs behind the bed.

There was also what looked like a medi-pack attached to the pale, sunken chest by a series of wires. This was like no medi-pack Kal had ever seen. It had a pict screen with little squiggly lines and numbers that flashed from side to side, and it beeped periodically.

Kal began to get an odd feeling in his gut. There was something not quite right here. It wasn't just that they'd placed Lord Helmawr's body in this secret room connected to a bunch of weird machines. Kal stuck the fingers of one hand under Helmawr's nose and felt the slightest breeze rustle his skin.

'He's alive,' said Kal. 'What the scav?'

'I suppose you have some questions for me,' said Valtin from behind Kal.

After wrapping up his wounded foot with a dirty strip of cloth from his shirt, Scabbs had made his way down the tunnel. As he suspected, it was full of twists and turns and dead ends and sheer drop offs. Within the hive, the areas between the domes were notorious for these kinds of secret pathways, lying hidden from most, yet allowing those who knew of them to move undetected from place to place.

They were also notorious for killing more people than ever got through to the other side. Hive quakes would render a path useless or worse, leave a deathtrap in its wake. Too often, wars between gangs would be fought over which gang had the right to control the tunnel. Some thought that most hive quakes were actually started by errant frag grenades set off within these enclosed and unstable areas of the hive.

Eventually, Scabbs saw some light coming from the tunnel ahead of him. As he

got closer, the light got almost unbearable to his sensitive eyes. As he turned one last corner, he saw it – a large hole with nothing beyond it but white ash and whiter light.

'I made it,' said Scabbs as he limped down to the exit.

'About scavving time,' said Yolanda, who stepped into the tunnel just as he reached its end. Scabbs was too tired and too sore to even rise to the bait. Instead, he decided it seemed like a good time for a rest. He put his back against the wall of the tunnel and started to slide down to the ground.

'Don't bother sitting,' said Yolanda. She kicked him in the thigh. 'We're heading back up to the docks.' She pointed at the tunnel exit. It opened onto the ash wastes, a place no hiver would go… at least not without a gun to his head or the promise of a huge score when, or if, he returned. 'There's nothing out there but an abandoned transport and a scavving lot of bodies.'

'But…' said Scabbs. He slid a little further down the wall, only to get another kick in his thigh.

'No,' said Yolanda. 'Come on. Whatever was in that transport is already gone. The only thing left was an empty safe that something ripped open. I don't know how they did it. I couldn't even lift the door, which I found embedded in the floor across the chamber.'

'Feg,' said Scabbs and he slipped the rest of the way to the ground.

Yolanda was obviously too surprised to remember to kick Scabbs. 'What?' she asked.

'Vandal Feg has it,' said Scabbs. 'Whatever was in that safe, Feg ripped it open with his big, metal hand and now he's in the hive with it.'

'But Feg is dead,' she said. 'You said you saw it yourself. Vandal Feg is dead… right?'

The sirens blared as the wall closed. Wotan could do nothing but howl and howl. The pitches of the two sounds combined into an awful, disharmonious wail that apparently human hearing couldn't handle very well. The guards, who had all trained their weapons on the metal mastiff, now dropped to their knees around him, holding their hands against the sides of their heads.

For several, long minutes, nothing in the plaza moved. Wotan, transfixed by the hard-wiring of his mechanical canine brain, could not stop howling, and the guards, incapacitated by the power of sound waves, fell over and twitched as spasms wracked their bodies.

Then, the automatic systems that had triggered the sirens in the first place,

switched off as the wall finally closed with a thundering clang that echoed throughout the dome. With the wailing of the sirens gone, Wotan's actions returned to his own control. The same couldn't be said for the guards, who continued to twitch on the ground.

Wotan licked the nearest guard on the cheek and panted for a few seconds before turning and padding off out of the plaza, leaving the incapacitated guards lying on the ground. He didn't have time for them anymore. He needed to find another way to the other side of that wall.

Feg desperately wanted to chase Kal Jerico's half-ratskin comrade through the maze of tunnels. He knew that wherever Scabbs was, Kal was certain to be nearby, and he owed them both a great deal of pain.

However, the royals had somehow beaten him to the docks and it wouldn't be long before someone checked in with the three guards he'd killed. He dumped their bodies down the hole and, after a short detour, slipped out of the warehouse.

The docks swarmed with security. They were methodically moving through the entire area, breaking open doors and searching every warehouse and docked ship. Luckily, they weren't being quiet about it, so Feg could stay ahead of them. He didn't want to risk another fight out in the open; that would surely draw too much attention.

He had one chance. The old smuggler's tunnel wasn't the only secret passage connected to the docks. It was far too important a place to have just the single passage. He knew of another one that would get him off the docks and even out of Hive City. The only problem was that he had to get to the rooftops to use it.

Feg made his way to the side of the dome and waited for the nearby troops to clomp away from him. He then used the claws of his mechanical arm to carve out hand holds in the masonry and pulled himself up onto the roof of the closest warehouse. Staying as low as possible while still keeping an eye on the troops below, Feg crossed the roof and jumped to the next.

The passage was close. Just two more jumps and he was there. He made the first no problem, but as he landed on the last roof, a laser beam lanced the wall next to him. He looked around trying to figure out where the shot had come from. Another shot tore into his knee and he jumped to the side.

He'd seen the direction of that last one and looked up, finding a young noble in a Yeld spyrer rig swooping towards him. 'Damn' said Feg. He had no ammo left, so unless she came within range of his chainsword, Feg was defenceless. His

only choice was to make a run for it. He dashed off across the roof, zig-zagging as best he could with his wounded knee.

Lasers tore into the roof on either side of him but Feg was almost to the hatch. He had no time to work the secret latch, so he switched on his chainsword and slashed twice across the huge air duct that ran up the wall towards a giant fan. He crashed through the criss-crossed metal barrier as two more shots from the laser etched the wall to either side.

Feg immediately fell about ten feet, but he'd expected that and hit the bottom on his good leg and continued running, not even bothering to look back.

A short while later, as Feg jogged down the tunnel, wincing with every step, and expecting at any moment to hear his pursuers behind him, he instead saw two forms standing in front of him.

They were a pair of Orlock gangers, twins named Brynn and Riyl in matching outfits. They wore dark, leather vests over red and blue shirts with matching bandanas wrapped around their shaved heads. Dark sunglasses, which seemed an odd choice in the dimly-lit tunnel, and long, black coats, had been donned to make some sort of statement about their cold-blooded nature.

Unfortunately, once they opened their mouths, the twin Orlocks gave away any advantage their slick clothes provided.

'Halt,' said one. 'This is Mr Nemo's secret passage.'

'Hey,' said the other. 'It was my turn to say that.'

The first figure punched the second figure. 'Nuh uh! You did it last time.' To which the second figure's response was a swift kick to the shin of the first.

Feg was pretty certain he could hear the sound of footsteps echoing through the tunnel behind him. He could simply kill these two and continue running, but he had finally recognized them and knew a quicker way to deal with the situation.

'Okay, Seek and Destroy,' he said. 'You got me. You'd better take me to see Nemo, and I mean right now.'

Bobo showed his invitation to the guards at the gate to the royal estate and was quite surprised to be immediately escorted through and into the palace. He was beginning to think that he probably should have dressed for the occasion. He kind of figured he'd have a little time before the wedding to get ready.

'Am I late?' he asked the guard walking with him through the palace. He glanced out a window and caught his breath at the sudden realization that he was near the top of the hive, in the very pinnacle of the Spire. Outside the window was not more dull-grey metal or another dingy passageway. Outside this window

there was nothing but sky.

'No,' replied the guard. 'I believe you are right on time. Minister Kauderer is expecting you in his office. We should be there in just a moment.'

'Minister Kauderer?' asked Bobo, more to himself than to the guard.

'Yes,' said the guard. 'He instructed us to bring you to his office as soon as you arrived.'

Bobo smiled. Now it all made sense. Kauderer had some job for him but for some reason couldn't risk using their normal contact protocols. Thus the ruse of the Kal Jerico wedding invitation. Kauderer knew that Bobo couldn't resist that invitation, even though it was too preposterous to be true.

'Guess I won't be needing a suit for the wedding, then,' said Bobo, almost laughing at the thought of Kal Jerico getting married and ruling the hive.

'Oh no,' said the guard. 'Not yet, anyway. The wedding isn't for several more days.'

He stopped in front of Bobo, which was good because Bobo had already stopped walking, his mouth hanging open.

'Here we are, sir,' said the guard. He opened the door, ushered the flabbergasted Bobo inside, and then shut the door behind him.

'Ah, Bobo,' said Kauderer from across the room. 'Come here for a moment. I have something important to show you.'

Bobo shook off the surprise that the wedding was indeed real, and walked over to see what his Spire boss had for him. It was a body. A dead Delaque, from the look of the armour, although her equipment seemed to be a step or two above what he normally saw in Hive City or the Underhive.

'Am I supposed to know her?' asked Bobo.

'I doubt it,' said Kauderer. 'She's strictly a Spire operative, an assassin actually.'

Bobo smiled. 'Looks like she killed the wrong person.'

Kauderer's glare made him instantly regret the statement. A long pause followed and Kauderer's searching eyes made Bobo feel like a bug caught in the web of a sump spider.

'What did you want of me, sir?' said Bobo at last, trying to get the conversation back on track and get himself out from under the hawkish eye of Hermod Kauderer.

'This woman's job was to assassinate the hive's ruler,' said Kauderer. 'She failed, obviously. I want you to take her place.'

'You want me to do what?' asked Bobo.

Kauderer flipped a lever on the wall and watched as the body slid off the table down into a chute that opened in the floor. A moment later, smoke and a few cinders floated up into the room. He turned and stared down his nose at Bobo again. ‘I want you to assassinate Kal Jerico.’

Seek and Destroy, two of Nemo’s henchmen – and not his best, obviously – had argued all the way back to Nemo’s hideout. They hadn’t even bothered to blindfold Feg before leading him into the master spy’s secret lair. Not that it mattered much. Feg knew the way. He and Nemo went way back.

The twins pushed against one another as they both tried to fit through the doorway into Nemo’s office at the same time. One started calling and then the other joined in: ‘Mr Nemo. Mr Nemo,’ they cried. ‘I caught someone in your special tunnel…’

‘No, I caught him. You weren’t even there…’

The twin Orlocks grabbed each other by the lapels of their leather coats and screamed at each other.

‘Yes I was…’

‘No you weren’t…’

Before their argument devolved into a brawl, again, Feg pushed his way past them and strode into Nemo’s office.

As usual, the master spy sat in a well-padded chair surrounded by a dozen or more pict-screens. His black helmet, which constantly reflected the images on his screens, was hooked by wires into the wall behind him. What those wires brought to the master spy, Feg had never dared ask. Perhaps messages from informants. Maybe data that he somehow routed directly into his brain, or some sort of medication or mind-altering drugs, although Feg doubted the latter. Nemo was far too serious to let his mind be altered in any way.

‘Ah, Mr Feg,’ said Nemo. ‘It is good to see you again. My sources said you were dead. But after I heard about the job today, I knew you were alive. Do you have the item in question?’

Feg smiled. ‘I’m not that stupid,’ he said. ‘It’s somewhere safe. Now, let’s talk about what we can do for each other.’

5: THREATS AND BARGAINS

Kal pulled back from the unconscious body of Gerontius Helmawr and turned around. Valtin stood just inside the pool of light, staring at him with an odd look on his face, somewhere between a smirk and a sheepish grin. He'd been caught lying – again – but obviously knew that Kal wouldn't kill him; at least not until he learned the truth.

Kal's first question had nothing to do with Helmawr or the assassin who tried to kill him earlier. 'How did you know I was here? How can you see me?'

'The answer to your first question is obvious,' said Valtin. 'After you disappeared, I thought, where is the one place I didn't want you to go. And, as usual, Kal Jerico did exactly what he wasn't supposed to do.'

Kal raised his finger to interrupt, but Valtin waved him off. That's when Kal noticed that his hand wasn't invisible anymore. Valtin held up his own hand, showing a small black box with an antenna at the top.

'It sends out a pulse that disrupts electro-magnetic fields,' he said, turning the gizmo over and over in his hand. 'Handy in the spy business. When Cait showed us the dead Delaque assassin and Kauderer mentioned the shimmer he'd seen in the office, we figured out what had happened.'

Kal hadn't really listened past the first sentence. 'You broke my holo projector?' he screamed.

Valtin shrugged. 'Sorry, I can't afford to have the heir to the Helmawr throne sneaking around the palace unprotected.'

Kal pulled the holo-projector from his pocket and tossed it on the ground. 'Just unprotected, right?' he said. 'That's what this whole charade is all about.'

The sheepish smirk returned to Valtin's face. 'I would have told you all of this up front,' he said. 'But it was decided you couldn't be trusted with the information.'

'Well, you're going to tell me now,' said Kal. Before Valtin could even respond,

Kal whipped out his pearl-handled laspistols and held them at arm's length to either side of his body. One he aimed directly at Valtin's head, the other he brought down slowly until it rested on the gaunt, pale face of Lord Gerontius Helmawr.

'All of it, nephew,' added Kal. 'And if I even think you're holding anything back, I commit patricide and then, um, nephew-cide.'

Valtin held his hands up in front of him. 'Okay. Okay,' he said. 'There was an assassination attempt on Lord Helmawr and it almost succeeded. He was injected with some sort of neuro-toxin. We don't know how it happened, but I would guess now that it was that same Delaque agent. But even with the holo-projector, she must have had help from the inside to get past all of our security.'

'Everyone has a price,' said Kal.

Valtin nodded. 'Exactly. Anyway, we rushed him to his doctors, but there was nothing they could do for him. The toxin had already begun shutting down messages from his brain to all of his vital organs. But we do have the most advanced medical tools on all of Necromunda at our disposal. These machines are the only thing keeping him alive. They breathe for him and pump his blood and everything else a body needs to sustain life.'

'Doesn't sound like living to me,' said Kal. 'Sounds like I would be doing old dad a favour if I finished the job right now.'

Valtin stepped forward and reached out towards Kal.

'No,' he said.

Kal snapped the laspistol in his hand and motioned for Valtin to stop.

'There is medicine that can reverse the effect of the toxin,' said Valtin. The concern on his face was evident and Kal began to believe his nephew was truly telling him everything this time.

'We had the medication shipped in from an off-world supplier, but somehow our enemies found out about it. They shot down the transport and stole the medicine. It's now lost in the hive. Just before coming in here, I got a communiqué from Captain Katerin. They had the thief cornered in the Hive City docks, but he got away through some hidden passage.'

'So let me see if I have all this straight,' said Kal. 'Dad's not dead and you have medicine that can save him. Only you've lost the medicine, which is by now somewhere deep in the Underhive. I was brought up here to be your lightning rod to flush out the assassins because you had no leads. Oh, and I'm not really going to be the master of House Helmawr and there is no wedding. That about sum it up?'

Valtin nodded. ‘I wanted to tell you all of this as soon as you got here, but I was convinced that it would be too much of a security risk.’

‘And I’m guessing it was old hawk-face who convinced you of that, right?’

‘Kauderer?’ asked Valtin and then the smirk returned. ‘Yes, although we don’t call him that to his face.’

‘Well, in that case,’ said Kal as he lowered and holstered his weapons, ‘I guess I’ll be leaving now.’

Valtin raised his hands again. ‘No.’ he said. ‘Wait! We still need you, uncle. You killed the assassin. Now we don’t have any leads. There really is a wedding, and we think that now that their assassin is dead, whoever wants to destabilize House Helmawr will try to stop the wedding. It may be our only chance to find out who’s behind all of this.’

Kal shook his head. ‘I’m nobody’s target,’ he said. ‘All of the money in dear old dad’s coffers wouldn’t make me stay up here unprotected.’

‘But Kal,’ pleaded Valtin, ‘When I said earlier that you were the only person I could trust, I meant it. I need your help with this. I’m trying to hold the house together, but now that the medicine is gone it’s likely Gerontius will die. Believe me, there will be a civil war over succession that will rip this house apart.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Kal. ‘It’s all Spire politics and it has nothing to do with me.’

‘You don’t think this will affect your world?’ asked Valtin. ‘What do you suppose happens to the economy of Hive City if the Spire destabilizes? By the time the political war is over up here, the Underhive will extend all the way to the great Spiral Gates.’

Kal thought it over. He had to admit his nephew had a point. It was always the lowest level of society that paid for the problems of the elite. Besides if the Hive economy collapsed, who would pay for Kal’s services? But dammit, why did it always have to be his job to clean up the family’s business.

‘I’ll tell you what I’ll do, nephew,’ said Kal. ‘I’ll find that medicine for you then you call off this damned wedding and we all get back to normal.’

Valtin thought about it and then nodded. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘We’ll smuggle you out so nobody knows you’re gone. But I must continue to prepare for the wedding just in case you fail. The doctors tell me that Gerontius can’t last on those machines for more than a week, and it’s already been four days. You’ve got three days to find the medicine or we have to go through with the wedding. I won’t let House Helmawr perish, even if that means putting Kal Jerico on the throne.’

‘You want me to kill Kal Jerico?’ asked Bobo. He looked for a place to sit, but the only spot seemed to be the low table that had just tipped the Delaque’s body into the incinerator. He decided to stand.

Kauderer used a towel to wipe down the table and dropped the rag into the incinerator chute. Then he walked back towards his desk, flipping the lever that shut the incinerator door along the way. Only after he had taken a seat did he look back up at Bobo and respond.

‘We work in a difficult business,’ he said. ‘It is often necessary to perform the unpleasant tasks that no one else is willing to do.’

‘But Kal is my: not so much my friend,’ said Bobo, ‘but he’s a kindred spirit. We understand one another; respect each other.’

‘Are you telling me that if ordered to kill Kal Jerico, you would refuse?’

Bobo’s professionalism jostled with his emotion for just a brief moment before the personal detachment he’d trained long and hard to turn into a reflex kicked in. ‘No sir,’ he said. ‘I will do whatever is necessary for the good of House Helmawr. You know you can count on me.’

‘Good,’ said Kauderer. Bobo wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw a smile for a brief moment cross Kauderer’s stern features. ‘That’s what I wanted to hear.’

‘So, how is it to be accomplished?’ asked Bobo. ‘I assume you chose me because I can get close to Kal without arousing suspicion.’

Kauderer sighed. ‘As much as it pains me to say this,’ he said, staring at his desk as if the words truly gave him physical discomfort, ‘I do not actually want you to kill Kal Jerico.’

Bobo forgot himself and sat down on the low table. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Someone sent an assassin to kill Lord Helmawr,’ said Kauderer. He pointed at the table. ‘That assassin. Now it seems the new target is our future ruler, Kal Jerico.’

Bobo detected just the slightest hesitation in Kauderer’s voice before saying Kal’s name. He knew better than to ask the unanswered question about the first assassination attempt.

‘It seems that Kal Jerico is much tougher to kill than he looks. Not only did he survive his encounter with the assassin, he made sure I couldn’t get any information out of her.’

He looked up at Bobo again. ‘That’s where you come in,’ he said. ‘I chose you because you are unknown up here in the Spire. You’ve spent your entire career below the wall. And you’ve proven your loyalty to this house.’

‘So, what is it you want me to do?’ asked Bobo. ‘How can I help you?’

‘Your mission is to root out whoever is behind these attacks,’ said Kauderer. ‘I have established an alias for you. Once you leave here, you will become, to all eyes in the Spire, an off-world assassin trying to establish new business in Hive Primus.’

Bobo pointed at the floor. ‘You’re hoping whoever hired her will come to me once they realize she’s failed?’

Kauderer nodded. ‘Once we are done here, you will be smuggled off the estate to an apartment. Information about your new identity as well as a new wardrobe will be waiting for you there, along with a list of possible suspects and their regular haunts.’

‘Do I make contact or let them come to me?’

‘I will leave that up to your discretion,’ said Kauderer. ‘The word of your arrival should be out by now, and I will leak news of the death of the assassin as soon as you are in place.’

Bobo nodded and stood up.

‘However,’ said Kauderer. ‘You only have three days. After that Kal Jerico may well be the master of House Helmawr, and Emperor help us all if that happens.’

Scabbs sat with his back up against the wall at the end of the old smuggler tunnel and described his aborted battle with Vandal Feg for Yolanda. He only embellished a little about his role in his own escape.

‘You sure you only saw three guards?’ asked Yolanda.

Scabbs nodded. ‘And Feg cut one in half right before I jumped down the hole. The others looked like they were about to run. Why?’

‘Because my guess is that there are a lot more on the docks than those three,’ she said. ‘Sonny was right. They did bring down a royal transport, but that’s not all. The troops on the first transport are all dead, along with dozens of muties.’

‘First transport?’ asked Scabbs. ‘There were others?’

Yolanda nodded. She turned to look out over the Ash Wastes, still visible beyond the tunnel entrance some distance away. ‘At least one more landed and the troops in that ship laid waste to a couple of hundred muties and a group of scummers without losing a single man.’

‘Maybe the muties and the scummers killed each other,’ said Scabbs. ‘Can we go home now?’ His foot ached and he really just wanted to get back to the Sump Hole and not worry about muties, scummers, packages of spire tech or especially Vandal Feg.

‘No, most of the scummers were killed by explosions and I saw shell casings

from a bolt launcher. It was the second transport and they had some heavy firepower with them. Whatever Feg has is valuable, really valuable to the right people.'

'And to the wrong people, it's lethal,' said Scabbs. He unwrapped his bandage and looked at the gash in his foot. It had started to heal okay. He picked at the scab a little as he talked. 'I mean we have to fight either Feg or these royals to get the stupid package, and given a choice between Vandal Feg and a unit of royal troops, I pick a bottle of wildsnake in the Sump Hole.'

Yolanda turned and glared at Scabbs. As the silence grew around him, he looked up at her and withered under her gaze. 'What we need,' she said, 'is our own shock troops.'

'The Wildcats?' said Scabbs. 'You sure you want to drag them into this? I mean they've stopped trying to kill you now. Do you really want to get a bunch of them killed again? That just makes them mad.'

'This could be the biggest score of our lives, Scabbs,' said Yolanda. 'Just think about it, we get this piece of tech and sell it back to whoever it is wants it so badly, and then we never have to go bounty hunting with stupid Jerico ever again.'

'But I like Kal,' said Scabbs. He pulled at the scab on his foot a little too hard and blood started running down towards his toes again. He hastily wrapped it back up. 'And I like living even more. This sounds like suicide. Besides, what if the uphivers from that second transport already have it?'

Yolanda yanked the half-ratskin off the ground, easily lifting him into the air before dropping him back onto his feet. 'Only one way to find out,' she said. 'Come on.'

She half-pulled, half-dragged Scabbs along behind her as she began climbing back up through the smugglers' tunnel towards the Hive City docks.

When Scabbs and Yolanda got to the top of the tunnel, they found the bodies of the three dead royal troops that Feg had obviously dropped down the hole.

'Well, I guess we know Feg survived this battle, anyway,' said Yolanda. She stepped on the bodies as she reached for the ladder, then she heard voices from above.

'In here, captain,' said the first voice. 'A trail of blood leads right into the warehouse.'

'Stein, get more troops and investigate,' said the second voice, presumably the captain. 'I don't want any more deaths today. Mageson and I are heading into the

secret passage that behemoth escaped through.'

'Yes, captain,' said Stein.

Yolanda heard the door to the warehouse open and the unmistakable sound of a spyrer rig clomping across the floor above her.

'Oh scav,' she muttered. She turned to Scabbs and motioned for him to follow.

As they tromped back down the tunnel, Yolanda kept looking over her shoulder. Once she felt they were out of earshot, she said, 'Just what we needed, a trigger-happy noble in a spyrer rig finding us standing over his dead men.'

Scabbs limped along beside her, grunting with each step. 'How do you know he was trigger happy?'

'They all are.'

They continued on for a little while before Yolanda spoke again. 'At least we know Feg escaped with that Spire tech.'

'Yippee,' said Scabbs.

Yolanda ignored him. Sure, it would be tough. They had to find Feg and somehow get the item from him without getting killed. Then they had to find a way to sell the item back to its owners without getting killed. It would all be worth it if it meant she never had to follow Kal Jerico's orders ever again.

Something began to gnaw at the back of Yolanda's mind as they got closer to the bottom of the tunnel again. Then it hit her. 'Hey Scabbs,' she said. 'Do you know about another secret tunnel leading out of the docks?'

Scabbs grunted and then said, 'No, but there's probably several. It's got to be a hot target for smugglers and such.'

'Sure,' said Yolanda. 'But the enforcers sweep the docks pretty regularly. I remember them shutting down a couple of back entrances recently. How did they miss both the one we're in and the one Feg used to escape, and how did Feg know about them?'

They had reached the Ash Wastes again and Yolanda turned towards Scabbs. He shrugged and said, 'I dunno. I guess they were paid off. I mean this one wasn't hard to miss. We fell right into it.'

'Right,' said Yolanda. 'That's the only explanation. But who can pay off so many enforcers, and keep them paid off.'

The sudden realization hit them both harder than the wave of heat from the Ash Wastes.

'Nemo,' they said together.

They looked at each other for a moment, and then Yolanda left the tunnel and turned to walk along the edge of the hive. 'Come on,' she said. 'I know another

way back in.'

'Where are we going?' asked Scabbs.

She stopped and turned to look at Scabbs. 'You remember when Crimson chased us out of the hive a few years back?' she asked. 'Those tunnels aren't too far from here. Then we can head to the Sump Hole to forget about this whole mess.'

'What? Why?'

'Vandal Feg is one thing,' said Yolanda. 'But you know my feelings about Nemo. There is nothing in this world worth going up against him for.'

They shuffled down the tunnel in silence. 'You know,' said Scabbs. 'We should have seen it earlier. Vandal Feg isn't smart enough to pull this off himself. He must have been working for Nemo the whole time.'

'I don't work for you anymore, Nemo,' said Vandal Feg.

Nemo stared at the giant mercenary through his reflective, black mask and smiled, secure in the knowledge that his smile could not be seen. 'Everyone works for me,' he said, 'whether they know it or not.'

He looked at Seek and Destroy, his loyal and ruthless henchmen who, unfortunately, spent as much time fighting each other as doing their job. They were currently playing 'punch the shoulder' while guarding the door. At least they'd stopped arguing.

'Well, this is my job, this time, Nemo,' said Feg, 'not yours. Now, I'm willing to cut you in on the action if you help me. You see, I want you to work for me.'

Nemo decided to humour Feg for the moment. 'And what would be my role in this little venture?' he asked. As Feg spoke, Nemo flipped a few switches on one of his consoles. Several views of the Hive City docks sprang to life on his screens.

'All I require is transport into the Spire,' said Feg. 'I was supposed to meet up with a contact in the docks, but I guess you already know what's going on there.'

'Yes,' said Nemo. 'Yes, I do. Bit of a botched job, don't you think?' One view showed two nobles in spyrer rigs entering the secret entrance that Feg had sliced open. He switched to a different pict-camera that showed the interior of the tunnel.

'There's no way those royals should have beaten me back to the docks,' said Feg. 'Anyway, my contacts will pay you a handsome fee for providing me safe and quiet passage through the wall.'

'Including expenses?' asked Nemo. 'All expenses?' his fingers hovered over a

switch on his console as he watched the monitors. When the two spyrers moved into view of his tunnel camera, Nemo flipped the switch. The monitor flashed brightly, illuminating his face for a moment as the explosion he triggered tore through the tunnel. Almost immediately static replaced the bright image as he lost the signal from the camera.

He looked back at Feg, who hadn't spoken; perhaps distracted by the flash of light in Nemo's otherwise darkened office. 'It would seem we shall be adding the cost of a new access point to the docks to your list of expenses,' he said. 'Will that be agreeable to your contact?'

Feg seemed to consider it and looked back at the two guards behind him, perhaps wondering if he could fight his way out. He then looked back at Nemo and smiled. 'Look,' he said. 'Because we're old friends…'

Nemo shook his head.

'Partners? Associates?'

'Associates, perhaps,' said Nemo.

Feg smiled again and talked quickly. 'Because we've worked together in the past, I'm willing to cut you in for half of my take, and all you got to do is get me to the Spire. That should be easy for Nemo, the Underhive's master spy.'

Nemo flipped a few more switches on one of his control panels before continuing. 'But why should I cut you in for any of the profit?' he asked.

Feg was taken aback. This was obviously not going the way he'd planned. But he still had one card to play. 'Because you don't have the package,' he said. 'I do. It's hidden. Besides, you have no idea what it is or who wants it so bad, that it's worth a hundred thousand creds.'

Nemo placed his hand over one last switch. 'You'd be surprised what I know,' said Nemo. 'There's very little that happens beneath, or above, the wall that I don't find out about. I know exactly who wants your precious medicine and why. And as for finding the package, I'm sure you'll tell me in time.'

Several doors opened behind Feg and a dozen more guards entered the room with weapons drawn. Seek and Destroy stopped their punching game and pulled out their weapons as well.

'You think you can hold me?' asked Feg. As he reached towards his arm to activate his chainsword, Nemo pressed the switch, which released a reinforced plasteel net that dropped over the head of the huge man, dragging him to the ground under the weight of heavy and nearly indestructible metal.

'I do, actually,' said Nemo. 'Needle him!'

Several guards shot Vandal Feg with needlers, knocking him out before he

could even attempt to cut his way through the heavy metal net.

A small, thin man wearing a suit and tie had escorted Bobo off the royal estate, through a series of tunnels that opened into the Spire docks. Before leaving the estate, Kauderer had given Bobo a new set of clothes, which he now wore.

The clothes were pure silk and fitted perfectly. Bobo had never felt so comfortable in a set of clothes before. He'd always seen clothing as an inconvenience. He wore them only because he would draw attention otherwise. The rough texture of his old clothes and the way they bound in all the wrong places had not only been uncomfortable but had hindered his movement, which he abhorred when he was on the job.

These clothes looked similar to his old set. They were grey in colour and fairly non-descript so as to not draw any undue attention. Functional without looking too utilitarian, but refined enough to not look out of place amongst the residents of the Spire.

'Here you are, sir,' said Bobo's temporary guide, who he suspected was another of Kauderer's agents even though he looked like a scribe. The man carried himself like a spy and his eyes had constantly scanned their path as they walked.

He motioned Bobo towards a blank wall down the tunnel and then disappeared into the darkness. Bobo moved forwards and opened the secret door at the end of the tunnel. The mechanism was the same as the one the 'scribe' had opened at the other end.

He stepped into a secluded section of the docks and closed the door before walking towards the docking ports ahead of him. As he reached the end of the corridor, a group of people began passing by right on cue. He slipped into the group and walked with them to a large building where their luggage waited. He looked around and found a set of bags with the name Jackal Bristol on them. He picked them up and left the docks.

Bobo was worried someone might try to contact him on his way to his apartment, because he wanted some time to look through his belongings and immerse himself in the role before beginning. Luckily, the trip was uneventful and he breathed a sigh of relief when he closed the door behind him.

When he looked up, Bobo gasped. He had thought the rooms in the royal estate had been huge and lush. It had nothing on this apartment. It was roughly the size of an entire floor at Madam Noritake's. He dropped his bags and wandered around.

The sitting room alone had enough furniture for all of Noritake's girls and their

clients. The bedroom had a bed that apparently had been built for five and a closet with enough silk clothing to outfit the entire dock workers' union. The most impressive thing in the apartment by far was the window, which covered both walls in the bedroom. He'd been given a corner apartment. It seemed Jackal Bristol liked to live well.

Foremost amongst the obvious symbols of wealth was an expensive looking bottle of fluid which immediately caught Bobo's attention. He opened the bottle and took a swig. The bubbly liquid glided down his throat, gently warming his mouth and chest as it passed, a far cry from the acidic burning sensation of a bottle of wildsnake. He sat on one of his many couches and looked through the information Kauderer had given him in his luggage.

It seemed the most promising option was a young prince from House Ko'Iron, who'd been very vocal of late about the unworthiness of House Helmawr's continued rule. 'Interesting,' said Bobo. 'It seems our young prince likes to frequent the Kitty Club. Looks like I'm going out tonight.'

He took another swig from his bottle. 'Yes,' he said. 'I could get used to this.'

Wotan's air analyzers had been taxed almost to their limits. His body had actually heated up to the point that his paws sizzled slightly on the stone floor of the Hive City dome. He'd finally tracked down the source of an odd odour he'd first smelled while the wall had been open. It was a non-metallic, non-toxic odour that had no place on this side of the wall.

After the wall closed, Wotan had searched the city blocks near the wall for any indication of that scent coming from anywhere other than the wall itself. His analyzers had picked up trace amounts and he'd followed the scent like a bloodhound into and out of buildings, up and down ramps, and across numerous catwalks.

He finally found the source of the odour at a large fan hung high up on the wall of the dome. It had taken him quite a while to reach the fan housing, as he'd had to find a way that didn't include the use of ladders. He'd had to jump from the top of a ramp onto a building and then follow the ductwork over to another building where a ramp took him up to a higher catwalk.

He followed that catwalk for some way before jumping down onto more ductwork that eventually climbed its way up above the fan. The last jump was the toughest. The fan, although enormous, had only a small ledge next to the housing, and that ledge was directly underneath the duct Wotan stood upon.

Deep down in his visual cortex, synapses fired estimating the distance and

trajectory. This information was transferred to his memory core and from there to the servos that controlled his legs. He jumped the twenty metres flawlessly, coming to a stop at the edge of the ledge.

Wotan turned and looked at the fan housing. He sniffed the air. The fresh scent didn't come from the fan itself. It drifted out of a crack in the wall beside the housing. Wotan pawed at it and the resulting sound echoed slightly as if the space behind the wall was empty.

He had no room to make a running leap through the wall, as he had done at the house of the little yellow lady. Wotan had to rely on the strength of his jaws. He snapped his mouth forward, sinking his top row of metal teeth into the crack and then biting down with his lower teeth.

The wall felt oddly soft, more like plaster than stone or rock. He clamped his jaw down tight and pulled back, digging his claws into the ledge. As he pulled, his claws scraped against the ledge, leaving long furrows in the metal beneath him. At last, the wall panel began to give.

He repositioned his feet and pulled again. A low growl came from deep within him. As he tugged he walked backwards, whipping his head from side to side to rip open the plasteel panel set into the wall.

After several minutes, Wotan had ripped the panel far enough to squeeze through. He released his hold and crawled into the opening behind the panel. It was a long tunnel. The scent of fresh air was much stronger inside and he padded forward, confident that he would find Bobo and Jerico on the other side.

At the other end of the tunnel, Wotan found himself looking through a round grate down onto the plaza before the wall. This time he was on the Spire side. Even his mechanical brain could easily tell the difference. For one thing, there was only one guard and no throng of people trying to get through. For another, everything on this side gleamed. It was as if the entire world up here were made of silver, gold and polished marble, and that odd scent of fresh air was everywhere.

Wotan breathed it in and set his analyzers to work. He almost barked when the analysis finished. He smelled Jerico, and he was close. Wotan searched the plaza, but didn't see his owner. In fact, there weren't that many people in the plaza at all, just a single group of three heading past the wall down a side passage.

Wotan looked closer. The one in the middle was wearing a strange cloak that hid his body, but Wotan's sharp eyes looked closer and saw just the hint of leather swishing around beneath the cloak. This time he did bark. A loud, tinny

bark that sounded like two swords scraping against one another.

But Kal didn't hear him. Wotan grabbed the grate in his teeth and pulled and twisted as before, whipping his head around and growling. Then, all at once, the entire grate came loose and fell towards the marble-covered plaza below, taking Wotan with it.

He landed on his front feet, smacking his head into the ground before his back feet hit. Disoriented, he spun around several times before he remembered which way Kal had gone. He ran off across the plaza, barking. He looked over at the lone guard by the wall, but the man didn't seem at all interested in getting involved with the crazy metal dog.

Wotan ran past the wall and into the passage where Kal had gone, which was basically an alley between the wall and the first set of buildings. The alley curved slightly so he could no longer see Kal, but then he saw the other two men, alone, and continuing on down the narrow passage.

Wotan stopped and sniffed the air. He could still smell Jerico, but the scent came from behind him now. He backtracked until the newer scent ended, but there was no sign of Jerico. He looked around for a door or side passage, but there was nothing to be found.

Then he looked up. Above him Wotan saw another large, round grate like the one he'd just crashed through. He sniffed the air. Sure enough, Kal's scent wafted down to him through the grating along with another, unmistakable odour – the acidic, stale, musky odour of Hive City.

Wotan sat down and howled.

6: NIGHT LIFE

The Kitty Club. Bobo walked through and marvelled at the sights, sounds, and smells. It was dark, but only in the Spire sense of the word. Thick velvet curtains and tapestries depicting the most interesting scenes of debauchery had been hung over the windows. Inside the club, candles and odd orbs of flowing, luminescent goo created pockets of light for those who wished to see or be seen.

A thick haze hung over the entire club, a mixture of conflicting perfumes and toxstick smoke. The resulting odour was oddly sweet with just a hint of spice. It was almost intoxicating and Bobo was glad his small stature kept his head out of the thick cloud. Underneath all this rich atmosphere of opulence was a beating pulse of music that seemed to drive forward with its own living rhythm. There was no band and Bobo was unsure where the music came from. It seemed to be everywhere and he could feel the beat of the music invading his body through the soles of his feet.

Through an open fold in one of the curtains, Bobo caught the lingering purple bands of the setting sun streaking through the cloud cover. He'd spent a full hour in his apartment just watching the sun set. It was the most amazing sight he'd ever witnessed and he couldn't believe all these people were so jaded they could ignore that natural wonder.

For them, it happened every day; it wasn't a once in a lifetime opportunity. They ignored the natural blessings that their charmed lives provided for them, like fresh air, clean water and plentiful, warm sunshine, and instead had to frequent places like the Kitty Club to feel alive.

A silk-skinned, blonde goddess walked by Bobo, arm-in-arm with some fat noble. The fresh, fruity scent of the gorgeous woman made Bobo smile and sigh, but the noble appeared bored and distracted. He stopped to talk to another noble, a skinny young kid of no more than twenty lounging on a plush couch with several scantily-clad women and a couple of his young cronies.

They argued about something while the girls just sat there, continuing to touch and caress the men. Two things struck Bobo about the scene. First, he knew he was being somewhat hypocritical of the Spire nobles. He too frequented places like this down in Hive City, but for him and the other hard-working men and women below the wall, it was a release from the hardship of their lives, not just another in a long string of decadent perversions to relieve the boredom of too much wealth. Maybe it wasn't much of a distinction, but it somehow mattered to Bobo.

Second, he realized that just like in Hive City, the girls in the Kitty Club had access to a great wealth of information about the private lives of the nobles. As he noticed a slightly-built redhead with freckle-specked, pearly-white skin looking at him from one of the five bars in the club, Bobo decided he would need to spend a great deal of time exploring this bountiful source of information.

'Hi,' he said, climbing onto the stool next to the redhead. 'My name's Bristol. Jackal Bristol.'

'I know,' she said. 'Someone wants to meet you.' She reached out and caressed Bobo's arm as she smiled a seductive, little smile at him. 'Would you like to follow me?'

'Anywhere and everywhere,' said Bobo.

Her smile widened even further as she slipped off the bar stool and sauntered off. Bobo followed her, taking one last glance around to make sure he hadn't been noticed or followed.

Captain Katerin punched his armoured fist through the top of the rubble, creating a hole big enough for some air to get through. He inhaled deeply and then coughed and spat up phlegm for several minutes as he cleared his lungs of masonry dust.

'Mageson,' he said and then repeated it through his comm-link. 'Mageson. Are you okay?'

As the resulting silence stretched out, Katerin continued to extract himself from the rubble of the collapsed tunnel. After shoving both arms through the opening above him, he managed to move enough rocks and girders out of the way to create a large enough space to climb out.

He pulled himself to the top of the pile and switched on his arm beams to light the area. He stood atop a mound of stone, jagged metal, broken pipes, and beams. Part way down the pile to either side, he could just see the roof of the tunnel, which had been completely blocked by the mound. Above him was an

empty space; probably an unused section of dome or, if he was lucky, a utility tunnel.

He scanned the rubble itself, looking for some sign of his companion. ‘Mageson!’ he called out again. ‘Report! Give me some sign, girl.’

In response, a laser beam cut through the rubble next to Katerin, nearly taking off his big toe.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I’ve got you.’ He dropped to his knees and began tossing chunks of debris off the pile, his hydraulic-powered muscles making quick work of the rubble piled on top of the young noble.

In a moment, he’d uncovered enough of Mageson to grab hold of her shoulders and pull her free. The resulting landslide of debris filling in the hole almost made both of them tumble down to the bottom of the pile.

‘What the scav was that?’ asked Mageson. She tested her wings, but only one opened to its full extent. The servos on the other had been damaged and Katerin could see blood trickling down her arm.

‘Somebody didn’t want us following that one-armed freak,’ said Katerin. ‘Brought the whole damn tunnel down on our heads just to stop us.’

‘Obviously,’ she said. ‘And that will be their last mistake.’ She slammed her fist into the palm of her other hand.

But Katerin saw Mageson grimace as she made the menacing move. ‘You’re heading back to the docks to see the medic,’ said Katerin. ‘I’ll find a way around this blockage and get a piece of whoever did this.’

Mageson shook her head. ‘I’m coming with you,’ she said. ‘I’ve got a stake in this, too.’ She looked down at the wound on her arm. ‘Some Underhive scum is going to pay for this.’

As much as Katerin wanted to let Mageson satisfy her bloodlust, he couldn’t afford to lead a wounded noble into battle. It was his head her parents would seek if anything serious happened to her.

‘You’re injured, Mageson, and your rig is damaged. You’ll just slow me down. Get back and take control of the docks.’

Mageson nodded finally and turned to scramble down the pile, blood trickling off her arm as she went. Katerin climbed down behind her and began opening a hole back into the tunnel. The rubble was pretty loose and he made good time. He hoped the blockage on the other end was as easy to get through. The gap between the top of the tunnel and the top of the pile had widened almost far enough for his spyrer rig to squeeze through when Katerin heard his comm crackle to life.

‘Captain Katerin,’ the voice said into his ear. ‘This is Lord Chamberlain Schemko. What is your status?’

‘Scavving bureaucrat,’ muttered Katerin before clicking on his link. ‘Nearly blown up, sir,’ he said. Before his superior could ask the resulting question, Katerin added, ‘We encountered a minor setback while pursuing the satchel, sir. Mageson and I are fine, but it will be some time before we are in pursuit again. Stein has the docks secured.’

‘Your orders have changed, Captain,’ said the Lord Chamberlain in his ear. ‘I am recalling your troops. Move your men back to the transport for a return trip to the Spire.’

‘But, sir,’ said Katerin. He turned towards Mageson and made an obscene gesture, indicating just what he thought of the Lord Chamberlain. ‘We are close. I know it. That’s why our pursuit was halted by such extreme measures. I just need a little more time. As you said, the fate of the house depends on this mission.’

‘You have your orders, captain,’ said the Lord Chamberlain. ‘Others will take up the chase. The martial law you imposed on the Hive City docks has stirred up a great deal of trouble and brought unwanted attention down upon this mission. I want your men off the docks within the hour. Do you hear me?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Katerin. His obscene gesture turned into an even more obscene salute.

‘I’m surprised,’ said Mageson. ‘I can’t believe you agreed to his orders so quickly.’

Katerin smiled at Mageson ‘Ah, but what did I agree to?’

‘Why, ending martial law and going back to the Spire.’

Katerin shook his head. ‘The good Lord Chamberlain never told *me* to return to the Spire. He only ordered my men to the transport for a return trip. And I plan to follow that order to the letter.’

He bent over and began moving rubble again. ‘Now, let’s get you out of here. I need *you* at the docks following *my* orders. I’ve got to see a man about a bomb.’

‘Excuse me?’

He crushed a piece of masonry in his armoured glove. ‘Nobody drops a tunnel on me and gets away with it.’

Peeking through the velvet curtain, Bobo found a small room with a private booth. As he pushed his way through, two large, bald men stepped up and frisked him roughly. Afterwards, they went through the curtain, but Bobo was

certain they hadn't gone far beyond that point.

The redhead slid into the booth and cosied up next to a white-haired man wearing what looked like red, silk pyjamas. Platinum and gold chains hung around his neck and he wore dark glasses, even though the only light in the booth came from one of those small globes with the luminescent goo hanging over the table.

Between the poor lighting and the glasses, Bobo could hardly make out the man's features, but he was fairly certain this was the young Ko'Iron prince at the top of Kauderer's hit parade. Either that or platinum white hair was the new rage for youth in the Spire.

The redhead caressed the prince's silk-covered arms and whispered in his ear. He leaned over and gave her a long kiss, and Bobo could tell that the prince had great affection for the girl. All the while she kept her eyes open, watching Bobo. There was more to her than just a simple Kitty Club girl.

After the kiss, the prince turned and looked at Bobo who hadn't moved since coming through the curtain. 'Sit down, Mr Bristol,' he said. 'Let us talk business.'

Bobo slid into the booth opposite the prince and the redhead. 'Call me Jackal,' said Bobo. 'I never talk business with strangers. And you are?'

The white-haired man smiled, showing a set of teeth that were easily as white as his hair. 'Let's just say that I'm the man who's about to hire you,' he said.

Bobo stood and put a hand on the velvet drapes. 'Then let's say this business meeting is over,' he said, and pushed open the curtain.

Bobo wasn't certain whether his gamble would work or not, but Jackal Bristol was supposed to be a bit of a hardass. Plus Bobo always felt better when he was in control of a situation instead of the other way around. As he pushed his way past the well-dressed muscle on the other side of the velvet, Bobo heard the glasses rattle and the table shake behind him. He turned to see the young noble standing on the cushion.

'My name is Granit Ko'Iron,' said the prince. The redhead smiled at Bobo as she dabbed at a stain on the young noble's silk pyjama bottoms with a wet napkin. He slapped her hand away and sat down again. In an obvious attempt to regain his composure, he added, 'You may call me "Prince".'

'Okay, Prince,' said Bobo as he sat back down. 'Now that pleasantries are over, who did you want eliminated? Got your eye on a promotion, have you?'

The Ko'Iron prince laughed while the redhead shook her head.

'Nothing so vulgar as that,' said the prince. 'We leave the killing to the lowlifes

below the wall. They're ever so good at it. I need a message delivered. That's all.'

Bobo felt the conversation drifting out of his control. 'Then why call on me?' he asked. 'I'm a specialist. Low profile eliminations for high profile clients. I'm no errand boy.'

'The message I want delivered requires your special services,' said the prince. The redhead handed him a packet. Bobo didn't want to know where she'd kept it hidden. Well, actually, he did want to know, but didn't feel it appropriate to ask. The prince slid the packet across the table.

'Go ahead and open it,' he said.

As the prince continued talking, Bobo looked through the contents. Inside were several picts of a high-ranking member of House Orlock, the Hive City family responsible for ninety percent of the refined iron ore produced in the hive. In addition, there were blueprints of some Spire estate and a passkey, along with five thousand guilder credits.

'That is Davol Orlock,' said the prince, indicating the picts. 'His father has an exclusive contract for iron with House Greim.' He pointed at the blueprints. 'That is the Greim estate. The Ko'Iron family would like to break that contract and force our own deal on the Orlocks.'

'So, I'm supposed to, what?' asked Bobo. 'Kill Davol and plant evidence in the Greim estate? And all that for a lousy five thousand creds?'

The prince laughed again, which made Bobo want to jump across the table and kill him. The mission, and the two bodyguards on the other side of the curtain, helped him retain his calm.

'No, no,' said the prince. 'I want you to kill Davol and plant his head in the bed of princess Jillian Greim.'

'Whatever,' said Bobo, 'I still don't work this cheap.' He almost had to swallow as he flipped the credits back across the table, as he'd never even seen that much money all in one stack before.

'I know, Mr Bristol, I mean Jackal. I know. That is simply a down payment. You get the other half upon completion. Isn't that how it's done?'

Bobo considered the offer. It was becoming obvious that Granit Ko'Iron wasn't the mastermind behind the Helmawr assassination plot. Plus Bobo felt an acidic taste welling up in the back of his mouth just thinking about working for this guy. But five thousand credits was a lot of money. A scavving lot of money! And what did he care for the Hive City families. In his mind they weren't much better than the Spire nobles anyway, feeding off the hard work of others. Of course, the

point was moot as he wouldn't be in the Spire long enough to finish the job anyway.

'Fine,' he said. 'But a job like this will take some time. Two locations to scout, two trips through the wall, transporting rotting flesh. I'll need at least a week.'

The prince nodded. 'That should be fine.'

Bobo got up to leave. 'Just one thing, Prince,' he said. 'I thought you said you leave killing to the lowlifes. And yet here you are, sending the "head in the bed" message.'

'Oh, I don't consider this killing,' said Prince Granit. 'The Hive City families are barely above those animals my brothers and I hunt down in the Underhive. But I would never go around killing real people, Spire people. That would be barbaric.'

Scabbs and Yolanda found themselves back in the Sump Hole. As far as Scabbs was concerned, they could just stay there until their money ran out. It had been a particularly crappy day. And, as usual, Yolanda blamed it all on Kal Jerico.

'Scavving Jerico,' she said, slamming her bottle of wildsnake down on the table so hard that a stream of the greenish liquid spewed out the top along with the little, wriggling snake. 'Fall down a hole, have to run around half the hive to find our way back in, all because he wants to go off and play Spire wedding all day long.'

Scabbs was unsure how all of that had been Kal's fault, but he knew better than to contradict Yolanda when she got started railing about how their partner was the bane of her existence and at fault for every bad thing that ever happened to her.

While it was true that Scabbs and Kal had gotten her kicked out of her gang when they brought her in for a double bounty – she was wanted by the Guilders for crimes she committed as leader of the Wildcats, while her father, Lord Catallus, had put out a reward for the return of his wayward daughter – was it really Kal's fault that she'd never told the Wildcats about her royal blood?

Scabbs tried to drink his wildsnake in peace, letting Yolanda continue ranting. He nodded every once in a while, but mostly just kept his head down. After a while, he noticed that the bar had gone quiet. He looked up, wondering what had happened, but it was just that Yolanda had stopped complaining about Kal.

Scabbs scratched at his elbow for a minute and then noticed his bottle was empty. He raised his arm to call the bartender over and a cascade of dead skin drifted off and settled on the table.

‘Whaddya need?’ asked the bartender. He wiped the table down with a dirty cloth, sending the spilled drink, the wriggling snake and the dead skin all onto the floor.

‘Another ’snake,’ said Scabbs, ‘and some grub. What’s the cook killed tonight?’

The bartender shook his head. ‘Nothing for you two until you settle up this tab.’

‘Tab?’ asked Scabbs. The bartender held a grubby slip of paper in his dirt-streaked hand.

Before the bartender could answer, Yolanda jumped to her feet and grabbed the piece of paper out of his hand. ‘Lemme see that,’ she said.

‘Five hundred creds for damages?’ she yelled. ‘What in the hive is that for?’

The bartender shrunk back a little, but his need for payment obviously outweighed his fear of Yolanda. ‘Well, there’ve been more than a few brawls lately,’ he said. ‘And I charge all patrons involved a brawl fee. Plus your damn dog broke through my door this morning. That door was real, simulated wood grain. Irreplaceable.’

Scabbs couldn’t help noticing that he’d already replaced it.

‘My dog?’ asked Yolanda, advancing on him. ‘My dog? Helmawr’s rump, that’s Jerico’s scavving dog. Make him pay for it.’

‘That’s what I’m doing,’ said the bartender. Sweat started to bead up on his forehead as Yolanda continued to glare at him. ‘This is Kal’s table. You’re Kal’s people…’

‘I am not Kal’s anything!’ said Yolanda.

Scabbs was amazed that the bartender hadn’t fled, or been killed yet. He did, however, move back behind the bar as he spoke next.

‘Fine, but Kal Jerico and associates cannot drink or dine in the Sump Hole until that bill is paid.’

Yolanda crumpled up the bill and dropped it on the ground. Scabbs could see every muscle in her neck and shoulders tense up. He completely expected her to pull out her sword or laspistol and drop the bartender where he stood. Instead, she grabbed the bag of creds they’d earned from Sonny’s head and dropped it on the bar.

‘There should be enough there to cover everything,’ she said through clenched teeth, ‘including this…’

Yolanda walked towards the door, her breach cloth flapping against her thighs in a staccato rhythm to the heavy beat of her boots on the floor. Two metres from the door, she pulled out her laspistol and fired three quick shots, hitting the hinges and the latch. She raised one leg and kicked at the centre of the door,

sending it flying into the street, trailing smoke from the holes she'd burned through it.

She didn't even look back as she called to Scabbs. 'Come on,' she said. 'Looks like we're working again tonight.'

Scabbs didn't want to go, but knew the consequences of staying would be far worse. He scrambled to his feet and ran after her. As he looked down at the remains of the door, lying in pieces on the street, Scabbs shuddered. He wondered if perhaps going after Nemo and Feg would be safer than staying with Yolanda.

'Mr Feg,' called Nemo. 'Mr Feg. Wake up!'

He flipped a switch on his console, which sent electricity coursing through Vandal Feg's unconscious form. The huge body twitched uncontrollably, shaking so hard it threatened to tear apart the scaffolding holding Feg's body suspended off the ground.

'I think you killed him, boss,' said Seek. Or was it Destroy? Nemo never could tell them apart. They wore nearly identical outfits – leather vests over skin-tight shirts and leather trousers tucked into thick work boots. One wore a red shirt and red bandana over his head, while the other donned blue. The colour coding didn't help though, as he couldn't remember which twin wore which colour, and he was pretty sure they sometimes switched.

'I rather doubt that…' Nemo decided to just leave off the name. He had no time for an argument. 'Mr Feg is actually quite a bit stronger than he even appears. However, let us err on the safe side shall we?'

Seek and Destroy looked at each other and then both shrugged at the exact same moment.

'Seek,' said Nemo, 'If you would be so kind as to administer an ampoule of adrenaline to Mr Feg's heart, please?'

The twin wearing the blue bandana scooted over to the medi-pack and picked up a syringe with a long needle. He crawled under the apparatus which held Feg off the ground and positioned himself beneath the huge man's chest, avoiding the tubes coming out of his neck and back that now hung limply around his face and chest.

Feg's mechanical arm had been removed and set aside, but the tubes seemed to be permanently attached, so Nemo had ordered them left alone. Now he wished he'd pulled the damn things out himself as Seek seemed to have gotten inextricably intertwined with them.

‘Just jam it into his chest before he does die,’ screamed Nemo.

With that Seek plunged the needle hard into Feg’s exposed sternum and depressed the syringe all in one swift stroke. A moment later, Vandal Feg opened his eyes and screamed.

‘I’ll kill you all. I’ll pound you into sludge! I’ll rip your hearts out and eat them while they still beat.’ As he screamed, Feg thrashed around in the scaffolding, trying to free his feet, head or hand.

At some point, he must have finally focused on Seek, who was trying to escape but had gotten caught in the flailing tubes. ‘You’re first, blue boy,’ he said and snapped his head forward, trying to bite Seek in the face.

Seek screamed for help, but his brother had doubled over in laughter. As soon as Seek extracted himself from the tubes he launched at Destroy, tackling him to the ground. The two started kicking and biting each other as Feg continued to scream.

At this point, Nemo had had enough of both Vandal Feg’s unwillingness to cooperate – even to the point of near death – and the twins’ inability to concentrate on the task at hand without devolving into a brotherly brawl.

Nemo flipped the switch again, and electricity crackled all along the scaffolding and Feg’s suspended body. That, for the moment, shut him up.

Nemo pulled a web pistol from a small compartment in his chair. The pistol had been liberated from Spire security some time ago and Nemo had paid a high price for it. He used it only in emergencies, but his stress level had now reached breaking point.

He pointed it at the squirming twins and fired. A tangle of sticky, milk-white threads spread out from the gun, enveloping the twins in their gooey web. They tried to struggle, but the threads hardened almost instantaneously, trapping them in their brotherly hug.

‘Boys,’ he said. They stopped struggling and looked at him. ‘Once you are free, I want you to go to the docks and look for the item Mr Feg retrieved from the royal transport. He is proving most difficult to reason with.’

‘What’d he take?’ asked Destroy.

‘You will be looking for a small box,’ said Nemo, showing the size with his hands. ‘No bigger than a medi-pack. It will most likely be within a bag of some sort, perhaps a suitcase or a duffel. He must have hidden it in the docks or the tunnel before he met you.’

‘We’ll find it for you, boss,’ said Seek.

‘Yes,’ said Nemo. ‘Yes, you will. Do not come back until you do, understand?’

The boys didn't respond.

'Do you understand?' he growled.

'Yessir,' they said in unison.

Wotan stood atop the lone Spire guard on duty at the wall and barked. He'd leapt at the man several minutes earlier, driving him to the ground and landing on his chest. Since then he'd barked almost incessantly at the man, occasionally stopping to growl and snap at his face.

The guard had started screaming from the moment he'd been able to draw a breath again and hadn't stopped except when Wotan growled and snapped. Then he just shut his eyes and twisted his head back and forth.

The metal mastiff heard footsteps run up behind him. He stopped barking and turned to growl at the approaching men. Three men in identical uniforms to the guard at his feet skidded to a halt about five metres away from Wotan.

'Great, holy Emperor!' said one of the men. 'What in the Spire is that thing?'

Wotan barked at them and then opened his mouth wide and plunged his head down towards the exposed neck of the guard beneath him. He sunk the tips of his teeth just into the man's soft skin. Several small trickles of blood dripped off his spiked, metal teeth onto the marble courtyard.

'S-stay back,' said the guard.

'I've got a clean shot,' replied one of the men.

Wotan wasn't sure what they were saying, but he didn't like the tone of the last one's voice. He growled again and clamped down a little harder, breaking the skin in several more places.

'N-no,' said the guard beneath him. 'Don't. Just get it off me.'

'How?' said another man.

'Needler?'

'Nah, it's metal.'

'Electricity?'

'No. You'll kill me, too,' whined the pinned guard.

'Rocket launcher?'

'No!' screamed the guard, which just made the mastiff dig its teeth in deeper.

Wotan got tired of the men arguing back and forth. He stepped off to the side of the guard, keeping his mouth clamped on the man's neck, and started moving towards the huge open wall. He'd found in the past that gentle pressure on the neck will make most men quite pliable.

The guard was no different. Instead of allowing his neck to get ripped open, he

scooted himself along behind the metal mastiff as he inched towards the opening.

'Where's it going?' asked one of the men.

'It wants to drag Harrell into Hive City.'

'Let it.'

'We can't open the wall.'

'Why not?'

'Harrell's got the only key.'

Wotan and the guard had reached the crack in the enormous wall. The mastiff began growling and exerting more and more pressure on the man's neck. The guard reached into his pocket and fished out something small and golden. He tossed it towards the other men.

'Open it,' rasped the bleeding guard. 'Maybe it just wants to leave.'

'There'll be hell to pay afterwards.'

'Won't be our problem. None of us were even here.'

'Right.'

'Right.'

'Okay.'

One of the men came up to the wall, inserted the golden object into a small hole and turned it. From the other side of the massive wall, Wotan heard the blare of the siren wind up as the crack began to widen. He released the pressure on the man's neck slightly as he kept an eye on the wall.

Once the crack had grown large enough, Wotan unclamped his jaw and loped through the opening. On his way through, he had to dodge around and through the throng of Hivers coming the other way. He recognized several from the lines earlier. All of them were screaming.

'Freedom!'

'To the Spire!'

'Finally!'

'I'm coming home, ma!'

Wotan ran on. He wanted to make sure he made it out of the courtyard on the other side before the blare of the horn began to signal the closing of the wall. He remembered what had happened last time.

'You agreed to do what?' asked Kauderer.

The two men had arranged to meet every twelve hours so Bobo could update Kauderer on his mission. Bobo had followed a long, convoluted set of protocols

to get to the meeting place. First he'd hired a specific private room at the Kitty Club and asked for Brandi, Sandi and Candi.

That part he'd enjoyed, but the fun had ended much too quickly. Once the girls got going, being quite loud and boisterous to cover his escape, Bobo slipped out of the room through a rear exit. This put him on a deserted street not far from an arched gateway.

Bobo peered into the darkness in either direction, making sure he was alone, and then slipped through the arch. Suddenly, he was outside the Spire, standing on a bridge between the Spire and the grand library. He stopped and stared at the pinpoints of light dotting the blanket of night above him. The white marble façade of the Spire loomed behind him like a massive shadow as he crossed into the grand library.

Only scholars, scribes and students were allowed here, and then only during the day, as the library had no internal lighting, relying on natural sunlight for all those studying inside. This made the library the perfect spot for a late night rendezvous.

Bobo slipped across the bridge and entered a series of numbers into a data pad, which gave him access to the library. He then had to wend his way through the stacks, pull out a particular volume and make his way to a study carrel.

Kauderer had been waiting in the carrel opposite him.

'I took a job for Prince Granit of Ko'Iron,' said Bobo. 'I couldn't exactly turn him down and maintain my cover as a crack assassin.'

Kauderer grumbled something under his breath. Bobo found it little easier to talk to the hawkish man in the dark. Even though he couldn't see that sharp nose pointing down at him, the man's eyes still found a way to pierce the gloom and glare at him over the top of the carrel.

'It doesn't matter,' said Bobo. 'The wedding is in three days and I told Granit I would need a week to do the job. 'I can just leave him hanging. Serve the impudent fool right anyway.'

Silence reigned in the dark library for several minutes before Kauderer responded. 'No,' he said. 'I have a better idea.'

'Oh no,' said Bobo.

'Oh yes,' said Kauderer. 'You're going to do the job and finish well before deadline. I've got an operative in Hive City that can deliver the head tonight. You scout out the Greim estate and I will contact you before morning.'

'And why are we doing this?' asked Bobo. 'Won't this mess up trade relations or something?'

‘House Helmawr cares very little whether Ko’Iron or Greim or anyone else controls the iron contract. We get our cut no matter what. But doing this job in one night will launch your reputation into the stars.’

‘And then,’ said Bobo, ‘whoever wants the future Lord Helmawr dead will come a-calling for the miracle worker, huh?’

‘Exactly.’

‘That’s actually a pretty good plan,’ said Bobo, adding a late, ‘Sir,’ at the end.

‘Why, thank you,’ said Kauderer, and Bobo could hear the ice chilling on each word. ‘You have no idea how much your praise means to me.’

Bobo got up to leave, but Kauderer cleared his throat. ‘Aren’t you forgetting something?’ he asked. ‘The money?’

Bobo tossed a wad of credits over the top of the carrel.

‘This operation is costing House Helmawr plenty,’ said Kauderer. ‘This twenty-five hundred barely covers your wardrobe.’

Bobo slipped out of the study carrel and made his way back to the stacks to shelve the book. As soon as he was certain he was out of ear shot, he muttered. ‘Smug bastard. No better than that white-haired freak.’ He patted the extra twenty-five hundred in his pocket.

Scabbs dropped to the ground as laser blasts sizzled over his head. He was pretty certain his life couldn’t get any worse. However, as he rolled to his feet, his leg slipped off the stone pier and Scabbs found out just how wrong that assumption had been.

He and Yolanda had come to Acid Hole to find the leader of the New Redeemers gang. The entire gang had bounties on their heads, but the leader was worth five hundred creds. Any other heads would just add to their take. Seemed like an easy job. Redemptionists were a pain in the rear, but they weren’t known for their fighting skills. They spent most of their time preaching, not fighting for territory.

This gang must not have understood the Redemptionist manifesto. They had a lot of weapons, and they knew how to use them. Another barrage of las blasts erupted around Scabbs as he pulled his sizzling foot out of the acid pool. Stone dust and acid spray filled the air around him as the blasts pulverized bits of the pier and sliced into the acid pools, turning pockets of the liquid waste into geysers.

Scabbs looked down and screamed. His boot was completely gone and his normally scabby foot had been burned clean of dead skin and turned into a raw,

red appendage. He ripped yet another strip of cloth from his ever-diminishing shirt and wrapped it around his bright red foot, and started running again.

'Did you want to start shooting sometime soon?' asked Yolanda. She'd stopped at the next intersection on the pier and fired several shots over Scabbs's head at the approaching New Redeemers.

Scabbs pulled out his own laspistol as he limped forward. He turned and fired, but his shots all went wide of the mark. Yolanda unleashed several more blasts. As usual she shot for their heads, which at this distance were pretty small targets. But Yolanda was deadly accurate. Her blasts went in a tight arc right through the middle of the pursuing gang. She gave one a glancing shot to the ear, which made him yelp and tumble to the side, his blue cloak flailing around him as he fell.

He toppled into one of his comrades and both lost their footing on the narrow stone path. The splash from their combined plunge into the acid forced the other Redeemers to pull back or get drenched by the potent liquid.

Nobody knew where the acid had come from. There were plenty of theories and stories, but it didn't really matter. It was here to stay and, even though the pools of acid in Acid Hole were slowly eating away at the settlement and were so strong they could devour a man whole in a matter of minutes, that didn't stop people from trying to farm the stuff.

The pools were criss-crossed with stone paths – the pier, they called it – made from the crumbling remains of buildings the acid had destroyed by eating away at their foundations. Scabbs and Yolanda had been told the leader, a Redemptionist by the name of Faloway, was holed up in a cave at the far end of the pools.

The information had been entirely correct. Scabbs just wished their informant had bothered to mention the huge stash of weapons the New Redeemers had stowed away for emergencies.

'Come on,' yelled Yolanda. 'Now's our chance to get that bounty.'

Scabbs was thinking it was a better time for getting the scav out of there, but he was so used to following his partners into stupid peril that he hardly even had time for a good 'Helmawr's rump' before following Yolanda back along the stone pier.

'We've got them on the run,' cried Yolanda. She shot at several of the fleeing Redeemers, but they ducked and her shots flew over their heads. She ran on past the spot where the two gangers had fallen into the acid.

Scabbs glanced down as he passed but all he could see was the roiling mass of

acid churning around the metal slag remains of their weapons. He shuddered and ran on, keenly aware that his right foot had no protection from the acid should he slip again.

As they chased after them, the Redeemers began to split up. Several turned off at each intersection of the branching, stone pier. ‘Which way?’ yelled Scabbs.

‘I’m on Faloway,’ said Yolanda. She continued running forward, through the first two intersections.

That was when Scabbs started to get a bad feeling. He looked left and right, but didn’t see the fleeing Redeemers running into the distance. Instead, they had stopped and turned around. Then, up ahead, Yolanda skidded to a halt. Scabbs had no choice but to run into her. Any other option sent him into an acid pool.

They tumbled to the ground, arms and legs tangled up in each other. Yolanda’s dreadlocks whipped Scabbs in the face, which made him flinch, and her knee slammed into his groin, which made him gulp and groan and curl into a ball.

They came to a stop at the edge of the pool, in the middle of a four-way intersection. Scabbs looked up through squinted eyes and saw New Redeemers coming at them from all four directions. He was, quite literally, in no shape to help. He was certain he’d be dead before he could uncurl or even speak clearly.

‘I’d drop the weapon if I were you,’ said one of the Redeemers.

Through his squinted eyes and haze of pain, Scabbs thought it was Faloway speaking.

‘You could shoot me,’ he continued. ‘You might even kill me, but then I’d be on my way to Redemption at the right hand of the almighty, all-knowing Emperor, while you would just be a melted pile of slag. Your choice, really.’

Yolanda spat at the Redeemer, but she also dropped her laspistol on the ground.

‘Good choice,’ said Faloway. ‘Better for me, as it turns out, because the dear Cardinal Crimson will most certainly reward me greatly for bringing him such fine specimens of heresy and evil.’

Scabbs groaned, partly from the pain emanating out from his groin across all parts of his body, but also partly from what he knew was coming next.

‘Yolanda and Scabbs,’ said Faloway. ‘My, my, my. What a prize, indeed.’ He chuckled and looked around at his fellow Redeemers. ‘You know, we might all get to sit at the side of the great cardinal if only we could deliver the heretic Kal Jerico along with these two.’

He looked back at Yolanda and Scabbs. ‘Now, where do you think Kal Jerico might be?’

Twin explosions rocked the pier behind Faloway. Scabbs couldn’t see what had

happened, but he heard screams and a lot of splashing followed by the unmistakable sound of las blasts all around him.

'Right here, you arrogant, self-righteous son of a bitch,' said Kal Jerico.

Several more explosions erupted on the piers to either side of Scabbs. This time he got to watch the devastation from his prone position as several frag grenades exploded in the midst of the Redeemers flanking them. Their bodies flew into the air as shrapnel shredded their blue cloaks and orange body armour. But it wasn't the explosion that killed them. It was landing in the acid.

Next to him, Yolanda dropped and retrieved her laspistol. She started firing in all directions, adding her las blasts to Kal's. Scabbs uncurled enough to pull out his own weapon and looked around for a target. Kal's grenades had left gaping holes in the piers on three sides, and those Redeemers lucky enough to be on the far side of the breaches were running for their lives. Faloway cowered at the edge of the hole, trapped between Kal and the acid.

Scabbs pushed himself to his hands and knees as Kal walked up behind them. He felt two hands grab him by the shoulders and pull him to his feet. Scabbs looked up at Kal, who somehow had found the one spot in Acid Hole with a working light in the dome. It illuminated his head with an angelic aura.

Kal smiled and clapped Scabbs on the back, and then looked at his hand and wiped it off on Scabbs's ripped and dirty shirt. He strode forward towards Faloway, whipping out both guns and pointing them at the Redeemer's head.

'The way I see it,' said Kal. 'You got two choices – dead or alive. What's it going to be?'

Faloway looked at the vast empty field of acid around him. His gang had all fled or died. The pier behind him had a gaping hole and the bounty hunters he thought he'd ambushed now had him in their gun sights.

Scabbs knew what he would do in a situation like this, but then, he wasn't a Redemptionist.

Faloway turned and ran towards the gaping hole in the stone pier, screaming 'Redemption now! Redemption now!'

Kal and Yolanda both fired at the same time. Faloway's body lurched as multiple las blasts hit him in the back. He stumbled forward, smoke rising into the air from the blackened holes in his fluttering, blue cape. He staggered two more steps before dropping onto the pier. As he hit, a small splash of acid leapt into the air just past his shoulders.

'Oh, scav!' said Kal.

He and Yolanda rushed forward. Scabbs limped along behind. When he got

there, Scabbs saw the problem. Faloway had fallen right at the edge of the hole in the pier and his head had dropped into the acid. There was now nothing left above his shoulders but a short stump of neck. The acid spat and hissed as blood drained out of his body into the pool.

Kal pulled the body away from the acid and sat down next to it. ‘I don’t suppose there’s a bounty on his body is there?’ he asked.

Yolanda looked at Kal, huffed, and walked back along the pier.

‘You’re welcome,’ he called after her and then smiled.

7: SOUGHT AND DESTROYED

Captain Katerin felt dirty, and not just because of the masonry dust caked on his face and head, although that was really starting to itch. No, in forty years of service to House Helmawr, he'd never once disobeyed an order.

As he continued to dig his way to freedom, he thought about what he was doing. Sure, he'd bent the rules now and then, even stretched an order to the breaking point when he thought the reason was just and true; his current rank as head of House Helmawr security proved that he'd been right more often than wrong.

He grabbed an I-beam in two armoured hands and heaved it out of the way. The rig's hydraulics barely even hissed at the enormous weight. As he grabbed another beam, a wave of anger spread through him. Whoever had set off this explosion had tried to kill him, but worse, they'd made him disobey an order.

'Emperor damn this place!' he screamed. He swung the beam around, slamming it into the pile of rubble behind him. At the impact, a large chunk of rock sailed off the pile and smashed against the far wall. The resulting rumbling shook the entire chamber he'd been trapped inside for hours now.

He'd dug an exit back towards the docks for Mageson in fifteen minutes, but the way forward had gotten the bulk of the debris from the original explosion. Every time he felt he'd made some headway, a tremor would dislodge more rockrete and beams. He'd been partially buried twice since Mageson left.

The current tremor, precipitated by his angry outburst, subsided and he breathed a sigh of relief. It was frustration, that's what it was. He had promised to return the medicine and now, when he'd gotten so close, the rug had been pulled out from under him. Trapped in a hole and ordered home by a stylus-pushing bureaucrat, he felt like bashing something… or someone.

This was what Captain Aldous Katerin did. He fought battles, even if it was against stupid masonry. He knew he was no advisor to the Lord of the Hive. He

was a fighting man and, dammit, this was his fight. He knew he was right. Perhaps releasing the docks was the right thing to do, but recalling him when he was so close had been ludicrous. He would show Valtin Schemko. He would show them all. This was his fight and he planned to see it through to the end.

'But I have to get out of this scavving hole first!' he screamed at the walls.

Sweat streamed down his bald head. He could feel the lines of sweat creating little rivers in the caked dust on his face. He didn't even want to know what his beard looked like at this point. He couldn't do anything about it while encased in the Spyrer rig. The massive fingers of his armoured gloves were made for punching, not wiping down his face.

After several hours work, he didn't seem to be any closer to digging his way through to the other side of the rubble. Katerin made a decision – a calculated risk actually. He raised both hands, curled his armoured hands into fists and launched two explosive bolts from his wrists.

He'd tried this earlier, and ended up buried to the waste in debris from the resulting quake. But, other than the small tremor after the I-beam incident a few minutes ago, the chamber had been stable since.

As soon as the bolts impacted the wall of rubble, Katerin moved forward. They exploded one after the other, creating a huge dust cloud, but no rumbling. Katerin fired two more and listened as he moved forward. There was a definite delay before they hit and detonated. He was making headway. He moved into the cloud and launched two more.

These exploded farther down the tunnel. Afterwards, the dust in the tunnel began to move. Instead of billowing up and around him, the dust was being pulled away. He'd broken through! Somewhere a circulation fan was drawing air through the tunnel. Katerin wasted no time with self-congratulation. He simply moved forward, following the escaping air.

Before he got to the far end of the dust cloud, he heard and felt the rumbling start behind him. He tried to run, but the Orrus rig was not built for speed. At best, he could get it up to a fast walk. More and more dust billowed around him, getting sucked down the tunnel by the awaiting fan. The rumble turned into a roar as the chamber behind him collapsed.

A chunk of rock smacked into his back and a scrap of metal nearly sliced through the armour on his thigh. Katerin kept moving. He chanced a glance back over his shoulder and then wished he hadn't. A wall of rock and rubble, pipes and beams, and a lot of dust billowed towards him.

The mass of debris hit him in the legs, tipping him over backwards and then

propelling him forward. Katerin might have enjoyed the ride if it weren't for the fact that the mass wasn't so much a wall as a chaotic vortex constantly eating the outer layer and remaking itself as it moved forward.

He felt his feet getting sucked into the roiling mass behind him and struggled to keep the rest of his body from getting pulled inside. He was quickly losing ground and didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep his head above the mass.

'Stupid Jerico, messing up my bounty and then taking all the credit,' mumbled Yolanda as she trudged through the tunnel outside Acid Hole. 'Thinks he can just disappear for a day and then reappear and take all the glory. We were doing just fine without him. Just fine.'

Yolanda grumbled her way through the uneven tunnel that linked Acid Hole to the next settlement, barely looking where she was going. For anyone else, walking through the Underhive without watching where you were going would be suicidal. Yolanda had spent much of her life in the Wildcats, an Escher gang full of large warrior women who lived and died by their wits and their swords.

She'd developed a sixth sense; perhaps it was just a heightened sense of perception, perhaps she had a bit of the witch-wyrd in her. That might explain why she never felt like she belonged in Spire society. She was different. All she wanted was to be appreciated for who she was, not to be moulded into some princess for her daddy, and definitely not pigeon-holed as Kal Jerico's sidekick.

She was Yolanda. Nothing less. Something more than most saw. She'd had it once. As leader of the Wildcats, she had been everything she'd wanted to be. Now, she was something else. Perhaps that was the whole problem. She hadn't yet figured out who she was in the post-Wildcats era of Yolanda.

She blamed it all on Jerico, and continued grumbling about his shortcomings as she sidestepped the edge of a hive quake chasm that intruded halfway into the tunnel. 'Stupid Jerico, thinks he's such a lovable vagabond, but he'd turn in his own mother for a bounty.'

Around the next corner was a sludge fall where some pipes between domes had cracked, letting raw waste seep into the void. Beneath her consciousness, her senses picked up on the clues – the rhythmic drip, the faint smell of rotten eggs, the rising moisture content in the air – which all came together to remind her of its presence. She moved to the other side of the tunnel and prepared to jump over the sludge that welled up on the floor.

As she hopped over the sludge pool without even a glance, Yolanda's senses

flared in her head. Something was amiss. Strange scents mingled with the rotten egg smell, almost completely masked by the foul sludge behind her. The tunnel ahead seemed darker than normal, as if shadows lurked in the shadows. And there was a slight rustling of fabric against fabric.

That sound she recognized. She'd heard it often enough while waiting to ambush a bounty. It was the sound of someone shifting their weight to relieve the pressure on their knees and ankles.

Yolanda put one hand on her laspistol and the other on the hilt of her sword. She'd stopped grumbling, but kept shuffling forward, trying to appear unaware of the ambush. How many were there? She counted at least four shapes skulking in the shadows.

Redeemers? Doubtful. Feg or Nemo? Nah. She'd given them no reason to come after her. But then, who?

As she walked past the first set of shadows, Yolanda whipped out her weapons. She fired and stabbed into the darkness to either side, connecting with both weapons. In the flare of the las blast she saw a man-sized shape take a hit in the shoulder, which spun him around and slammed him into the wall. While, on the other side, she felt the sword bite into flesh and possibly even skip off something harder like bone or rib.

She didn't wait to see which one. After making both attacks, Yolanda sheathed her weapons and jumped back. Pivoting on one foot, she turned and ran. At least that's what she wanted her attackers to think. As soon as she reached the sludge pool, Yolanda sidestepped, stopped and dropped into a crouch.

As expected, her attackers pursued. The first one came running hard, and Yolanda leaned her shoulder in for the impact. As the attacker reached her, Yolanda grabbed him around the knees and lifted. Using his own momentum against him, she dumped him over her shoulder into the pool of sludge.

She then did a backflip, using her prone attacker's sludge covered body as a spring board to vault the pool, making sure to slam his head down hard along the way. She ran on, jumping over the chasm and stopping just on the other side. She pulled her weapons back out and struck a pose. As soon as she heard the last attacker come around the corner, she aimed and shot.

The laser blast went wide and high, but she hadn't been trying to hit him anyway. She simply wanted to announce her presence in the corridor. She turned and ran a few more steps, making sure her big boots clomped just a little louder than normal. She could hear him barrel on down the corridor behind her.

She dived forward into a roll just in case he decided to shoot. Before she came

back up to her feet, Yolanda heard the man scream as he fell into the gaping hole in the tunnel. She put her weapons away again and slapped her hands together to clean off the sludge and congratulate herself on a job well done.

As she moved back down the corridor, Yolanda swore she heard an echo of her hands clapping. Then she realized the clapping continued longer than the original sound and wasn't fading.

'Well done, Yolanda,' said an oddly familiar voice. 'You make me proud.'

'Oh, scav,' said Yolanda. Not only did she recognize the voice, but she knew he wouldn't have revealed himself if he hadn't already won. As that thought leapt into her brain, she felt the needle prick her in the neck.

As the blackness began to envelop her brain from the poison invading her body, Yolanda could only say, 'What did I do to deserve this…?'

'Well, I guess half of half-a-bounty is better than nothing,' said Scabbs. He dug into his breakfast with gusto. The soupy eggs were the only semi-solid food he'd had in a couple of days. And, as usual, just about anything served in the Sump Hole tasted better with enough wildsnake to wash it down.

Kal frowned. 'Fifty credits? Those grenades cost me more than that. Why are you and Yolanda going after such crappy bounties? Where's your self respect?'

Scabbs looked up at Kal. Egg whites dripped from his scabby chin back onto the plate.

'Never mind,' said Kal, looking away in a hurry. He dug a coin out of his pocket and began flipping it back and forth across his knuckles.

Scabbs wiped his face on his sleeve and then picked a few crumbs of bread off the dirty fabric and popped them in his mouth. 'Well, you weren't here and the only other option at the time was to go after Nemo and Feg.'

'Nemo and Feg have teamed up?' asked Kal. 'I thought Feg was dead.'

'Yeah,' said Scabbs. 'I mean, no. He's alive and they've teamed up.' He picked up the plate and began licking it up and down, trying to get every slippery bit of the egg. In between licks, he kept talking. 'At least we think so. Seems Feg got his hands on some tech from a downed transport. He was last seen using one of Nemo's private tunnels.'

'Feg took the…?'

Scabbs peered at Kal over his plate. The coin had stopped between his third and fourth knuckle, and stood straight up in the air, quivering a little as Kal's mouth hung open.

'Yeah,' said Scabbs. 'One of Nemo's own tunnels. Right from the docks. You

see, I fought Feg off in this warehouse…'

Kal popped the coin into the air and held up his hand to stop Scabbs from speaking. The coin dropped right between his middle and ring fingers. 'Start from the beginning,' he said. 'I want to know about this transport.'

Scabbs told Kal the whole story starting with Sonny, the ratskin thief and ending with he and Yolanda trudging around the ash wastes looking for a way back into the hive past the royal guards.

When the story was done, Kal stared at him with such a serious look on his face that it scared Scabbs down to his dirty socks. 'Listen very carefully,' said Kal. 'When you saw Feg come out that hole in the warehouse, did he have a satchel, a bag of some sort?'

Scabbs didn't answer right away. He had to put himself back in that room, curled up in a ball and trying not to look at the man who wanted to kill him. He didn't really want to go back there. The memory was mostly a blank.

'I'm sorry, Kal,' he said finally. 'It was dark and I was trying to hide. I just don't remember.'

Kal sighed and dropped the coin on the table along with his head and hands.

'Is it important?'

Kal nodded his head on his hands. After a while, he looked up. 'If I don't find that satchel in the next two days,' he said,' I have to get married.'

Scabbs nodded out of habit. Then the message sank in, causing his eyebrows to furrow and his mouth to open and close a few times before he could speak. 'Huh? What?' he said at last.

Kal opened his mouth and then closed it and then opened it to try again. 'I couldn't explain it to you even if I could… um… explain it to you. Look, I need that satchel. My very freedom depends on it. You say Feg was on his way to see Nemo?'

It took a moment for Scabbs to catch up to the end of the conversation. 'Yeah,' he said. 'At least we think so.'

'Then that's where we have to go,' said Kal. He stood and checked his weapons.

'To Nemo's?' asked Scabbs. He suddenly felt very sick to his stomach and he didn't think it was the runny eggs coming back up on him, although they were. 'Don't we need, I don't know, a plan, an army, some spyrer rigs?'

'No,' said Kal. 'What we need is information.' He pulled Scabbs out of his chair and shoved him towards the door. 'And I think I know where to get it.'

Before they got to the door, Kal turned back towards the table and scanned the

floor. ‘By the way,’ he said, ‘where’s Wotan?’

Bobo washed his hands again, nearly scrubbing his palms raw with his fingernails. He wasn’t being obsessive – well not overly obsessive. It was just that the Spire soap had no grit in it. He didn’t know how the nobles got clean when they couldn’t scrape off a layer of dirt with just a bar of soap and some spit. This soap was all suds and no substance.

It was, in fact, a lot like this washroom. The faucets, knobs and even the free-standing basins all gleamed in brass and gold and silver with lots of little bits of filigree here and there that had absolutely no practical value. All he needed was a knob and a spigot, but what he had here looked like an extravagant shrine to some porcelain god.

He looked at himself in the oval glass mirror hanging on silver chains over the overwrought basin and was amazed again at the horrible opulence of life in the Spire. Where a hunk of polished metal would serve just as well, some noble had instead purchased a dozen enormous mirrors set in engraved gold frames that depicted cherubs and angels cavorting amidst the clouds. Who really needed to look at that, especially in what was essentially a public toilet?

Bobo sighed and splashed water on his face. The head had been delivered without a hitch and he’d washed and changed twice since returning to his apartment. He just couldn’t get the stench of that bloody head in a bag out of his nostrils, out of his head. He didn’t know how Kal and Yolanda did it without throwing up each and every time.

He walked across the marble floor towards a brass and oak table that held an array of tonics, sprays and colognes. Looking at the various scents, Bobo thought that perhaps one might help cover the stench stuck in his nose. He opted instead for one of the heated towels held in a brass steamer next to the table. As he wrapped the towel around his head, Bobo decided that this was one luxury he could get used to. But not if it meant toting heads around ever again.

‘I’m just not cut out for this,’ he said as he pulled the towel off his head.

‘I would say you’re doing quite well,’ said Kauderer. He grabbed a bottle of green liquid and splashed it on his hands. ‘Were you followed?’

Bobo wanted to ask Kauderer how he’d managed to slip in without making a sound, but he let it pass. He really should have known better than to let himself be so vulnerable with the towel over his head.

‘Let’s see,’ he said. ‘I went from my apartment to the Kitty Club to the library, then up to the tourist area outside the Helmawr estate and down to the wall,

where I circled the square several times before coming into the visitor's bureau, which nobody ever uses, asked to use the washroom, was given the only key and came in. In all that time, I saw nobody twice except the poor guard with the large bandage around his neck at the wall.'

Kauderer splashed the liquid on his face and rubbed it in. He then opened the brass steamer and pulled a large, embroidered towel from within. He patted his face ten times before turning to drying his hands. Bobo began counting and soon realized that the master spy wiped each and every finger exactly ten times before moving to the next. Bobo assumed the man did everything with the same meticulous, surgical care. 'Were you followed?' he asked again.

'No,' said Bobo. 'I was not followed.' He tossed his own towel into the wrought-iron receptacle provided. It seemed that in the Spire, even used towels had a special place to call their own. He didn't feel quite that special anymore up here.

Kauderer finished patting his hands dry and tossed his towel to Bobo, who dropped it into the receptacle with barely a grumble. 'You received your final payment?'

It was more a statement than a question. Bobo was certain Kauderer rarely asked a question to which he didn't already know the answer.

'I did,' he said, handing over an envelope containing another twenty-five hundred credits. 'The prince seemed pleased with the job.' So pleased, in fact, he'd gotten a little bonus, which he'd stashed with his unreported five thousand. Bobo kept all of that information to himself. 'It seems he's already told his friends about my "prompt and professional" services.'

'Oh?' Kauderer picked up another bottle, making Bobo wonder how much cologne one man needed. This one he tipped over and poured into one of a myriad of silver cups lining the back of the table. He brought the cup to his lips and drank deeply.

'In between my first and second showers, I received several gifts,' said Bobo.

'Gifts?'

Bobo nodded his head. 'Yeah. At first I was alarmed, but then the house boy knocked and brought in yet another gift and said something about my secret admirers.'

Kauderer smiled. 'Ah, yes. Secret admirers of your work,' he said.

It was obvious from his tone of voice and smug smile that he was taking credit for that work, even though it was Bobo who'd had to break into the Greim estate with only four hours of prep work. He swallowed and sighed, shaking off the

rising ire. This was for the good of the house, not for personal gain. Besides, he was already up five thousand credits, plus the bonus.

'Exactly,' he said, with only a moment's hesitation. 'A box of chocolates – the real thing, not synth – from the duke of Ty, with an invitation to his table at the Grand Sky City Restaurant tonight. A set of silk pyjamas from Prince Gregor Ulanti with a note to join him at the Kitty Club. A gorgeous steel sword from someone in House Ran Lo with an attached note requesting me to appear before the Lord of the House. And a set of iron throwing stars from Princess Jillian of House Greim. I'm not sure if that one's an invitation or a threat. But she does want to meet.'

'You did make quite an impression,' said Kauderer. He smiled again, which was no more than a slight lip curl on one side of his thin lips. Perhaps the taut muscles of his gaunt face could do little more.

'It was your idea to go through with the Ko'Iron job,' said Bobo. 'Now I need to decide which invitation to accept.'

'Why, all of them of course,' said Kauderer. 'This is the perfect chance to find out who's behind the assassination plot. That's every house except Catallus, and they have no reason to kill Jerico as the wedding will only strengthen their position in the Spire.'

'Kal's marrying someone from House Catallus?' asked Bobo. 'Don't you think that's reason enough to try to kill him?' It was meant as a joke and Bobo started to smile, but the look on Kauderer's face stopped him.

'Good point,' he said. 'We shouldn't discount them yet. But let's rule out the others first. Make arrangements to meet them all tonight. We'll meet in the library again at midnight.'

With that, Kauderer turned and left, slipping through the door without making a single sound and leaving the used cup sitting on the table. Bobo assumed it was meant for him to clean and replace. He left it there and returned to the golden basin. Twisting the silver knobs, he let the hot water fill the basin and then plunged his entire head into the near boiling water. The searing heat finally eradicated the stench of blood from his nose, but did little for his overall feeling of being constantly dirty in the cleanest place in the world.

'Let me get this straight,' said Scabbs. 'We're going to capture Seek and Destroy?'

Kal nodded. He could see Madam Noritake's up ahead. They were almost there. 'I saw them snooping around the docks earlier when I was looking for you and

Yolanda. Nemo must have sent them down here to look for the package.'

'So you think Nemo doesn't have it yet?'

Kal nodded again.

'So why don't we just find it ourselves?'

Kal stopped and ducked into an alley next to Noritake's. 'Look,' he said. 'I see two possibilities. Either Nemo already has the package, in which case we need inside information to get it back.'

'And the second?'

'Nemo doesn't have it, which means Feg hid it and Nemo's trying to double-cross him by finding it before he pays for it.'

'So, why don't we look for it?' Scabbs scratched his chin, obviously perplexed. A large scab came off and landed on his shirt. He brushed it onto the ground.

'Because if Feg hid it, nobody's going to find it except Feg,' said Kal. 'He may be a big bruiser, but he's still smart enough to outwit Seek and Destroy.'

Scabbs worked at the edges of the spot where the scab had fallen off. 'What if Nemo already paid for it and sent the boys out to fetch it?'

Kal was surprised by the question. He hadn't considered that. As usual he had an answer, even if he had to make it up on the spot. 'Then they won't be at the docks and I'm scavved.'

He pulled Scabbs out of the alley and crossed the street to the Hive City docks. 'Show me this warehouse where you first saw Feg,' said Kal. 'That seems like the best place to start.'

Scabbs led the way down towards the far end of the docks. 'It's down this way,' said Scabbs as he reached the corner by the wall of the dome.

Kal turned the corner and immediately grabbed Scabbs and pulled him back. 'There they are,' he hissed. He glanced back around the corner to see if Seek and Destroy had spotted them. Luckily, it looked like they were too busy arguing to notice anything at the moment.

'What's the plan?' asked Scabbs.

Kal looked at his little friend and smiled. 'You create a diversion.' With that, Kal shoved Scabbs in the back with his boot, sending him sprawling into the middle of the street.

He fell with just a soft thump and an *oof*. Not nearly enough noise to draw the boys down to the corner. But then, being Scabbs, he got up, dusted himself off, turned towards Kal and screamed, 'What the scav was that for?'

He immediately threw his hands over his mouth as he turned towards Seek and Destroy. Scabbs's jaw dropped and Kal heard one of the boys say, 'Hey, it's that

ratskin friend of Jerico's. Get him.'

Scabbs glanced at Kal, his eyebrows raised in a pleading look. Kal mouthed the words 'fall down' and pointed at the ground.

Scabbs shrugged, his eyebrows furrowed and mouth half open.

Just then, two las blasts shot past Scabbs on either side of his head. He screamed and ran towards Kal.

'Oh scav,' muttered Kal. He had no choice with what he did next. As Scabbs reached the corner, Kal stuck his foot out and tripped him. Scabbs went down hard. Kal heard something crack and was pretty sure it wasn't the rockrete street. 'Stay down,' hissed Kal. 'Time for plan W.'

He ran off down the docks, leaving Scabbs groaning on the ground.

Bobo decided to meet with Princess Jillian first. He didn't want to appear to be avoiding her because that would show weakness, which he could ill-afford when meeting with the woman whose bed he'd dumped a head in that morning. He also didn't want to be in that house after dark.

He was led through the Greim estate by a valet dressed in a suit and tie. Bobo marvelled that even the help in the Spire dressed better than the most prominent members of the Hive City houses.

The Greim estate was lush, though nothing so nice as the Helmawr estate. For one thing, they had fewer exterior windows, being located in a mostly interior space of the Spire. Marble columns dotted the expansive foyer leading to a sweeping staircase with real wood banisters engraved with swirling designs along their length and topped by carved lion's heads at the pedestals. Of course, he'd been up those stairs earlier, but it had been dark.

'Ms Jillian will meet you in the garden,' said the valet. 'I'll show you the way.'

Bobo waved the valet on ahead. They passed through a corridor lined with portraits of the Greim ancestry. The gold and platinum frames gleamed, but the faces were all dour and stern. Glass double doors at the end of the hall led into the garden.

Bobo stepped out and almost lost his breath. He was outside the Spire, standing on a wide balcony filled with plants and exotic flowers whose multi-coloured blooms strained to get ever closer to the bright sun above. In the middle of the balcony sat Princess Jillian at an iron table eating fresh fruit and what looked like real eggs.

Bobo decided to play this meeting bold and loose. 'Little late in the day for breakfast, isn't it?'

Jillian looked up and waved off the valet. She smiled. ‘I didn’t sleep at all well this morning,’ she said through the smile. ‘Must have been some problem with my bed.’

Bobo, well-trained in the art of the straight face, simply nodded and sat across from Jillian. She had full, thick, black hair that was currently tied back into an elaborate bun, with what looked like teak wood sticks poking out at odd angles. She was a full figured girl wearing a long, pleated velvet dress and a tight-fitting, low-cut top that accentuated her considerable assets. Perhaps the most striking thing was the black eyeshadow and thick, dark-red blush she wore, which made it very tough to read her expressions.

‘A large lump in the mattress?’ he asked with an innocent look on his face.

Princess Jillian smiled again, which made Bobo worry that he’d gone too far with his brazen act. ‘Mr Bristol,’ she began.

‘Call me Jackal.’

‘Mr Bristol,’ she began again, and Bobo felt a chill run down his spine as the temperature out in the sun seemed to take a nose dive. ‘I received a message this morning from a rival of mine. I would like to send a reply.’

‘Surely your valet can deliver a message for you,’ said Bobo.

‘Not this message,’ said Jillian. ‘This will require your special expertise.’ She pulled an envelope out from beneath her dish and passed it to Bobo. ‘Inside you will find pictures of Davol Orlock’s sister as well as five thousand credits. I think you know what to do with her head.’

Bobo had a great deal of trouble controlling his face and breath as he accepted the envelope. What had he started here? These nobles were in a price war, but real people were getting hurt. He opened the envelope and took out the pictures. His gasp was quite audible.

‘She’s no more than ten,’ said Bobo, disgust dripping from every word.

‘And your point being?’ asked Jillian as she casually buttered her toast. She took a bite and smiled at Bobo as she chewed.

Bobo pressed his feelings into a ball and shoved them back down to a pit in his stomach where they would most certainly fester. ‘Only that it will take more time to get her alone,’ he said. ‘I assume you wish no collateral damage.’

Jillian dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin. ‘I think we understand each other,’ she said. ‘Can you show yourself out? I believe you know the way.’

Bobo gladly rose and left the balcony. He waved off the valet as he came rushing towards him.

Scabbs rolled over on his side and wrapped his arms around his chest. He was pretty sure he'd cracked a rib. 'Damn,' he muttered. 'Why do I always get hurt when we wing it?'

He tried to pull his laspistol out but every movement shot sharp tendrils of pain deep into his chest and back. He just managed to get the weapon out of its holster as Seek and Destroy came around the corner. One of them kicked his hand as he raised the gun, sending the weapon sliding away and possibly breaking a finger or two.

'Well, well, well,' said the other. 'What do we have here?' He kicked Scabbs in the ribs, which drove all of his breath out of his lungs and nearly made him pass out from the pain.

'You shouldn't ought to have made us run,' said the first. 'That makes us mad.'

Scabbs looked up at the two of them. They tried to slap each other's hands, but one went high and the other low and they ended up hitting each other instead. This led to a brief argument during which Scabbs could only groan in pain.

'Hey Destroy, let's take him back to Nemo,' said Seek.

'No, you idiot,' said Destroy. 'Nemo said not to come back until we find the package.'

'Shut up,' said Seek. 'And don't call me an idiot.'

Scabbs tried to get to his hands and knees as they started punching each other again. They must have both noticed because he got a boot in his stomach and another one in his chest. This time he did lose consciousness for a moment. When he came to, the boys were still standing over him.

Seek snapped his fingers. 'I know. He's a ratskin, right? He's gotta be a tracker, right? Let's use him to find the package for us and then we take 'em both back to Nemo.'

'Hey, good idea,' said Destroy.

'Don't sound so surprised.'

'Don't take everything so personally, dummy.'

They grabbed each other and began wrestling, eventually falling on top of Scabbs.

'I think that's enough, boys!' said Kal a moment later.

Scabbs rolled out from beneath Seek and Destroy and looked up at Kal standing above them all, his pearl-handled laspistols pointing at the leather clad goons. 'Sorry,' he said. 'These warehouses are big. Took me forever to run around behind them.'

Scabbs nodded his head and then passed out.

Bobo folded up the envelope full of credits and photos of a little girl he had no intention of killing and stuck it in his inner coat pocket. He'd now made contact with two houses, and neither seemed at all interested in House Helmawr or killing Kal Jerico. Perhaps those two were simply too caught up in their own little rivalry to worry about ascending into the upper Spire.

Since that meeting hadn't taken very long, Bobo decided to pay a visit to the Kitty Club to see if Prince Gregor of House Ulanti had arrived for his afternoon special yet.

The Kitty Club was conveniently located near the entrance to one of the tunnels that ran between the Spire's myriad levels. As Bobo walked in, it took a minute for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The goo globes were no match for the sun's rays.

Before his eyes adjusted, Bobo felt his arms grabbed, and he was pulled forward through a curtain into one of the numerous alcoves situated around the perimeter of the club. Bobo began to wonder if these were ever used for their intended purpose, although their purpose probably was for clandestine meetings.

'Mr Bristol,' said a figure sitting at the table. The goo globe above him provided just enough illumination to see his outline. 'Have a seat.'

Bobo closed his eyes and felt his way into the booth. 'My friends call me Jackal,' he said. 'Are you my friend?'

Bobo opened his eyes, which had now adjusted enough to see some facial details of the man across the booth from him. He was a large man with a round, plump face and a wide smile. His blue eyes sparkled beneath a thick shock of wavy black hair that seemed just this side of out of control.

'I am Gregor,' said the man. 'Prince Gregor, of House Ulanti, if you must, but my friends call me Gregor and I truly wish you to be my good friend.'

He smiled again as he extended a meaty hand across the table. Bobo had thought the man to be heavy-set when he first saw his shape in the dark, fat from a life of leisure, but there was enormous strength in Gregor's arm and hand and very little flab. His fingers enveloped Bobo's small hand, practically crushing it when he squeezed.

Bobo smiled through the pain. 'Thank you for your kind gift Prince, I mean, Gregor. To what do I owe the pleasure of your largesse?'

'I require the services of one such as yourself, he said. As he talked, Gregor kept running his thick fingers through his hair as if something felt out of place up top. As far as Bobo could tell, the prince's constant rearranging never changed a thing. His hair simply returned to the same wavy state after each pass.

‘You need a well-dressed, dashingly handsome businessman?’ asked Bobo, getting into the good natured banter.

Gregor laughed out loud, which was a sight to behold. He threw his arms up in the air and leaned back on the couch and then slammed both hands down flat on the table with such force that Bobo nearly jumped out of his seat.

‘No, no, no!’ said Gregor. ‘I need someone trained in the art of death.’ His eyes bored a hole into Bobo’s forehead. ‘I need a killer.’

Bobo resisted the urge to lean in. Perhaps he was finally getting somewhere with this investigation. ‘Oh?’ he asked. ‘And you believe I have the look of a killer?’

Gregor laughed again, but this time Bobo was ready for the loud crack as his hands smacked the table. ‘Your reputation proceeds you, Jackal,’ he said after the laughter subsided. ‘I know of your exploits downhive.’

‘Well, let’s say I have a certain knack,’ said Bobo. ‘A flair if you will. Was there a specific target you had in mind?’

Gregor shook his head. ‘Nothing specific,’ he said. ‘I am planning an excursion and wish to take a skilled hunter along with me.’

‘Excursion?’

‘Into the depths of the Underhive,’ said Gregor. His smile returned. ‘I take an annual trip down into the bowels of this massive city to hunt the most dangerous prey imaginable.’

‘Giant spiders?’ asked Bobo, hopefully.

‘No, you silly assassin,’ roared Gregor. ‘Man!’

Here we go again, thought Bobo.

‘The Underhive is full of gangs, you see,’ he said as he passed his hands through his hair again. ‘Very dangerous they are, like cornered animals. Now, I normally go down in a spyrer rig, but lately that has lost much of its thrill, so I would like to go on a hunt with just my wits, a kevlar suit and my trusty heavy plasma gun. But I would like a professional along to protect me. Here’s the plan…’

Bobo’s eyes glazed over as Gregor outlined their itinerary using objects from the table to illustrate. He wondered why it seemed that every job these nobles had for him involved killing regular people. But, he realized, his question contained the answer: because they were nobles.

After they dropped all of their weapons, Kal handed the twins some rope and told them to tie each other up. This proved to be too much trouble as they almost

instantly began arguing about who would tie up the other first.

Kal blasted the ground next to them to get their attention and pointed at the one wearing the blue bandana tied around his bald head (the other wore a red bandana). ‘Which one are you?’ he asked.

‘I’m Seek,’ he replied. ‘That’s Destroy.’

‘Nice names,’ said Kal. ‘Tie him up Seek. Nice and tight. In fact, the tighter you make his knots, the looser yours will be. Got it?’

Kal glanced down at Scabbs as Seek got started. From the cursing coming from Destroy’s lips, he knew the blue twin was doing a good job. Scabbs was unconscious, but seemed okay. There were no bones protruding anywhere and just a trickle of drying blood around his mouth. Kal would need to get him somewhere safe where he could recover.

After Seek finished tying up his brother, he looked expectantly at Kal, holding his arms out with his wrists together. Kal smacked the pearl-handled butt of his laspistol into Seek’s jaw, dropping him to the ground.

As he leaned down to tie up Seek, Destroy started laughing. ‘Good one, Kal. That serves him right for tying me up so tight.’ He then kicked his brother in the stomach.

Kal just shook his head. He knew you could always count on family to kick you while you were down. He raised his weapon up towards Destroy. ‘That’s enough,’ he said. ‘Now, you tell me what Nemo and Feg have planned for the satchel or you’ll be down here on the ground after your brother wakes up, and I’ll tell him you kicked him.’

Destroy’s face paled to a deathly white. He began speaking very quickly. ‘I don’t know what Nemo’s plan is. He never tells us nothing. But I heard Feg say he was looking for transport up to the Spire.’

‘Wait,’ said Kal as he finished tying the knots around Seek’s wrists. ‘You mean Feg and Nemo aren’t working together?’

‘Course not,’ said Destroy. ‘You either work for Nemo or get tortured into working for Nemo.’

Kal stood up and trained a gun on each twin again. ‘Let me get this straight,’ he said. ‘Nemo is torturing Feg?’

Destroy nodded his head.

‘So Nemo doesn’t know where the satchel is yet?’

Destroy nodded again.

Kal thought for a moment and an idea sprang into his mind. It was a terrible idea, but it was the only one he had and it was so old and so bad that only Kal

Jerico could pull it off.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Here’s what we’re going to do. When your brother wakes up, you two are going to take me to see Nemo. I know how to get the information out of Feg, but Nemo will have to pay me to get it.’

‘That’s your plan?’ asked Destroy. He rolled his eyes and let out a low whistle. ‘You are scavving crazy, Jerico.’

‘True,’ said Kal, smiling. ‘But it works for me.’

8: BAIT AND SWITCH

Yolanda tumbled forward, blindfolded, her hands tied behind her back. ‘This isn’t necessary,’ she said.

‘Oh, but I think it is,’ said the familiar voice. ‘I know you all too well.’

‘What do you want from me?’ asked Yolanda. Free of the hands that had held her, she whirled around and kicked out, hitting nothing but air.

‘Just a little favour,’ said the man. ‘You owe it to me.’

‘I owe you nothing but pain,’ she said. Yolanda lowered her head and charged blindly towards the voice. Hands caught her before she reached him, pulling her backwards. Kicking out, Yolanda landed a couple of good blows, but whoever held her was strong enough to withstand a few off-balanced kicks.

She reared one leg back, getting ready to snap it down towards what she hoped would be a knee or ankle. But before she unleashed the kick, the hands slammed her back into a chair. She felt a rope go around her waist. She kept kicking, but once they cinched the rope tight, they worked together to grab her legs and tie them to the chair as well.

She couldn’t move, so she screamed. ‘I’ll never do anything for you again!’ Her blindfold came off and she stared at her father. ‘You hear me?’ Never!’

‘Oh, but you will,’ said Lord Catallus. ‘For if you don’t, I will send spyrers down to wipe out your precious Wildcats; every last one of them, and any other Escher women they happen to see along the way.’

‘You monster!’ she screamed.

Yolanda’s father simply smiled. He turned to the guards standing beside him. They stopped massaging their thighs and calves long enough to stand straight and salute their lord. ‘Bring it in,’ he said.

The guards left the room. ‘Bring what in?’ she asked. ‘What do you want from me?’

‘It’s not what I want,’ said her father. ‘It’s what the house wants: needs

actually.'

'Let me guess,' she said. 'More power.'

Her father smiled again. 'You always were a smart girl,' he said. 'And you are uniquely qualified to perform this little task for the good of the house.'

'Why's that?' spat Yolanda.

'Because it involves your comrade, Kal Jerico,' he said.

The door opened and the guards returned. Yolanda gasped. 'No,' she said. 'Absolutely not.'

'You know we're not supposed to bring anyone here without a blindfold,' said Destroy.

Kal walked just behind the two thugs, his hands folded inside his jacket holding his pistols beneath his arm pits. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I've been here enough times that I already know the way by heart.'

'It's just that it'll look funny, us bringing you in without a blindfold.'

'But we brought in Feg without a blindfold,' said Seek.

Destroy elbowed him in the side.

'Don't worry, boys,' said Kal. 'I'm sure nobody will notice. They'll all be too impressed by my presence to worry about such trivial matters.'

After a while, the twins led Kal up to a blank wall. Seek stepped forward and tapped out a series of knocks on the wall with his fist, waited for a response, and then rapped out another series of knocks. As the wall slid open, he turned to Kal, his laspistol in hand. 'What if we just decide to turn on you right now? We're bad guys, remember?'

Kal smiled. 'Well, for one thing,' he said. 'I took the liberty of depleting your power cells before I gave back your weapons.'

Seek popped open the cell compartment and took a look. 'Scav!' he said.

'So,' said Kal, showing them his weapons again, 'if either of you tries anything while we're inside, I'll shoot you both in the back. And if you survive that, you'll have to face Nemo afterwards. You don't think he'll be happy about the two of you showing me the way into his secret base of operations, do you?'

Destroy huffed, his eyebrows crinkling. 'You said you knew the way,' he said.

'I lied,' said Kal. 'I'm a bad guy, too, remember? Now move in, both of you. And remember: try to get as many guards to follow us as possible.'

'Why do you want the guards?' asked Seek.

'All part of the plan,' said Kal. Just not the plan I told you about, he added to himself.

As they stepped through the opening in the wall, the panel started to slide shut behind them. Kal immediately knew something was wrong. Other than a little ratskin slave operating the wall controls, there was nobody at all in the outer room.

'Where is everybody?' asked Seek.

'I dunno,' said Destroy. 'Maybe they smelled you coming.'

As Seek grabbed his brother in a neck hold and tried to wrestle him to the ground, Kal began to hear sounds of a battle from deep inside the complex. Then an explosion shook the room around them. The twins stopped their tussle and looked around.

'Sounds like someone already beat us to the punch,' said Kal. 'I guess with that diversion going on, I don't really need you two any longer.'

Seek and Destroy, still holding each other in bear hugs, looked back at Kal just in time to see the pearl handles of his laspistols come down on their foreheads.

'Looks like we go with plan W as usual,' said Kal as he followed the sounds of battle into the complex.

Gregor had given Bobo a sizeable retainer for his services on the hunt and Bobo, in turn, promised to meet the prince at the wall at dawn the day after the upcoming royal wedding. Gregor couldn't miss that, of course. Every noble in the Spire was practically required to attend. He'd asked Bobo to stay at the Kitty Club and enjoy some companionship with him in his private suite upstairs, but Bobo begged off, saying he hadn't eaten all day and needed his strength before he could handle any more pleasure today.

Most of that was the truth. What Bobo didn't tell the Prince of Ulanti was that he had a meeting with the Duke of Ty at the Grand Sky City Restaurant. However, the real truth of the matter was that for all its finery and pleasures – the sunshine and silk clothes, the clean buildings with no gaping holes blown into them and the cleaner people with their coiffed hair and smooth skin, not to mention the wonderful, fresh air bereft of any tinge of acidic vapour – the Spire was beginning to leave a bad taste in his mouth.

The Grand Sky City Restaurant was just about as close as you could get to the Helmawr estates in the Spire. Of course, there was an entire level of Helmawr guard posts to go through first. Lord Helmawr, and now Kal, were, the most well-protected people on the planet.

The restaurant itself took up the entire outer ring of the level and it rotated. Every table had a window seat, and if your meal took long enough, you would

get to see the entire vista surrounding the Spire. Of course, with the ever-present cloud cover a mile beneath the windows, there really wasn't that much to see.

The Duke didn't so much have a table as an entire section of the restaurant to himself. He was a darkish man with close-cropped, tightly curled, black hair. In the dim light of the restaurant – the sun had gone down below the clouds as Bobo had wound his way up from the Kitty Club – the whites around the Duke's dark-brown irises nearly glowed. He stood and smiled a bright white smile as Bobo was escorted to his table.

'Mr Bristol,' he said, and then corrected himself. 'I mean, Jackal. I know how you like to use first names.'

Bobo marvelled once again at the speed with which information moved around the Spire. He bowed and said, 'At your service…'

The duke picked up on the hint immediately. 'You may call me Derokin,' he said and then laughed. 'My actual name is much longer and more difficult, even for me to pronounce. My mother was quite interested in preserving the ancient culture of our ancestors and went a bit overboard on naming.'

Bobo smiled. On the outside, most of the Spire nobles seemed so kind and affable, but only when they thought you an equal or needed something from you. So far, none of them had any respect for anyone beneath the wall.

'Please sit and order,' said Derokin. 'It takes forever to get your food here. I guess they have to wait for the doors to line up between the dining hall and the kitchens. At least we have the view to pass the time.'

Bobo looked out the bank of windows and saw that they were just in time to witness the colour shift from orange to red to purple as the sunlight streamed through the clouds. He had thought that only someone like him could truly appreciate that sight, but perhaps this duke was different after all. Bobo tore his gaze from the window and ordered a steak with all the trimmings. He had no idea what that meant, but he figured he'd be able to eat the steak if nothing else.

After the sun finally set and the spectacular light show concluded, Derokin turned back to Bobo and said, 'Well, we should talk before our meals come. I always like to get business out of the way before a meal.'

Bobo took a sip of the wine that had been placed in front of him and marvelled at its smoothness and heady aroma. 'A fine strategy,' he said. 'How may I be of service to the House of Ty?'

'Well,' said Derokin. 'We have been having some trouble in our dealings with House Ran Lo,' he said.

Bobo kept his demeanour calm, nodded his head, and even managed to smile at

the appropriate times as Derokin laid out a plan whereby Bobo would make his way down to Hive City and blow up a Van Saar weapons plant that had an exclusive contract with House Ran Lo. The duke would then be able to sell his weapons made in a different plant for a much greater profit while the Van Saar plant was rebuilt.

'And how do I limit collateral damage?' asked Bobo. 'A weapons plant is sure to make quite a large hole in the City. Not to mention the potential for a massive hive quake.'

'Oh, most certainly,' said Derokin. 'It will be spectacular. But I doubt we'll feel anything up here other than a small rumble. Just make sure it appears to be an accident. Shouldn't be too much of a problem, though. Those downhivers aren't all that bright.'

Bobo hid his reaction behind the glass as he drained its contents. He waved at the waiter for another glass. It was going to be a long night.

Kal ran blindly through Nemo's lair, opening and glancing through doors, looking for the source of the battle sounds. Every once in while, he'd feel another explosion rock the entire building. He had some idea of where he was going. He'd lied twice to the twins. He had been here enough times to sort of know his way around. He'd just never been through that particular secret entrance before. Nemo undoubtedly had several.

He finally found a door that opened onto a staircase leading down. The battle sounded much closer now. He checked the levels on his laspistols and patted his pocket where he'd put Seek's and Destroy's extra power packs. He slipped down the stairs and glanced around the wall at the bottom.

There, in the middle of the room, stood a large man wearing an Orrus spyrer rig holding one of Nemo's henchmen off the ground by his neck. The rest of the guards were already dead. 'Tell me where I can find the one-armed brute that blew me up,' he growled.

'I think you'll find he can talk a lot better if you don't crush his windpipe,' said Kal.

The spyrer whirled around and pointed his other hand at Kal. From his vantage point, Kal could see the tip of the explosive bolt snap into the chamber. He held his hands up, palms forward, leaving his fingers lightly on the triggers of his laspistols, just in case.

'Whoa there, big fella,' said Kal. 'I'm on your side.' Kal had no idea if that was true, but considering his options this deep into Nemo's base, it seemed safer to

be on the side of the Spyrer.

The sweaty, heavily-bearded and yet oddly bald man gave Kal a quizzical look. ‘Jerico?’ he said. ‘Kal Jerico? You’re supposed to be getting ready for your wedding.’

Then it started to click in with Kal. He’d met this behemoth before, sans spyrer rig, of course. He was some military general or something of Helmawr’s. In fact, Kal recognized the man’s voice. He’d been talking to Valtin remotely in his office when Kal had been eavesdropping.

What was his name? Kal snapped his fingers. ‘Kraperin, right?’ he said.

‘Katerin,’ he replied, deadpan. ‘Captain Katerin.’

Kal snapped his fingers again. ‘Right, right. Valtin gave me some time off to come down and help you get the package back.’

‘I don’t need any help,’ said Katerin.

The guard’s eyes were beginning to bulge and his face was turning blue from lack of air.

‘That’s exactly what I told Valtin,’ said Kal. ‘But here I am. So why don’t you put that poor guard down and let’s find that satchel. I’ll just follow your lead.’

Katerin looked back and forth between Kal and the nearly unconscious guard for a moment before dropping the man and pointing his armed fist at him. ‘Talk, you!’ he growled.

Kal smiled. Military men were so easy to manipulate. All any of them wanted was a little recognition for their work. That and the chance to blow things up from time to time.

The guard coughed for a minute before looking up and asking ‘What was the question?’

‘Where’s the one-armed brute who blew me up?’ said Katerin.

Kal could tell the guard had no idea what Katerin meant, so he cut in. ‘Where’s Nemo holding Feg?’ When Katerin glared at him, Kal shrugged. ‘The one-armed brute is Vandal Feg. He has the satchel. He blew you up?’

‘Somebody did while I was following this Feg character.’

Kal and Katerin looked back at the guard. ‘Well?’ they both asked at the same time.

‘In the torture room,’ said the guard.

Katerin reached down and picked the guard up by the collar. ‘Take us there,’ he said, adding under his breath, ‘Man’s going to pay for trying to blow me up.’

As the guard led them down into the recesses of Nemo’s lair, Kal got an idea. ‘You know, Kater… captain,’ he said. ‘I doubt it was Feg who tried to blow you

up. It was probably Nemo. You know, master spy. You were in his tunnel. He probably did it to protect his secret base; not that it helped though.'

'Makes sense,' said Katerin.

Of course it does, thought Kal, smiling. The best lies always make sense. Kal had no idea he'd hit on the exact truth. He'd just pieced together a convincing story based on the information he knew; a story intended to make Captain Katerin behave exactly like Kal needed him to behave during the next stage of plan W.

House Ran Lo had a much different feel to it than House Greim or any other spot within the Spire that Bobo had seen. Where Greim had been imposing with marble floors and columns, the Ran Lo estate felt more like a garden. They were blessed with southern exposure and had put it to great use, replacing nearly the entire back wall of the estate with windows.

Bobo could see thousands of pinpoints of light in the night sky through those windows, and once again marvelled at the grand beauty of the Spire, which was so tainted by the lust for power of all its residents.

He entered the estate through a wooden gazebo bedecked with tangles of ivy that seemed to pulse and constrict as he brushed past them, climbing roses with enormous thorns and some odd-looking plant with fuzzy foliage that looked more like tentacles than leaves. On the other side, he walked down a path of pebbles set in a garden of spiked grass, exotic plants that had deep, pitcher-like bulbs, trees with waving, low-hanging limbs and bushes adorned with bright red flowers and long stamens that seemed to wave at him as he passed. In fact, throughout his trip through the garden, Bobo couldn't shake the feeling that all the plants were watching and waiting for him to step off the path.

He passed many side paths curving around towards the back of the estate. He also passed guards at regular intervals. Somehow they all knew who he was and why he was here – something even Bobo didn't know yet. In the centre of the garden stood a mansion of natural wood and glass.

The Ran Lo manor seemed to almost grow naturally out of the garden. It was a large, low building; just a single floor, but had no right angles that Bobo could see. Even the door was oddly shaped, almost like a peanut.

The door opened as he approached. He entered a circular room with a wood floor that seemed to have been sliced from an enormous tree. Rings of alternating browns emanated from the centre and grew in size all the way out to the edges of the room. Bobo wanted to get a closer look, to see if it was truly

natural or simply another unnatural design, but a manservant appeared from behind the door.

A small man, even by Bobo's standards, the manservant was also quite old. He walked with the stoop of the aged, but kept a permanent smile on his leathery, olive-yellow face. He motioned for Bobo to follow and led him into the house.

As he walked behind the manservant, Bobo soon realized he would need to be escorted out of this mansion. It was a maze of strangely shaped rooms all connected to one another through open doorways. There were no halls and no doors inside but each room had so many exits to other rooms, it was dizzying.

The manservant finally led him into an office. In the middle of the room sat a middle-aged man behind a large, birch desk. He had straight hair that might once have been jet black, but was now mottled with grey. A small nose jutted out beneath oval eyes on his almond-coloured face. It was the eyes that drew Bobo's attention. They seemed to pierce him as soon as he walked in.

The man stood and bowed slightly. 'Good evening, Mr Bobo. Thank you so much for coming to meet with me in my humble house.'

Bobo was so taken aback by the gracious nature of his host that he completely forgot to ask to be called by his first name. 'I appreciate the invitation… and the gift,' he said.

The elder Ran Lo waved his hand at a high-backed, leather chair. 'Please sit and we shall conduct our business. Sing will bring us some tea.'

As Bobo took his seat, the manservant left, closing the door.

'What can I do for you?' Bobo trailed off, finally realizing that the elderly man had used his real name.

Ran Lo smiled a very disconcerting smile. Not quite an all-knowing Kal Jerico smirk, but close.

After a rather long pause Ran Lo said, 'It's not what you can do for me, Mr Bobo, but what I can do for you.'

There followed another pause. Bobo was still smart enough to not give anything more away than he already had. He scanned the wall behind Ran Lo looking for any means of escape or any weapons.

Ran Lo kept his eyes firmly on Bobo. 'I can free you of Hermod Kauderer's grasp, or rather pay you to free yourself.'

He tossed Bobo a large envelope. 'A down payment for your services,' said Ran Lo.

Bobo opened the envelope. It was jammed full with credits. Something stuck up from the bundle – a photo. He pulled it out.

‘That,’ said Ran Lo, ‘is my insurance policy. A Miss Jenn Strings, I believe. Quite lovely by downhive standards. She’s under the watchful eye of someone in my employ, a small lady I believe you know as Madam Noritake.’

Bobo reminded himself to breathe. He needed to stay focused, but the thought of Jenn in trouble made his heart rate quicken and his breath run shallow.

‘You will take care of Hermod Kauderer for me, Mr Bobo or Madam Noritake will take care of Jenn for you.’

He glanced at an ornate clock with hands that looked like tree branches and numbers fashioned from leaves. ‘Oh my,’ he said. ‘You’d best hurry. You don’t want to be late for your meeting with Hermod.’

Sing came in with the tea on a tray. ‘I’m sorry you won’t be able to stay for tea, Mr Bobo,’ said Ran Lo. ‘Mr Sing will show you the way out. Please conclude our business before you leave the Spire. Good night.’

Bobo left the Ran Lo grounds in a daze. What had he gotten himself into? What had he gotten Jenn into? He ran towards the library, completely forgetting to follow Kauderer’s safety protocols.

It didn’t take Kal and Katerin long to make their way to the torture chamber. Katerin had already wiped out a significant portion of Nemo’s guards. Nemo must have called in all of his guards as soon as the spyrer-suited warrior had breached the lair. That plan had backfired as it left the rest of the building completely empty.

Kal was beginning to worry that Nemo might have taken Feg and escaped already, or worse, killed the bruiser to keep his secret safe. They would know soon enough. Their guide showed them the door to the torture chamber, but before he could open it, Kal pistol-whipped the poor guard at the base of the neck. He dropped at their feet and then Kal opened the door.

A hail of bullets screamed into the hallway from inside. Kal dived to the side, hoping the walls of Nemo’s base were made of heavy-duty rockcrete.

‘Autocannon,’ he yelled at Katerin. ‘Looks like they’ve been waiting for us.’

‘Now this is more like it,’ said Katerin. ‘Let’s see how they like this…’

He locked two shells into place and, just as Kal shouted ‘Nooo!’, fired them into the room. ‘Feg may be in there, too,’ yelled Kal. ‘We need him alive.’

He had to admit that the autocannon had stopped, though. Kal crawled forward and peered inside. He could see the huge barrel of the cannon still spinning in the middle of the room, but there was nobody at the controls anymore. A shadow moved towards the big gun from the side. Kal jumped to his feet and ran

forward, firing with both pistols.

Blasts impacted the back wall to either side of the guard moving towards the autocannon. Kal re-sighted and shot again. This time both shots hit their mark and the man dropped to the ground with holes in his chest and stomach.

'I'm going for the cannon,' said Kal. 'Cover me!'

He sprinted forward, not even waiting for a reply. He heard the unmistakable sound of explosive shells being launched behind him and ducked as he ran.

A moment later, Kal was standing behind the autocannon, which had been set up on a tripod. He whirled it around and began spraying the room with bullets. Guards dived and rolled or died where they were standing. As he pelted the room with gunfire, Kal could see they weren't in the torture room, but in a guard post.

The autocannon sat in the middle. To each side were several tables, presumably for the guards to use for eating and playing cards. The tables had been overturned to use as barricades, but they did little to slow the barrage of bullets from their own heavy weapon. A row of thick metal doors with small, bar-covered windows spanned the back wall of the room. They'd found Nemo's prison block.

'It's beautiful!' yelled Kal as he held the trigger down and swept the gun back and forth around almost the entire perimeter of the room. No need to worry about collateral damage. Even if he hit Katerin, the noble captain's rig would surely protect him. Then the gun jammed. A moment later, the guards who had hidden behind the farthest tables stood back up and opened fire again.

Kal dove behind the autocannon and crawled away looking for cover. He found an overturned table and crawled behind it, being careful not to slide in the pool of blood. Peeking over the top with his laspistols in hand, Kal watched as Katerin stomped to the far end of the room, right into the middle of the guards behind the last table and began bashing heads with his hydraulic powered fists. It was bloody and it was short.

'Which one's Nemo?' said Katerin, looking at the pile of dead bodies around him.

'None of them,' said Kal. 'My guess is that Nemo's with Feg. That's his only bargaining chip left.' Kal looked around the room. There was the door they had entered, four cell doors along the back wall and one more door on each side. 'One of these two,' he said, pointing to the side doors.

Katerin didn't wait to talk strategy. He simply kicked the bodies out of his way and opened the nearest door. Kal shrugged and waited to see what would happen

next.

Katerin raised his hands, clicked two shells into place and entered. ‘You Nemo?’ he asked as he went through the door.

Kal slipped around the table and moved towards the door, making sure he couldn’t be seen by anyone in the next room. He listened to the exchange as he moved.

‘Stop right there,’ said Nemo. Kal knew that muffled, yet incredibly sinister voice anywhere. ‘One more step and Mr Feg’s head becomes a molten puddle of goo.’

‘That satchel is royal property,’ said Katerin. ‘If you destroy that man’s head, you will be obstructing a royal inquiry. The penalty for that is death.’

Kal shook his head. Nobles. Hrmph. The man had no tact. No flair. Kal peered through the crack in the door to locate Nemo. He needed more information before he acted. Most of the room was blocked from view as Katerin had stopped on the other side of the door, but he could just make out the glint off the master spy’s dark helmet in the middle of the room.

Nemo wasn’t one to make idle threats, so he must have some weapon trained on Feg, although Kal couldn’t see the one-armed scummer yet. One thing Kal knew about dealing with Nemo was that the only way to bargain with him was to change the odds. Kal fingered his laspistol, stepped out from behind the door, sighted and fired.

His shot flew true, blasting a meltagun right out of Nemo’s hand.

‘Jerico!’ screamed Nemo. He reached into his jacket and tossed something at them as he dived to the side.

The room exploded with light and sound. Nemo had thrown a flash bomb. Kal was blinded, but he was pretty sure the Orrus rig came complete with a photo visor or at least photo contacts. Katerin should be able to see.

‘What’s going on?’ he called out as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

‘Nemo opened a tunnel and took off,’ yelled Katerin. ‘I’m going after the bastard.’

‘You go ahead,’ said Kal. ‘I’ll safeguard Feg.’

A few moments later, once Kal could see again, he holstered his weapons and sauntered over to Feg, who looked like he’d been slung from the top of some sadistic cage. ‘Hello Vandal,’ he said, smiling. ‘I’m here to rescue you.’

Feg spat at him, but Kal was ready for that move and sidestepped. The second wad of spittle, though, smacked him right between the eyes.

‘Now, now,’ said Kal. ‘Any more of that and I won’t get you out of here.’

‘What’s the catch?’ asked Feg.

‘I get you out of Nemo’s clutches and you lead me to the satchel,’ said Kal. ‘If you’re a good boy, I’ll even get my contacts to pay you for it. Or you could wait for mister “No Personality” to come back.’

‘Phah,’ said Feg. ‘Which one’s that?’

‘Either,’ said Kal. ‘Deal or no deal?’

Feg looked at Kal and he could tell that the chained up bruiser was thinking about launching another wad of spit at him. Instead, he swallowed the spit along with his pride and said, ‘Deal.’

Kal looked at the structure. It wasn’t so much a cage as an elaborate crucifix. Lattice beams had been attached to Feg’s body and limbs by ropes. These beams were roped together in such a way that they held the scummer with his arm and legs spread out horizontal over the floor. Pipes attached to the beam structure hung down to the ground all around the huge man. Kal had no idea what those were for and wanted ever so much to twist a few to see if they hurt Feg.

What he really needed was to find a way to release the scummer as quickly as possible. The ‘cage’ had been hoisted two metres off the ground by ropes attached to a pulley at the ceiling. The rope snaked its way through a few more pulleys towards a side wall and down to a large winch.

‘Hmmm,’ said Kal. He pulled out his sabre and gave the ropes a good whack.

‘Nooo,’ said Feg as the ropes went slack. His exclamation was cut short as he dropped to the floor, face first.

‘Perfect,’ said Kal. ‘Now, let’s get out of here.’

Bobo had no idea what he was going to say to Kauderer when he got to the meeting spot. Kill Kauderer or lose Jenn. It wasn’t like he had strong feelings for either one. Kauderer was his boss. Jenn was his girl as long as he had enough credits to keep her that way. One thing was certain. Bobo was tired of everyone else knowing more about him than he knew about them.

He decided to play dumb with Kauderer, since that wouldn’t be much of a stretch.

‘You buffoon,’ said Kauderer from the shadows of the stacks. ‘You made such a racket coming up here, I’m surprised you didn’t wake the spirit of the first librarian.’

Bobo dropped into his chair at the study carrel. ‘What happened to him?’ he asked.

‘Who?’

‘The first librarian,’ said Bobo with a sigh. ‘I assume something tragic happened or you wouldn’t have mentioned it.’

‘He fell off the top bridge while carrying a large load of books,’ said Kauderer. ‘Never mind. What have you learned today?’

Bobo was glad he’d at least been able to derail Kauderer’s initial anger. Now he needed to feel his way along with just enough truth to draw out what Kauderer already knew about his day.

‘None of them seem at all interested in House Helmawr,’ he said. ‘They’re all too caught up in their petty bickering about Hive City contracts.’

‘Oh?’

‘Princess Jillian wants to get back at Prince Granit with yet another head in the bed,’ said Bobo, ticking off the nobles on his fingers. ‘While the Duke of Ty wants me to blow up some manufacturing plant to honk off the Ran Lo family. Oh, and for a nice diversion from all the infighting, I can go on a gang hunt with Prince Gregor down in the Underhive.’

‘What did House Ran Lo want?’ asked Kauderer.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Bobo, buying some time. ‘What?’

He could see Kauderer’s eyes narrow in the gloom. ‘House Ran Lo,’ he said. ‘What did that old bastard want?’

Bobo could tell by Kauderer’s tone of voice that there was definitely some history between them. ‘Nothing,’ he said, finally. ‘He wanted me to get take care of some contract dispute he was having with House Ty. I think it was over that Hive City plant the duke wanted me to blow up.’

‘Hmmm,’ said Kauderer. ‘That doesn’t seem his style. Oh well, give me the particulars about each job and we’ll get started on them. Then maybe something will shake loose from somewhere else. Once everyone in the hive knows you can handle any situation, the assassin will most certainly come to you. Oh, and I’ll need your retainer fees. These will be expensive operations.’

‘No,’ said Bobo.

‘What do you mean, no?’ snapped Kauderer. ‘Give me the money. It belongs to House Helmawr, not you.’

‘No,’ said Bobo again. ‘I mean, I’m not giving you the particulars about the jobs. These jobs are not to be done. Okay?’

Kauderer began to fume. ‘What?’ he got out at last.

‘Don’t you get it?’ asked Bobo. ‘Nobody in any of the other houses has anything to do with the assassination attempt. They’re all too caught up in their own bickering to care about Helmawr. Everything they do hurts people down in

Hive City. My people. So, no. That's it. I'm out.'

Kauderer exploded out of his chair, towering over Bobo. 'You're not out until I say you're out,' he said through clenched teeth. Even in the gloom of the library, Bobo felt cowed by the tall man's overpowering presence. 'Now give me your instructions and your fees and then go wait in your apartment until I contact you again.'

Bobo fingered the knife he always kept in his pocket. It was small enough that he could palm it or place it in places where it wouldn't be found except under the most intense searches, but he knew at least a dozen places where he could stick it into a man that would result in death.

He got up and walked away. 'I threw it all off the bridge before I came in,' he said as he walked away. It was at least partially true. He'd shredded the instructions and photos and let them drift away on the breeze as he ran across the bridge. The packets full of credits were in a safe place.

Kauderer let him go. Bobo wasn't sure he would, but neither of them wanted to draw any attention to their clandestine meeting. Bobo still had his hand on the knife, but he knew he wasn't safe.

As he walked, Bobo wondered if he and Jenn could lose themselves in the Underhive before Ran Lo got the word out. But first he had to get to Jenn. 'I've got to get out of the Spire,' he said to himself as he trudged across the bridge. 'Away from all of this nasty Spire politics and away from that son of a bitch, Kauderer.'

As Bobo stepped off the bridge, a voice from the darkness replied. 'I can help you with that if you'd like.'

After re-attaching his mechanical arm, Vandal Feg led Kal out of Nemo's lair through a different secret entrance. Kal wasn't happy about giving the brute his arm back, but he knew that if this 'partnership' was going to work, he needed Feg at his best, and that meant allowing him to have his big, mechanical toy.

'Where are we going?' asked Kal as they trudged through the tunnel.

'You'll find out when we get there, Jerico,' said Feg. He stretched and flexed his muscles, practically scraping the ceiling of the tunnel with the outstretched claws on his mechanical arm. Kal heard a series of pops and cracks, but wasn't sure if it came from the man's sore joints or from the big metal arm.

'Feels good to get out of that stretcher,' said Feg. 'I owe you one.'

'At least,' said Kal.

Feg stopped and whirled around. 'Just one!' he said. 'And I'll pick when you

get it, got it?'

Kal tossed his hands up. 'You're the boss, Vandal,' he said. 'Just remember our deal. You give me the package, and if you're a good boy and don't try to double-cross me, you'll even get paid for it.'

Feg snorted. 'And where are you going to get that kind of cred?'

'My family has deep pockets,' said Kal, 'and at the moment, I hold the purse strings. Now move it. That noble captain won't buy us much time with Nemo.'

They continued down the tunnel in silence for a while.

'What set him off on Nemo like that?' asked Feg. 'I was sure he'd stay and try to beat the package out of me.'

Me too, thought Kal before answering. 'He had some grudge against Nemo, something about blowing him up…'

Kal's voice trailed off as they came to a pile of rubble blocking their path.

'Hey, this wasn't here when I came through earlier,' said Feg.

'That's because Nemo blew it up when he saw the royals chasing after you,' said Kal. 'Damn, I was right. Who knew?'

'What?'

'Nothing,' said Kal. 'Katerin must have found a way through here. You got a light beam on that mechanical arm of yours?'

Feg glared at Kal but then switched on the beam attached to his mechanical arm and shined it around the pile of rubble. Up towards the top, he halted the beam at what looked to be a small opening.

'I don't know if I can squeeze through there,' said Feg. 'You better go first, skinny.'

'Right,' said Kal. 'Like I'm going to fall for that. I'm staying right behind you the whole way, with my guns levelled at your head.'

Feg shrugged and started to climb the pile. Kal thought he'd won that round a little too easily and decided to stay close in case Feg tried to bolt once he got to the other side. However, right after Feg made it through the hole, he turned off his beam.

Kal scrambled through the hole and stood up on the other side. A horrible grinding sound made him dive for cover. Feg had his chainsword out.

The scummer revved the chainsword, which sent off sparks that fell onto the pile about three metres above him. At least now Kal had some idea where he was standing. He shot off two las blasts from his guns, but saw them impact another ten metres past where he thought Feg ought to be. Worse, he felt a low rumbling right after the impact.

‘No good, Jerico,’ said Feg. ‘You use those pea shooters in here and the whole place will collapse. Which one of us you think has the better chance to dig his way out?’ he laughed and advanced from the side, sparks flying and outlining his legs as he moved.

Kal holstered his guns and pulled out his sabre. It didn’t seem much of a fair fight against the chainsword. Then again, Kal didn’t fight fair.

He stayed low as the brute advanced. Luckily, his eyes were adjusting to the gloom of the tunnel again, so he could see the looming shape before it got to him. Kal grabbed a handful of mortar dust and flung it up high, hoping to hit Feg’s eyes.

As Vandal screamed, Kal scrambled forward, up the incline of the pile. He swiped at Vandal’s knee with his sabre. The blade bit deep into his flesh but Vandal Feg was one tough bastard, right down to his skin, and Kal didn’t get much power behind the swing.

Vandal turned and swung his chainsword blindly in a long arc. The tip cut into the shoulder of Kal’s leather coat as he tried to get farther up the pile of debris.

Kal stood and turned around. He stuck his finger through the hole in his coat and screamed. ‘Look what you did! That is it! You’re a dead man, Feg. I don’t care about the scavving medicine. You cut my coat. Now, I’m going to kill…’

Vandal cut his tirade short with a roundhouse punch to Kal’s jaw. Kal dropped to the ground. Feg stood over him, waiting for Kal to get up. When he didn’t, Feg said, ‘That’s one, Jerico. And that’s all you get.’

Feg shut down his chainsword and strode off around the pile of debris and disappeared back into the tunnel.

Kal rolled over and smiled. ‘One was all I needed, Vandal.’

Seek and Destroy woke up at the same time, rolled over and looked at each other.

‘We’re in deep trouble, brother,’ they said simultaneously. Then they both nodded at each other.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ they said in unison, but knocked their heads together as they stood up.

Destroy pushed his brother back down and opened the secret entrance, and then to make sure they stopped saying the same things, he added, ‘Dinglesnort.’

‘What the scav?’ asked Seek.

‘I said “dinglesnort”,’ said Destroy. ‘Bet you weren’t expecting that.’

Seek sat up and pointed behind his brother. ‘No, what the scav is that?’

Destroy turned around just in time to get slammed into the floor by the flying Wotan.

The metal mastiff landed on his chest and began barking and growling.

'Get him off me!' yelled Destroy. 'Get him off of me!'

Seek just began to laugh. 'Ha, ha, ha. I remember this one,' he said. 'That dog just loves you.'

'Shoot him, will you?'

Seek grabbed his lasgun, but then stopped. 'Jerico drained our power cells, remember?'

Wotan continued to bark and growl and snap at Destroy's neck. Seek stood and backed away, edging around the room towards the door.

'Don't you leave me,' cried Destroy. 'Don't you dare leave me.'

'I was just going to go get some help,' said Seek. 'Honest.'

'Liar.' Destroy got one arm free and put it up over his face, but instead of protecting himself, he just gave Wotan something else to snap at. Wotan closed his jaw around the forearm. Destroy took in a huge breath, getting ready to scream, but there was no pain.

'What the scav?' he said.

Wotan backed up, stepping off Destroy's chest, but held onto the arm, effectively pulling Destroy to his feet. It was either that or lose his arm.

'What's he doing?' asked Seek.

'I don't know but I wish he'd stop.'

Wotan growled and pulled on Seek, leading him down into Nemo's lair.

'I've got an idea,' said Seek. He grabbed the stick the ratskin used to tap out the code on the door and tossed it back through the secret entrance.

Wotan didn't even seem to notice. He just kept growling and pulling Destroy on into the lair.

'You don't suppose he's looking for Jerico, do you?' asked Destroy.

Wotan stopped.

Destroy looked down at the metal mastiff. 'Jerico?' he said again.

Wotan released his arm and barked.

Destroy nodded at the dog. 'Sure,' he said. 'We'll take you to Jerico.' Behind his back, Destroy waved his brother towards the door. He moved forward a little and looked at Wotan.

'Come on, boy,' he said. 'This way. Jerico's down here.' He moved on and then added. 'Get Jerico, Wotan. Get Jerico.'

As soon as the mastiff began running down the steps, Destroy turned and bolted

for the door, slapping his brother in the shoulder along the way to get him to run.

'Come on, stupid,' he said. 'Let's get out of here.'

Seek ran after his brother and tackled him. 'Don't call me stupid,' he said as he began punching.

9: OVER THE EDGE

Vandal Feg slipped through the blasted opening of Nemo's tunnel and stepped onto the roof of the warehouse. He glanced around and then trotted off towards the edge of the roof. Grabbing the rungs of the ladder, he swung around and descended from view.

Scabbs gave Feg a few moments to reach the bottom before crawling out from beneath the air duct where he'd been hiding for the last hour. He pushed aside the pile of trash in front of him and tiptoed across the roof. He got to the edge just in time to see Feg turn the corner, heading towards the back of the docks.

'I sure hope this works, Kal,' he muttered as he pulled out the blindsnake pouch he'd snitched from Sonny's body a few days earlier. He opened the top of the pouch and stuck a finger inside. The gooey paste felt like something he'd avoid stepping on, and when he pulled his paste-covered finger back out, he realized it smelled much worse than anything he'd ever stepped in.

Scabbs wiped the paste on the top of the ladder and then climbed down and slapped another splotch of it at the bottom. Ratskins made the vile stuff from the venom of the albino blindsnake and some secret fungi that Scabbs figured must stink from the Hive Bottom to the top of the Spire.

He'd been wearing the pouch ever since Yolanda had killed Sonny. It was supposed to imbue the wearer with a sixth sense against incoming attacks. Of course, it hadn't worked so well for either himself or Sonny, so maybe using it to mark Feg's trail was a better use for it anyway.

It was a typical Kal Jerico plan: long and complicated. Kal figured Feg would never tell him the location of the satchel. The man was too tough to break and carried a grudge too long to be bought out. So, they had to make him believe he'd escaped free and clear and then follow him to the hiding place. After Scabbs got knocked out, Kal had left him at Madam Noritake's with Bobo's girlfriend, Jenn, and then laid out the plan for Jenn to tell Scabbs when he woke

up.

Scabbs's job was to keep tabs on the one-armed scummer until Kal showed up. That's where the blindsnake pouch came into the plan. Scabbs needed some way to mark a trail for Kal to follow as he shadowed Feg.

He stuck his finger back into the pouch to get another glob of goo and trotted after Feg. At every intersection, he glanced around the edge to make sure Feg was still ahead of him, waited for the big brute to turn another corner, and then slapped some paste on the wall and ran after him again.

Luckily, it was late enough in the day that the docks were practically deserted. Most of the workers were either home having dinner or inside Madam Noritake's partaking in a different kind of feast. That left Feg and Scabbs to themselves as Vandal ran towards his prize while Scabbs kept tabs on him.

Scabbs just hoped Kal wasn't too far behind, because Vandal was heading straight towards the warehouse with the exit tunnel and he didn't want to have to try to follow the brute down that hole.

'Helmawr's rump!' said Scabbs as Feg opened the supposedly boarded-up door of the warehouse with the smuggling tunnel and slipped inside.

The little ratskin made an executive decision. There was nowhere for Feg to go at this point but back into the docks or out into the Ash Wastes. If Feg came back out before Kal arrived, he could just follow him again. If he went into the wastes, well Kal would know what to do. One thing Scabbs knew, there was no way he would follow that maniac into the wastes alone. So he decided to wait it out.

After a few long minutes of intolerable silence, Scabbs heard someone kick a stone behind him. He turned, a smile spreading across his face, expecting to see Kal.

'Well now!' said the dock guard. 'What do we have here?'

'And who might you be?' asked Bobo of the man in the dark. 'Let me guess, the Duke of Catallus.'

'Wrong!' said the shadowy figure. 'I will explain, but not here. If you wish to leave the Spire alive, and wealthy, follow me.'

The figure slipped away from the bridge abutment and darted across the street towards an alley. Bobo could just barely make out his form in the dark as the man stepped into the alley. A moment later, a shadowy arm snuck out of the black alley and beckoned him in.

Bobo had little choice. Ran Lo had put him on a deadly clock and Kal's

wedding was in the morning. He was out of time. Bobo checked behind him for Kauderer, but even if the master spy was there, Bobo knew he had little chance of seeing him. He shrugged and trotted across the street into the alley. He kept his hand on the knife in his pocket just in case.

'Okay,' he said into the darkness. 'I'm here. Tell me what this is about or I'm gone.'

'Certainly, Mr Bobo,' said the man in the dark. 'Yes, I know your real name. My employer saw through Kauderer's alias quite quickly. But now it seems that we are both in unique positions.'

Bobo was getting impatient. 'Get to the point,' he said. 'What does your employer want?'

'Due to your current disaffected position vis-à-vis your current employer, you are in the unique position of being able to make your alias permanent,' said the man, ignoring Bobo's request for a more direct conversation. 'And my employer, needing the services of a man not only with your skills but your access to House Helmawr and your dislike of certain men in charge of said house, is in the unique position of being able to grant that permanent transfer, assuming you perform one task for him.'

Bobo almost followed all of that, and it seemed they had finally come to the point in the conversation when he could ask a direct question and maybe even receive an answer. 'Fine,' he said. 'What is the task?'

'Why, to kill Kal Jerico before he marries and gets crowned Lord of Hive Primus, of course.'

'Of course,' said Bobo. 'And I do this for your employer why?'

'Upon successful completion of the requested task,' said the man, 'my employer will be in a position to grant you any request you wish. You could even leave Necromunda with your little girlfriend and start a new life elsewhere, perhaps as Jackal Bristol.'

'And how would I afford to live the life of Jackal Bristol?' asked Bobo. He still couldn't see well enough in the dark to get more than a silhouette of the man. 'Mr Bristol has expensive tastes.'

'My employer is prepared to pay you the sum of one hundred thousand credits for the successful completion of this task, plus clandestine transport off Necromunda.'

Bobo gasped. That sum of money was so beyond anything he'd ever imagined that he momentarily lost control of his normally guarded emotions. He recovered quickly. 'And how can your employer afford such an amount?'

‘Let’s just say he has connections to the wealth of the Spire and, once Kal Jerico is dead, he plans to solidify those connections even further.’

‘When do I get to meet this employer of yours?’ asked Bobo. But the silhouette was already fading away as the man moved off down the alley.

‘Tomorrow at the wedding, Mr Bobo,’ he said as he left. ‘Instructions and gear will be waiting for you in your apartment.’

‘Gear?’ asked Bobo, but there was nobody there to answer his question.

The guard had a laspistol in one hand and a billy club in the other. His uniform had been recently cleaned and pressed and all his buttons were not only intact but polished to a bright sheen. All Scabbs had was his blindsnake pouch, which once again had failed to warn him about someone sneaking up behind him.

‘There’s been an awful lot of commotion around the docks lately,’ said the guard. ‘You know anything about all that?’

Scabbs shook his head, but the guard didn’t seem convinced.

‘I think you do,’ said the guard. ‘See, I’ve noticed you skulking around here quite a bit the last few days. Now, you can either tell me what you know, or Mr Billy here will begin prodding your memory for you.’

He shook the club menacingly; obviously wanting to make sure his threat didn’t remain even thinly veiled.

Scabbs tried to think of some lie to tell the guard that would sound convincing enough to stave off another beating, but he wasn’t an accomplished liar like Kal. The best he could come up with was, ‘I’m looking for a friend?’

‘Your friend’s not here right now, is he?’ said the guard. ‘It’s just you and me. Now, tell me what you know, Scabbs, or Mr Billy and I persuade you to talk.’

Scabbs was about to spill his guts when he realised the guard had called him by his name. He hadn’t given his name yet. He stammered a little to buy some time as he scrutinized the guard a little closer. The polished buttons, the clean uniform, and Scabbs now noticed that the guard’s laspistol had a pearl-handled grip, just like Kal’s.

‘That’s an expensive gun,’ said Scabbs finally.

The guard stopped shaking the club and stared at Scabbs. ‘Huh?’ He glanced at the gun. ‘What’s that got to do with the whereabouts of your friend?’

Scabbs suppressed a smile as a Kal Jerico plan formed in his head. ‘I’m just saying that a gun like that must have taken a large chunk of your pay check; perhaps several pay checks.’

The guard looked confused, but before he could try to retake control of the

conversation Scabbs pressed on. ‘I would think a man like you is not adverse to finding ways to bring in a little extra money on the side, you might say.’

Now the guard understood. ‘Ah,’ he said. ‘I think I see where you’re headed. But I should warn you that my “night” job pays pretty well. It would take a large sum to make me look the other way right now.’

Scabbs let his smile spread across his face. Yolanda had been right. Nemo had some dock guards in his pocket and this must be one of them. That meant all bets were off. ‘But you haven’t seen what I have in my pouch,’ he said. ‘Let me show you just a sample.’

Scabbs stuck a finger into the blindsnake pouch and scooped a large gob of paste onto his finger. He pulled out his finger and flung the goo at the guard’s face. It hit dead centre, splattering on the man’s nose and spreading up into his eyes and down into his open mouth. Scabbs could smell the stench of the fungi/venom mixture from several feet away.

The guard started hacking and sneezing and screaming. He tossed his weapons aside and clawed at his eyes and mouth. Eventually, his knees buckled and he dropped to the ground and vomited. Tears streamed down his face and blood began to trickle from his nose. Scabbs strolled over, picked up Mr Billy and lined up a shot at the guard’s head.

‘That’s no way to treat a man in uniform,’ said Kal as he walked up.

Scabbs held his swing for a moment. The guard continued vomiting and spitting on the ground. ‘I’m pretty sure he’s been paid off by Nemo,’ said Scabbs. ‘Maybe even reports to him.’

‘Then, by all means,’ said Kal. He folded his arms over his chest.

Scabbs put both hands on Mr Billy, pulled the club back over his shoulder and unleashed a mighty swing.

‘So,’ said Kal, after the guard dropped to the ground unconscious. ‘Where’s Feg?’

Vandal Feg shone his beam down into the smugglers’ tunnel to check for guards or Nemo’s men, or anyone else who might possibly be waiting for him in the dark. This entire operation had left a sour taste in his mouth. Mr Smythe had said it would be so simple. Just shoot down the transport, steal the package and bring it to him in the docks. He not only supplied the heavy weapons and the mercenaries, but promised Feg twenty-five thousand credits for his part in the operation.

But then the royals beat him back to the docks. So, after taking out the three

guards that barged in on him and the little ratskin, Feg decided he needed to stow the package somewhere safe.

Content that nobody was below him in the tunnel, Feg dropped through the hole. He waved the light beam around and then trotted and skidded down the steep incline, keeping an eye and an ear open for anything moving.

Luckily, his knowledge of these tunnels went well beyond that of anyone still alive in the hive. Feg was the sole living member of the smuggling gang that first found the tunnel. In retrospect he probably shouldn't have killed all of his partners. But that last score had just been too big and tempting.

He stopped about halfway down the tunnel, at the edge of a deep drop-off that looked like it had been caused by a hivequake. In reality, the smugglers had created the chasm by accident while excavating the tunnel. They then decided to use what appeared to be a lethal drop into the darkness as a holding area for the loot they planned to smuggle into and out of the hive.

Feg got down on his hands and knees and swung his legs over the edge of the chasm. Holding onto the rocky lip with his steel claws, he lowered his legs down to a ledge cut back beneath the lip of the chasm. The little alcove couldn't be seen from above unless you leaned way out over the chasm and shined a light beam back towards the wall. Even then it looked like a natural outcropping of stone.

Once his feet reached the ledge, Feg let go and lurched forward. He always hated that part. Of course, getting back out was even worse. Back during the smuggling days they had used a winch to get stolen goods in and out of the alcove, but Feg didn't need that. He illuminated the back of the alcove with his beam and found the satchel.

He slung it over his head and went back to the ledge. It had been the perfect hiding place, because only someone as large as Vandal Feg could get back out without help. He stood on his tiptoes and reached up with his mechanical arm. Digging his claws into the stone floor above him, he used all the hydraulic strength in his arm to pull himself back out of the chasm, scrabbling at the sheer wall with his legs as he ascended.

He got his other hand up to help pull his massive body out of the hole and then sat there for a moment, breathing heavily, before getting to his feet.

'Thanks, Vandal,' said a familiar voice from behind him. 'I'll take that satchel now, or have you forgotten our deal?'

Vandal turned around and scowled at the smiling face of Kal Jerico. His little ratskin half-breed pal stood cowering behind the bounty hunter.

‘Sure thing,’ said Vandal. He grabbed the strap and pulled the satchel from around his neck. ‘Show me fifty thousand credits and it’s all yours.’ He held the satchel out over the chasm. ‘Otherwise, you can dive for it.’

Kal sputtered. ‘Fifty thousand?’ He wondered who in the Spire could afford to throw so much money around.

‘The deal was for double, right?’ said Vandal. ‘So, double twenty-five is fifty.’

Kal smiled. ‘No problem,’ he said. ‘You come with me to my estate in the Spire and I’ll get that out of petty cash.’

‘You think I’m a fool, Jerico?’ yelled Feg. As he said it, he pointed at Kal with the hand holding the satchel strap.

Kal drew both laspistols and shot. The blasts hit Feg’s body armour, doing little damage, but the shots passed through the strap, severing the leather on either side of the brute’s massive hand. The satchel fell to the ground at Feg’s feet.

Kal rushed in, trying to reach the satchel before Feg could react.

‘Oh no you don’t, Jerico,’ said Feg. He kicked at the satchel.

Kal dove and got his hands on the satchel. Feg’s huge boot smacked him in the ribs. He tumbled away, losing his grip on the satchel. As Kal lay there trying to draw a breath, he watched the satchel slide down the tunnel along with his laspistols.

‘You’re dead, Jerico!’ cried Feg.

‘If I had a cred for every time someone said that, I could retire,’ said Kal. He pushed himself back to his feet. ‘Hell, Yolanda says it ten times a day.’

Feg’s chainsword revved to life, its whining scream echoing through the tunnel. Kal went for his guns, but then remembered they’d gone down the tunnel with the satchel.

‘Aw, scav! He said, ducking and backing away just as Feg swung his chainsword in a long arc over his head. ‘Um, Scabbs?’ called Kal. ‘Little help here?’

‘On it,’ said Scabbs. He ran down the tunnel behind Feg. Kal ducked and weaved as the chainsword screamed at him again.

‘Stand still and die,’ said Feg.

Kal smiled. ‘I’m too pretty to die,’ he said, pulling out his sabre. ‘You on the other hand…’

He slipped inside Feg’s reach after the chainsword passed and stuck him in the thigh with the point of his blade. The sword dug deep, but Kal knew he didn’t have time to drive it home. He pulled out quickly and ran on through.

Twirling around, Kal had to sidestep as the chainsword came down at his head

from above. As always with Feg, it was turning into a battle of brute force versus speed and guile. Kal would be fine as long as Feg never touched him.

He spun away as Feg punched at him with his massive left hand. He then had to dive to the ground and roll away as the chainsword came spinning back in from the side. It seemed Feg had learned some new moves.

Feg stomped at him as he rolled, but didn't seem interested in using the chainsword at the moment. Kal wondered why, and then saw the edge of the chasm coming towards him as he rolled. Vandal was driving him towards the edge.

Kal couldn't slow down, though. If he stopped, he'd get a face full of boot. So instead he sped up, lifting his arms over his head and rolling faster. His feet went over the edge first. As his lower body fell, Kal swung his legs around like a pendulum. Then, catching the ledge with his free hand, he continued rotating his body around until his legs came back up over the top.

He scrambled up and kicked out at Feg as he tried to stomp one last time. Kal's boot caught Vandal's ankle in mid-air, kicking it up high enough to put the huge man off balance. Kal kicked out with his other leg, smacking Feg behind the knee. The brute fell backwards onto the ground.

Kal jumped to his feet and called out, 'Now would be a good time, Scabbs,' He looked down the tunnel just in time to see the satchel flying at him. As the package hit him in the stomach, Kal yelled, 'My guns, Scabbs. My guns!'

But it was too late. Vandal had reared both legs back and kicked out at Kal, slamming him in the chest. Kal went flying back onto the hard ground while the satchel tumbled high up into the air and fell at the edge of the chasm, teetering over the lip.

'Shoot him!' screamed Kal as he tried to reach the satchel. Right then, his pearl-handled laspistols clattered to the ground next to him. As usual, Scabbs was one step behind where Kal needed him.

Kal heard the chainsword whine to life above him. He rolled over just in time for Vandal's foot to press down on his chest, holding him in place. The big brute raised his mechanical hand over his head and revved the chain on his sword.

'Now you die, Jerico!'

Wotan heard the sounds of battle. That was nothing new to his processors. In the Underhive, someone was always fighting someone else. He was far more interested in the large rat he'd just seen sticking its nose out from a crack in the tunnel wall. He growled, but the rat didn't move. It just stared at Wotan and

twitched its nose.

That made Wotan even angrier. He wasn't sure why he should hate the rat so much. It wasn't like the rat had done anything other than exist and happen to come out of its hole at the wrong time. But he did hate the rat, and he hated it even more for not running. Rats should run when he growled. That's how this worked.

Wotan crept forward, his head low and his stubby, metal tail twitching. A low growl escaped his mouth again. Three metres. He took another couple of tentative steps, but the rat didn't move. Two metres. The sounds of battle intensified and Wotan thought he heard a familiar voice, but the sounds echoed so much his processors couldn't identify it. One metre.

Wotan lunged forward, his jaws snapping shut just as the rat ran off down the tunnel. He barked and gave chase. But even with his mechanical legs, he couldn't outrun the rat. It dodged and scampered and jumped off the wall to get away. Wotan finally gave up. His rubber tongue lolled out to the side as he trotted along with his mouth hanging open. The anger had passed. The rat had run. That's all he wanted.

Then he heard the voices again, just up ahead. One still sounded familiar. Then the other one said, 'Blah, blah, blah, Jerico!'

Wotan's ears picked up. 'Jerico!' That was the owner of the familiar voice. Wotan bounded off down the tunnel.

Kal tried to squirm out of the way, but Feg's big boot held him fast to the ground. He tried to kick, but couldn't even lift his legs because his hips were being crushed by Vandal's massive weight. And he'd dropped his sabre before he'd rolled over the edge the chasm. Only one thing to do: stall.

'Vandal?' he cried. 'What's that behind you?' Yeah, Kal knew it was weak, but he had nothing else and no time to think of anything better. Besides, Vandal might just be dumb enough to fall for it. He didn't.

'Give me a break, Jerico,' he said. 'Just how dumb do you think I am?' The chainsword began its rapid descent towards Kal's face.

Just then, Kal saw a flash of metal fly over Vandal Feg's head. The next thing he knew, the whine of the chainsword died away and Feg's forearm snapped back up towards his shoulder.

'Helmawr's rump!' screamed Feg.

Wotan landed next to Kal, a long line of tubing hanging out of his mouth. He dropped the tube and licked Kal in the ears, eyes and down into his open mouth.

Kal pushed Wotan's face away and looked up at Feg.

Liquid spewed out the top of his mechanical arm. Hydraulic fluid released like a fountain when Wotan ripped the hose out of Feg's shoulder. As the big man vainly tried to stem the tide of fluid from the housing of his mechanical arm, Vandal's weight shifted just enough for Kal to push him off and sit up.

Kal wasted no time. He reared back and punched Vandal right where he knew it would hurt the most. Vandal Feg might be a monstrously large, armoured man with a mechanical arm and attached chainsword, but he was a man nonetheless. A quick jab to the groin was all Kal really needed to bring him to his knees. Literally.

Feg doubled over and fell to the ground. Kal stood up, grabbed his weapons and stood over the groaning man. He holstered his guns and then slipped his sabre into the tangle of remaining hoses snaking around Vandal's head. With a quick flip of his wrist, Kal slit the hoses. The hoses hissed and gushed as they flopped around like live snakes spewing gas and liquid all over the ground.

'Kal!' yelled Scabbs, running up beside him finally. 'The satchel!'

Then Kal saw it. The hydraulic fluid and compressed gas jetting out of the hoses had pushed the satchel to the brink of the chasm.

Before Kal could react, the satchel tipped over the lip and fell away. Scabbs dived forward, sliding over the edge as well. Kal dropped his sword again and fell to his knees. His hands shot out and he grabbed Scabbs by the ankles just before he slid into the darkness.

Scabbs's weight pulled Kal towards the edge. He fell onto his chest and slid towards the chasm as well. As his chest went over the edge, Kal felt a sharp pain in his rear. He heard Wotan growl as he held onto Kal by his trousers.

'Back, Wotan,' called Kal. 'Pull back, boy!'

Wotan dug his claws into the stone floor of the tunnel and began inching his way back. Kal's biceps screamed at him and his forearms ached from the strain. After what seemed an eternity, he dragged his arms back up over the edge. Once he got purchase again, Kal slipped his legs under him and pulled Scabbs out of the chasm.

His half-ratskin companion flopped to the ground next to him. When he rolled over, Kal saw the satchel hugged against his chest.

'We've got to stop doing that,' said Scabbs.

Kal sat down next to Scabbs. 'I agree,' he said. 'That really wasn't as much fun as it looked.'

'Just how much fun was it?' asked a familiar voice.

Wotan growled.

‘Aw scav,’ said Kal, looking up. ‘Nemo’s here.’

Nemo stood behind the still foetal Vandal Feg with at least a half-dozen of his goons. All of them, Nemo included, held weapons pointing at Kal and Scabbs. The light from Feg’s beam glinted off Nemo’s pitch black helmet and the goon’s weapons, but the rest of Nemo’s black-clad body was cast in shadow. ‘You didn’t really think you could win against me, did you, Kal?’

‘You do have history on your side, Nemo, but I figured I was due,’ said Kal. He grabbed the satchel from off Scabbs’s chest.

‘You know the odds never change,’ said Nemo. ‘No matter how many times you lose.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Kal, ‘But we’re not in your house today.’ He flung the satchel down the tunnel and called out, ‘Wotan, fetch!’

Before Nemo or his men could react, the metal mastiff bolted into the dark after the satchel. Kal rolled over Scabbs, and whispered, ‘Run!’ He got to his knees and pulled out his laspistols. Firing several shots at Nemo and his men, Kal jumped to his feet and ran down the tunnel after Wotan. He heard Scabbs scrambling to his feet behind him.

Las blasts hit the walls and floor all around Kal. He dodged back and forth in the tunnel. As he came upon Wotan holding the satchel in his mouth, Kal yelled, ‘Wotan! Follow!’ The mastiff skidded to a halt, jumped, and pivoted in mid air, coming down beside Kal in full gallop. ‘Good dog!’

Kal glanced back and saw Scabbs a few metres behind him. ‘Duck!’ he called. Scabbs crouched down as he ran and Kal let loose several blind shots, which he hoped would at least slow down their pursuers.

‘Where are we going?’ yelled Scabbs in between wheezing breaths.

‘Away from Nemo!’ called Kal back.

‘But, Kal…’ said Scabbs. His breathing was getting laboured and he could barely talk. ‘This tunnel comes out in the Ash Wastes.’

‘I know,’ said Kal. ‘You told me about it already, remember?’

‘But… muties… and heat… and… toxic… air,’ said Scabbs. ‘We can’t last out there.’

‘Fine,’ said Kal. ‘You stop here and fight off Nemo.’

‘Never mind,’ said Scabbs.

For a time there was only silence, broken every few moments by the sound of las blasts behind them. Kal turned and returned fire, but in the dark nobody had

much chance of hitting anyone, which was fine because Kal didn't really care if he hit anything, but he did care if he got hit.

Luckily they were past all the chasms, so Kal only had to worry about hitting the walls. After the first couple of collisions, he holstered one gun and kept his fingers running along the wall as he ran. Wotan and Scabbs didn't seem to have any trouble, though.

'Can you see?' asked Kal.

'Yeah,' said Scabbs. 'Pretty well.'

'Then shoot at the bad guys!'

'Oh, right,' said Scabbs.

Kal heard Scabbs fire off several blasts behind him and thought he heard at least one body fall back up the tunnel.

'Now we're getting somewhere,' said Kal. He turned to shoot again just in time to see the tell-tale flash of fire from a grenade launcher. 'Aw, scav. Dive for cover!'

The tunnel exploded around Kal. He flew forward, rolling down the incline and smacking into the wall. Wotan stopped next to him, the satchel still hanging out of his mouth. Kal pointed down the tunnel. He could just see the opening into the Ash Wastes below. 'Wotan!' he said. 'Deliver!'

The mastiff ran off towards the tunnel mouth as Kal dragged himself back to his feet. He looked around for his laspistols but couldn't see them. He scanned the rubble behind him for Scabbs but didn't see him either.

What he did see was a beam of light bobbing along the tunnel just past the pile of debris. Kal tried to run, but a sharp pain shot up his leg as his knee gave out beneath him. He fell to the ground and screamed.

Kal tried to pull himself down the tunnel, but then gave up. As Feg, Nemo and the goons crawled over and around the pile towards him, Kal said, 'Well, at least now I won't have to get married tomorrow.'

'Perhaps,' said Nemo. He pointed his gun at Kal with one hand while holding Feg back with the other. 'But your precious father won't live to see his empire crumble, either.'

'Wrong on both points,' said another voice.

Kal turned to see the silhouette of either a monster or a large man in power armour. He opted for the second. 'Captain!' he called. 'Good of you to join us.'

'I'd have been here sooner,' said Katerin, 'But I had to take a slight detour.'

The tunnel opening behind Katerin darkened as an entire platoon of royal

soldiers filed inside. Someone behind them all called out, ‘Lights!’ and the tunnel flared to near daylight as a dozen beams came to life.

Kal leaned against the wall and pushed himself up to one foot. ‘Looks like I win after all,’ said Kal. But when he turned back to gloat at Nemo, the master spy and his men were already gone.

Vandal Feg, however, remained behind just at the far edge of the debris. ‘Next time, Jerico,’ he said, before vanishing into the darkness. ‘Watch your back,’ he called from up the tunnel. ‘I’ll be waiting for you. And you won’t have daddy’s men to fight your battles for you.’

Kal ignored him. Vandal wasn’t the problem. He could handle that big, dumb ox… always had. Nemo, however, did not take kindly to losing. That would definitely cost Kal in the future.

‘Want me to send my men up after them?’ asked Katerin.

‘No,’ said Kal. ‘We need to dig my guns out of this pile. Oh, and Scabbs is under there somewhere, too.’

‘Where’s the package?’ asked Katerin.

‘Oh scav!’ said Kal. ‘You didn’t see…’ He hobbled down the tunnel, pushing Katerin’s men out of the way. ‘Wotan!’ he called. ‘Wotan. Return, Wotan!’

Some time later, Kal sat aboard Katerin’s transport as a med tech tended to the gash in his leg. He patted his holsters and sword sheath, happy to have his weapons back where they belonged. Wotan had curled up at his feet, while Scabbs scowled at him from across the aisle.

The little half-ratskin was covered from head to toe in dust, which did nothing to help his looks. ‘I heard what you said back there, Jerico,’ said Scabbs. ‘You were more worried about your guns than me.’

‘Oh, come on, Scabbs,’ said Kal. ‘If I’d been really worried about you, I would have dug you out myself. But you’re a survivor. How many times have you been blown up since we’ve been together?’

Scabbs thought for a minute. ‘I dunno. A lot I guess.’

‘There you go,’ said Kal, smiling. ‘Being with me is downright lucky, isn’t it. You get blown up all the time and yet here you are!’

‘I guess so,’ said Scabbs. He picked at a large piece of dead skin hanging off his elbow as dust cascaded from his body onto the floor. ‘You did save my life back there.’

‘That I did,’ said Kal. ‘Looks like you owe me one, huh?’

‘Um, sure Kal,’ said Scabbs. ‘Thanks, I guess.’

Kal looked back at Katerin. ‘We should be going, Captain. My father is a sick man, you know.’

Katerin closed the hatch. A moment later, a huge explosion rocked the transport. ‘Just closing that tunnel for good before we leave,’ he said.

‘Good idea,’ said Kal. ‘You can just drop us back at the docks on your way up to the Spire.’

Katerin shook his head. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘You’re along for the whole ride. Only a few more hours until your wedding.’

Kal sputtered. ‘B-b-but… you’ve got the medicine. That was the deal. I get the medicine back, and in exchange I get to skip the whole getting married part of this stupid plan.’

‘Only problem with that,’ said Katerin, ‘is that there’s still an assassin loose in the Spire who wants you and Lord Helmawr dead.’

‘So,’ said Kal, ‘everyone thinks better me than Helmawr in the crosshairs, huh? Well I don’t think so.’

Just then the transport took off.

‘You don’t understand, Jerico,’ said Katerin. He wiped the sweat from his bald head. ‘You don’t have a choice.’

Kal looked around the transport. The entire platoon of royal guards had their lasguns drawn and pointing at Kal. ‘Ah, I see,’ said Kal. ‘It’s to be a lasgun wedding, then? Fine. I damn well better get paid hazard duty for this.’

He looked over at Scabbs again, who had a huge white smile on his ash-grey face. ‘What are you so happy about?’ asked Kal.

‘I get to go to your wedding,’ said Scabbs. ‘In the Spire no less. This will be great. We should send someone to find Yolanda. She wouldn’t want to miss this.’

Yolanda stood in the middle of the sunlit room, grumbling. ‘Stupid Jerico,’ she said. ‘This is all his fault… again!’ She screamed as a pin stuck her in the leg.

‘Watch that!’ she called down at the seamstress. ‘Helmawr’s rump. There’s no way I am going through with this.’

Her father walked around from behind her and said, ‘But you look beautiful, Yolanda. That wedding dress has been in the family for generations. It’s worth a fortune.’

‘Besides,’ said another voice in the back of the room. ‘This union will be good for both families.’

Yolanda turned around, kicking the seamstress as she tried to scoot around with her.

‘Valtin,’ she said. ‘I liked you much better when you were huddled on the ground in the vampire’s lair than now that you’re lord muckety muck of House Helmawr.’

‘Lord Chamberlain,’ said Valtin. ‘And don’t you forget it. I can make or break you and your father, and I will for the good of House Helmawr and Hive Primus. Go through with the wedding and your house will reap the benefits. Fail me and there won’t be a hole deep enough for you to crawl down to escape my wrath, you or your Wildcats!’

Her father clasped his hands together. ‘Please, darling?’ he pleaded. ‘For me? Do this and I will never again ask you for anything. You can go do whatever you want with your life.’

Yolanda scowled at them both, but she knew she didn’t have a choice. She was trapped again in the Spire with no way to even warn the Wildcats of what was hanging over their heads. She had to see this through to the end.

‘Can you at least attach a sword sheath to this dress?’ she asked. ‘Or a holster? I feel naked without my weapons.’

10: LASGUN WEDDING

Bobo crawled through the ductwork, grumbling. ‘Everyone else gets a plush seat for the wedding except me,’ he said as he pushed the sniper rifle ahead of him through the cramped pipe. ‘No, I get to watch everything from the comfort of a metal box.’

He’d switched back to his old Hive City clothes. He didn’t want to get his Jackal Bristol silks filthy crawling through the air vents. As it was, he wished he’d picked up some filter plugs for his nostrils. He’d kicked up so much dust he was afraid he’d sneeze right in the middle of the ceremony.

He stopped to wipe his face again with his sleeve. At least it wasn’t much farther to the spot indicated on the map by Mr Smythe. Bobo turned a corner in the duct and moved down a short way to a dead-end. He peered through the vent grate and sighed. Just as the map indicated, he was at the rear of the chapel. ‘Best seat in the house,’ he said, and tried to get comfortable, which was impossible in the cramped quarters.

He gave up and just lay down with his head propped up over the rifle so he could see down into the chapel. It was an enormous, triangular room with huge banks of windows on the two walls opposite Bobo. A white marble dais stood just in front of the sunlit corner in front of row upon row of velvet-lined chairs. Massive gold and silver candles – each emblazoned with a foot-tall image of the Helmawr crest in red wax – lined the rows of chairs.

Behind the dais rose a giant archway sculpted from ice with heads of at least twenty animals sculpted up and down both sides of the arch. Bobo had no idea what most of them were, but he’d seen pictures of some. He recognized the lion, the bear, the elephant and the unicorn. The rest were more fantastical with double heads or long snouts and intricately carved horns and tusks. The archway sculpture itself had been designed with multiple facets that reflected the light from the windows into hundreds of rainbows throughout the chapel.

Below him, Bobo could hear the sound of running water. He looked down as far as he could and saw six fountains set in a geometric design. They sprayed water from one to another around the perimeter and even across through the streams in a hypnotic dance. The water itself somehow changed colours through a wide spectrum as it jumped around its beautiful circuit.

In the back left corner of the room sat a massive brass and iron automata with tubes ranging from a few centimetres to more than a metre in diameter, flaring out in all directions from a central bronze ball measuring at least five metres across. A servitor stood beside the ball, waiting; for what, Bobo didn't know.

The rest of the chapel was bedecked in all manner of flowers. Some Bobo recognised from Ran Lo's garden, which made him worry about the fate of the guests. The rest added to the rainbow of colours throughout the hall with both flowers and leaves of every imaginable hue. Some even seemed to radiate their own light, glowing purple or yellow or red and almost pulsing in the bright room.

Above it all hung giant crystals roughly a metre in length. At first Bobo thought they were simply there to catch the light rays from the ice arch and continue reflecting them, but as he looked at them, he could see they were generating their own illumination. He began to realize that he could even feel their power as they thrummed with some inner energy. Those worried him almost more than the carnivorous plants from the Ran Lo gardens.

Bobo let out a low whistle as he took in the spectacle. 'They sure know how to throw away money up here,' he said. He shushed himself as the crystals flared to life with light and a melodious, humming music that seemed to have a life of its own. Shortly afterwards, the ushers began showing the guests to their seats.

'This is ridiculous,' said Kal. 'I look like a general from the pansy brigade.' He pulled the military dress coat off and, before anyone could stop him, ripped it from hem to collar. 'The trousers are okay,' he said, 'but I think I'll need a different coat. Something more befitting Kal Jerico, Lord of the Underhive.'

'I think you mean Lord of the Hive,' said Scabbs. He looked equally ludicrous in his suit jacket and cummerbund. He kept reaching inside his ruffled shirt to scratch at his stomach and chest. He must have seen Kal staring, because he said, 'This thing itches.'

'What?' said Kal. 'Your body?'

'Luckily,' said Kauderer. 'We do have one other jacket you can use. Interestingly, it was fashioned for your half-brother, Armand, before he went

crazy and turned into a mass murderer.'

'Sounds promising,' said Kal.

Katerin came running in with the new coat. It was still obviously a military dress coat, but it was definitely more in the Kal Jerico style than the bright purple thing they'd tried to foist on him. Kal slipped it on and it felt like he'd been wearing it all his life.

'Perfect,' he said. He reached for his weapons belt.

'No weapons,' said Kauderer.

'What?'

'That's the rule of the wedding. Only the guards will have weapons.'

'Look,' said Kal. 'You can paint a target on my back and toss me out into the middle of all those hunters out there, and even announce open season on Kal Jerico, but I won't go without my guns and sword.'

'The sword might be okay,' said Katerin. 'It is military tradition to wear a sword in dress uniform.'

'Fine, you can have your sword,' said Kauderer. 'But no guns. If the other nobles see guns on your waist, all hell will break loose and then we'll never find the assassin.'

The coat seemed awfully roomy around the waist. Armand had been a tad bigger than Kal. He got an idea, and kicked Scabbs in the shin.

'Ow!' he screamed. 'What'd you do that for?' The little half-ratskin started hopping around the room, eventually falling over, stumbling over his dress shoes. As Katerin and Kauderer helped Scabbs to his feet, Kal slipped his pistols into the back of his trousers.

'I'm ready,' he declared.

A slow procession began with the least important people who'd somehow snagged invitations to the event. As they entered, the servitor came to life and began pulling levers and twisting knobs on the bronze sphere. An eerie, howling music resounded throughout the chapel, coming from the pipes of the automata. Somehow the pipe music and the crystal music complemented one another perfectly.

Bobo watched the procession and noticed that the dancing water the guests had to navigate to enter the chapel had quickened in step with the music. The water now truly was dancing, much to the chagrin of all the guests who had to find a safe path through the fountains.

Bobo didn't recognize any of the early guests. He assumed they were mostly

younger members of the houses and perhaps some courtesans or entrepreneurs whose favour was being curried by members of the various houses. However, one section of courtesans split off from the early guests and walked to the sides of the chapel, taking up position in front of the windows. Once both lines finished filing in, the courtesans began to sing, lending their voices to the chorus of music inside the chapel.

After the lesser guests were seated, members of the noble houses entered. All of them wore silk or velvet and their gems and jewellery glittered in the reflecting light of the chapel, almost overshadowing the hanging crystals and faceted ice sculpture.

Bobo watched as Prince Granit came in with other members of the Ko'Iron family. They were followed by Princess Jillian and House Greim. These two feuding houses were seated across the aisle from one another and Bobo could see them all glaring at each other.

Representatives from Ty and Ulanti came in next. Bobo watched to see where Gregor and the duke sat. He wanted to have a good sight line on all the major players. Interestingly, House Ty was seated in front of Ulanti. He assumed the pecking order of the houses must be a bone of contention between all of them, and Gregor didn't look happy to be so far back.

As Bobo watched Gregor fume, House Ran Lo entered the chapel. They were seated across the aisle from Ulanti, which didn't seem to phase the elder Ran Lo at all. Bobo didn't think anything could mar that man's public image. His face was as expressionless as a rock.

Strangely, the members of House Helmawr were ushered in next. Bobo didn't understand why. They were all seated on the right side, in front of House Ran Lo – and there were a lot of them. Mostly the various sons of Lord Helmawr and their spouses or companions for the evening. Bobo didn't know many of them.

Some of them had come down to Hive City on occasion, and Kauderer had asked Bobo to keep an eye on them and clean up any messes they made. He recognized Carlos, Gustav, Umberto, Tomas and Ramone right away.

The last member of House Helmawr to be seated was Valtin, whom Bobo had met when he and Kal went after Armand. Valtin was now some high-ranking official in the house, and as such got the seat of honour in the front row. Bobo didn't see Kauderer yet, so watched as House Catallus filed in.

He knew even fewer of these people. In fact, he didn't recognize a single one. For some reason, they got the best seats in the house, right across the aisle from House Helmawr. The duchess of Catallus was the last one led in and was

escorted to the front, across from Valtin. The duchess was decked out in the most extravagant gown in the entire hall, a layered taffeta and silk dress in a dozen shades of purple. She wore an enormous ruby pendant on an inch-thick, braided, diamond and gold rope around her neck and a gold tiara also set with an enormous ruby and hundreds of diamonds. It suddenly dawned on Bobo why Catallus was last. She was the mother of the bride.

A hush came over the hall as the groomsmen began walking down the aisle together. There were only three. The first was a huge tank of a man who just barely fitted into his black tuxedo. He took up the entire aisle and was sweating profusely. Halfway down the aisle, he stopped to dab at his bald head with a handkerchief he pulled from his breast pocket. He then tried in vain to get the handkerchief back in, deciding finally to just carry it.

The second man loomed over the first, practically glaring him back into motion when he stopped. It was Kauderer. Once the two of them made their way to the front, Bobo picked up the rifle and sighted in on Kauderer, making a few adjustments to get the distance just right. He then set the rifle back down and watched as the best man stumbled up to the dais.

The little man obviously was not used to the tuxedo and dress shoes as he almost fell over himself several times on the way down the aisle. When he got to the end and turned around, Bobo gasped to see that it was Scabbs, decked out to the nines, but still scabby-looking even with his hair combed almost straight.

Kal strode down the aisle next. He wore not the expected white tuxedo, but what looked like a black, leather dress uniform jacket, trimmed in gold at the cuffs and collar, with gold-trimmed epaulets on both shoulders. He wore his sabre at his waist, and Bobo wasn't sure, but he thought Kal's jacket bulged a little. Did he have his laspistols with him?

The priest stepped through the ice sculpture archway and set a large black tome on the crystal pulpit in the middle of the dais. He raised his hand and, right on cue, the music changed. Bobo covered his ears as the servitor apparently opened up the largest pipes in the automata. It was so loud he had to fight to keep the sound from deafening him and making his ear drums explode.

'What have you done?' asked Duke Catallus. He had just come in to escort his daughter to the chapel and found yards and yards of white silk and taffeta draped all over the floor and chairs in the room.

'I made a few alterations,' said Yolanda. 'I couldn't move in that thing.'

'And what are those… things?' asked her father. He pointed at various spots on

his daughter's body.

'Oh these?' she asked. 'I found them in my old room. Do you like them? I think it really makes the whole ensemble come together.'

'There's no time to do anything about it now,' he said. 'The music's already started.'

'I know,' said Yolanda. 'It's my wedding, and I plan to do it my way.'

'About time this thing started,' said Kal as the automata played. 'I feel a bit exposed up here by myself.'

Scabbs leaned over to look at Kal's trousers. 'No,' he said. 'You're all buttoned up.'

Kal quashed his desire to smack the little rat. 'Just keep your eyes open for any weapons, Scabbs,' whispered Kal. 'And if you see one, jump in front of me, okay?'

'Don't worry, Kal,' said Katerin. 'My men will keep you safe.'

'What about your men, Kauderer?' asked Kal. 'I'm not worried about an army, but the thought of one hidden assassin with a rifle does have me a little perturbed.'

'I'm not exactly sure where my man is,' he said.

'Man?' hissed Kal. 'One man? And you don't even know where he is?'

'Shhh,' said Scabbs. 'Here comes the bride.'

Kal peered down the aisle as the bride and her father walked through the opened doors. At first he couldn't see her as the water jets from the fountains obscured the back of the chapel. Then, on cue, the dancing water turned into an arcing waterfall tunnel. As the bride stepped through, Kal gasped out loud.

'Yolanda?' both he and Scabbs said at once.

This was like no Yolanda he'd ever seen, though. This was not the leather-clad Escher with wild gang tattoos and a massed tangle of dreadlocks he remembered – the dangerous woman who'd nearly killed him on several occasions, and who nobody in their right mind would ever cross.

Instead, this was the young duchess of House Catallus being led to the altar by her father, the duke. A sheer, white veil covered her face, draped down from an enormous, silver crown that held aloft a floor-length, silk train between its tines.

The crown and veil covered her tats and dreadlocks, but the old Yolanda still shone through. The rest of her outfit consisted of a tight-fitting white – for lack of a better word – undergarment, cut low in the front and high on her thighs. Her arms and legs were covered in white, and she wore silver epaulets on her

shoulders and spiked gauntlets and knee guards. To finish off the ensemble, her sword hung at her nearly bare waist.

'Wow!' said Kal. He'd never seen Yolanda like this… like a woman. She'd always been a thorn in his side. At best, a comrade in arms. At worst, a very deadly enemy. He wasn't sure he could ever go back to the way it was between them after seeing her like this.

Yolanda left her father at the base of the dais and climbed the steps to stand next to Kal. They turned to face one another and Kal found his eyes slipping down from her face and snapped them back to attention.

'Let me get one thing straight, Jerico,' she said beneath her breath.

'Yes, Yolanda?' asked Kal, drinking in the aroma that she'd been sprinkled in.

'Try to kiss me at the end of this wedding and I will kill you.'

That brought Kal back down to reality. 'Not a problem,' he said.

'Dearly beloved,' said the priest.

Bobo watched from his hiding spot as the wedding began. He had good sight lines on Kal, Kauderer, Ran Lo and even Valtin. He picked up the rifle and scanned the crowd. The only person he didn't see was Mr Smythe.

'I'm sorry, Kal,' he said. 'I never wanted to see this happen to you, but now that it has, all I can say is better you than me.'

The wedding progressed for a while. There was singing, some chanting and praying, and an odd little homily from the priest about life as a star being more than just burning up your fuel – that you had to warm the planets circling around you to nurture them during their lives before your ultimate end in a fiery cataclysm.

Then the priest got down to the nitty gritty.

'Do you, Kal Jerico, son of Gerontius Helmawr, slayer of Underhive vampires, despoiler of cardinals, nemesis of the dregs of society and heir apparent to the throne of Hive Primus, take this woman to be your wife, to have and to hold…'

Both Kal and Yolanda kicked the priest at that point.

Bobo picked up his rifle again and got ready. Mr Smythe had furnished him with quite a nice weapon for his final assignment. It was a modified needle rifle with a combined telescopic and red-dot laser sight, along with a clip of especially virulent toxin darts. The darts came with their own set of directions. Bobo had had to use rubber gloves while loading them, as one drop would kill instantly.

'…for richer and even richer, until you finally tire of her and take a mistress?'

The room went completely silent as Kal glanced around. The wedding wasn't supposed to get this far. Valtin had practically guaranteed that the assassin would strike before he finished his vows and was crowned Lord of the Hive. He gulped and looked at Yolanda. The daggers coming from her eyes were not all that reassuring either.

'I do?' he finally croaked out.

The priest turned to Yolanda. 'And do you, Yolanda Catallus, Duchess of House Catallus, leader of the Wildcats, scourge of the Underhive and saviour on more occasions than you wish to count of the worthless lives of both Kal Jerico and… Scabbs…'

Kal glared at Yolanda.

'Part of my deal was that I got to write my own vows,' she said, smiling.

'Do you take this man, who's so obviously not worthy of your great beauty and strength to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to… to never obey, but to constantly ridicule for as long as you can stand to look at his miserable face in the morning?'

Yolanda's smile disappeared as soon as the priest got to the end of the litany. Kal could see the pain of what she was about to say cross her face. Her mouth contorted back and forth until she finally got it open enough to say, 'I do.'

The priest picked up the crown sitting on the pulpit in front of him and brought it over towards Kal. He lifted it high in the air above Kal's head and said, 'Then, by the power vested in me by the holy Emperor of Man, and by the House of Helmawr, lords of Necromunda and Hive Primus, I pronounce you Lord of the Hive and…'

'Wait just a scavving minute!' screamed someone from the congregation.

Kal looked down to see one of the Helmawr princes stand up and step into the aisle.

He was a dark, swarthy young man with thick black hair pulled back into a pony tail and long sideburns that dominated his olive-coloured face. And, of course, he had the iron jaw line and pronounced chin of all Helmawrs.

'What in the hive happened to "Does anyone know a reason why these two should not be wed?"' he asked. 'Because I got a big reason why. A huge reason.'

'Who the scav is that?' asked Kal.

'Your cousin, Ramone,' said Kauderer.

'What's he want? Is he next in line or something?'

Katerin chortled. Kauderer shot a hawkish glance at the captain before

answering. ‘He’s probably fifteenth in line,’ he said. ‘Right ahead of you, actually.’

‘Ah,’ said Kal. He turned to Ramone. ‘Brother,’ he started. ‘I think we can find a better time and place to discuss your concerns.’

‘My concern is you, Jerico,’ spat Ramone. ‘My concern is this travesty you call a wedding.’

Kal motioned Kauderer over to him. ‘Is he the assassin?’ he whispered.

Kauderer shrugged. ‘Hard to say. Nobody’s very happy about this wedding.’

‘Not even the bride and groom,’ said Kal.

Ramone continued his rant. He turned to face the rest of the congregation. ‘Do you know that neither of them lives in the Spire? They’re bounty hunters. They don’t even live in Hive City. They dwell down with the vermin in the Underhive. And we are all going to bow down to them as our new Lord and Lady of the Hive? Is this a joke?’

‘Ramone,’ said Kal. ‘There’s bigger things at stake here than just this wedding. I know you want the crown for yourself. Hell everyone in this room wants the crown, except me and Yolanda, and maybe Valtin, but I’m not so sure about that either.’

Kal stepped in front of Yolanda and faced the crowd. As he did, he slipped one of his laspistols from beneath his jacket and placed it in her hand. He then stepped forward. ‘But this wedding isn’t about you, Ramone. It’s not about the Helmawr family or even the Spire. It’s about the hive. Nobody wants to see a civil war between the houses. That hurts everyone.’

He moved a little closer to Ramone, still speaking to the crowd. ‘Catallus, Ran Lo, Ko’Iron, Greim, Ty, Ulanti and Helmawr all profit from their positions up here. Does anyone here really want to upset that balance and take the chance that the new order will be less profitable? I don’t think so.’

He was almost next to Ramone. ‘So, let’s all sit back and see where this wedding takes us, shall we? I promise it will be fun and profitable for all.’

Kal was within striking distance of Ramone, and his hand rested on the pommel of his sabre at the end of his speech.

Ramone began to clap the slow clap of someone completely unimpressed by Kal’s showmanship.

‘Nice speech, Jerico,’ he said. ‘You might have actually made a decent Lord of Hive Primus. But that honour will now go to me!’

Kal pulled out his sword, but Ramone was quicker. He whipped a laspistol from his jacket and fired at Kal’s head.

Kal dove to the side as the blast sheared off one of his epaulets. He swiped at Ramone with his sabre, catching his younger cousin in the leg with a glancing blow.

Yolanda returned fire, but Ramone ducked behind some of the panicking guests. The entire hall erupted in screams as guests ran towards the exits, getting drenched in the fountain jets.

'Katerin,' yelled Kal. 'Why don't your men do something?'

Ramone answered instead from the chaos. 'Because,' he said. 'I control this wedding, not your precious captain. Now!' At that, a dozen or so security guards by the doors pulled out their weapons and began shooting. Those guests closest to the doors stopped suddenly, causing a mass collision amidst the fountains. Many of them fell under the press from behind and screams of terror turned to screams of pain.

Kal crawled back to the dais. From there he could see that the guards weren't shooting into the mass of bodies. They were shooting at the other guards. He looked for Ramone, but his cousin had disappeared into the crowd. Kal pulled out his second laspistol, but couldn't get a clear shot at any of the guards, and didn't really know which ones to shoot at anyway.

'Wotan,' he called. His mastiff trotted out from behind the ice sculpture. Kal had ordered him to stay back there with the priest before the doors to the chapel opened. He wiped the blood off the tip of his sabre and put his fingers up to Wotan's nose.

'Find Ramone,' he said. 'Wotan! Fetch.'

Kal crawled back towards the arch where Yolanda had taken a defensive position. 'Having fun on the honeymoon yet, darling?' he asked.

Yolanda scowled at him. 'Call me darling again, and this will be your last honeymoon… ever!'

'Fair enough,' said Kal. 'Can you get a clear shot at any of Ramone's guards?'

Yolanda shook her head. 'Of course we could just kill everyone and sort it out later.'

Kal considered it, but then shook his head. 'Then we would end up as rulers of the hive, and I don't think either of us wants that.'

Kal heard Wotan bark and crawled out from behind the arch to have a look. Wotan barked again and then let out a squeaky little yip.

'Nice try, Jerico,' said Ramone. 'But I've thought of everything. Remember that little gadget you used on Armand to disrupt his spyrer rig? That wasn't the only one. Your little metal friend is dead.'

‘Now, I’m really mad,’ said Kal. ‘Scabbs, go get him!’ Kal looked around but Scabbs was nowhere to be seen.

Then Kal noticed something else. The weapons fire had stopped. The wedding guests still screamed and tried to hide or at least get out from underneath the pile, but the laser blasts had stopped for the moment.

‘Everyone quiet!’ screamed Ramone. He shot into the air to punctuate his command, shattering one of the crystals. Shards rained down on a chapel that had gone completely silent, except for a few whimpers. ‘I control this wedding now,’ continued Ramone. ‘And the only way for any of you to get out of here alive is for Kal Jerico and Yolanda Catallus to die and for me to be crowned Lord of the Hive.’

‘Why me?’ asked Yolanda immediately. ‘Kal’s the one you want. Just kill him. I won’t stand in your way.’

‘Thanks for sticking by me, honey,’ said Kal.

Yolanda pointed her gun at Kal. ‘No honeys either,’ she growled. ‘And don’t even think about calling me sugar plum.’

‘You shot at me,’ said Ramone. ‘So you have to die now, too.’ Ramone fired into the air again. ‘Are you people listening to me? Either Kal Jerico dies or everyone dies. Now go get him!’

‘Uh oh,’ said Kal.

Bobo swore under his breath. Ever since the guards started shooting, he’d lost sight of all the major players. It was total chaos down there. Now he could do nothing but watch as the crowd turned on Kal and Yolanda.

They advanced on the dais. Kal actually stood in front of Yolanda as they came, making Bobo smile despite the stress of the situation.

As the first of the crowd reached the front of the chapel, Kauderer, Katerin and Valtin all stepped in front of them and held up their hands.

‘You will not give in to the rantings of this madman,’ said Valtin.

‘You’ll have to get through us to get to them,’ said Captain Katerin. He puffed up his considerable chest, looking quite impressive despite his slick bald head and glistening beard. The hot lights and tuxedo had not been kind to the large, sweaty man.

Kauderer simply stood and glared down at the oncoming crowd, which would have worked had there been less than a hundred scared people pressing in on the three lone men.

They put up a brave fight. Katerin knocked down the first three people who

grabbed at him, but got distracted by the low neckline on Jillian Greim's dress, and was pulled down to the ground by Granit Ko'Iron.

Kauderer and Valtin went back to back, fending off the first few attacks with precision martial arts moves. Valtin had obviously been practicing since Bobo had seen him bumbling through the Underhive a few months earlier. His front and side kicks were precise and strong, but he was no match for Ran Lo.

The elder noble blocked Valtin's kicks with ease and moved in with such blinding speed that Bobo didn't even see what happened next. All of a sudden, Valtin was on the ground desperately trying to breathe. Ran Lo stepped over the top of him before Kauderer even knew his backup man had fallen, and jabbed the House Helmawr master spy twice in the ribs from behind, dropping him to the floor.

Then the crowd was on the dais. Kal and Yolanda stood side by side, waving their weapons at the incoming crowd, but these weren't Underhive criminals. They were Spire nobles. Neither bounty hunter could pull the trigger.

Yolanda's parents went up to her. As her father grabbed the gun from her hand, her mother said, 'We're sorry, dear. It's for the good of the house.'

Kal simply put his hands in the air. He was instantly mobbed by a group consisting mostly of his half-brothers and cousins. They pulled him to the ground and began kicking at him.

'Enough!' yelled Ramone. 'This is my show. I get the honour of playing the lead role and executioner.' The crowd parted and Ramone ascended the dais. 'Besides, do you have any idea how much money I've spent on this production already? An entire year's allowance and you and your father still aren't dead…'

That was Bobo's cue. Of course, he'd suspected that Ramone was the man behind Smythe since he'd pulled the gun on Jerico, but without definitive proof he couldn't pull the trigger. Those had been Kauderer's orders. Confession first. Besides, he never had a clear shot at Ramone or any of his guards.

Bobo aimed the rifle at Ramone, flipped on the laser sight and started to pull the trigger, but the crowd closed back in on him at the last second and Bobo lost his clear shot.

'So, the great Kal Jerico brought to his knees by little old me,' said Ramone.

'I'm not on my knees,' said Kal. He spat blood on the marble dais and wondered if his last act on this world was to commit sacrilege. It seemed about right.

'Pull him to his knees,' roared Ramone. 'I want him to kneel before his better

before I incinerate that little brain of his.'

Two of Kal's other cousins – he thought their names were Tomas and Carlos – pulled him up from his foetal position and set him on his knees.

Kal looked up at the barrel of Ramone's gun. 'What in the hive did I ever do to you?' he asked.

'You killed my brother,' said Ramone.

'Could you be a little more specific?' asked Kal. 'I've killed lots of people. I bet lots of them had brothers.'

Ramone punched Kal in the jaw.

'My brother was Armand,' said Ramone. 'A great patriot who tried to bring down this rotten house. A feat I will now accomplish for him.'

Kal spat another gob of blood onto the floor and then pulled his arm away from Carlos to wipe the bloody spittle from his lips. 'I should have recognised you,' said Kal. 'The resemblance to your brother is uncanny.'

Ramone smiled at Kal.

'You're both spider-shit insane.'

Ramone tried to punch Kal again, but Kal caught him by the wrist. 'Nobody ever hits me twice! Nobody!'

Ramone tried to pull free, but Kal wouldn't let go. As Ramone pressed his gun to his temple, Kal saw a laser sight circling on Ramone's arms. He wasn't sure, but it seemed to be tracing letters. B… O… B… O.

'Any last words, Mr Kal Jerico, Underhive bounty hunter?' asked Ramone as he pushed the gun harder against Kal's head.

Kal smiled. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Say hello to your brother for me.'

Kal released his hold on Ramone's arm and fell on his rump. Ramone's gun went off, just missing Kal's head as he rolled onto his back. With his legs free beneath him, Kal swung his feet up and kicked out, catching Ramone in the chest and sending him reeling back through the gathered crowd.

Ramone lifted his weapon and aimed at Kal again. 'Why you bas…'

Ramone's mouth stayed open but he didn't finish the sentence. Instead he started gurgling. Blood and phlegm welled up in his mouth, spilled onto his chin and ran down his neck onto his tuxedo. His whole body went rigid. Then, as the entire congregation watched in silence, he toppled to the ground. A small, black hole in the back of his neck was the only indication of the poison dart that killed him.

The room erupted into chaos again. The guards in the back of the room began

shooting at anyone who came close and the guests all scattered, looking for cover. Screams and laser blasts filled the air.

Kal slugged Carlos and Tomas in the face with the back of his fists and then crawled over to Yolanda, kicking his half-brothers in the stomach along the way. ‘Where are the weapons?’ he asked when he got there.

Yolanda shrugged.

Another voice answered instead. ‘Kal,’ said Scabbs.

Kal looked around, but didn’t see his scabby friend. ‘Where have you been, you little chicken-rat?’ he asked.

‘Gathering these,’ said Scabbs. He crawled out from behind the ice archway, pushing a large stash of weapons ahead of him. ‘The dead guards didn’t seem to need them.’

He tossed lasguns to Kal and Yolanda, and then, after a moment’s hesitation, scooted three more towards Valtin, Katerin and Kauderer who had freed themselves during the confusion.

‘On the count of three,’ said Kal. They all nodded at him. ‘Everybody get down!’ he called out.

Kal looked back at his comrades, nodded, and said, ‘Three!’

He stood up and started firing. Yolanda and Scabbs stood beside him. Kal smiled as he gunned down one of Ramone’s guards. The Spire brats were a little slow on the uptake, not understanding how you count to three in the Underhive. But once Valtin, Kauderer and Katerin joined in, they had six battle-hardened professionals against a bunch of guards. It was, as Kal would later describe it, a complete rout.

In a matter of moments, all of Ramone’s guards had either been gunned down or thrown their weapons to the floor and raised their arms above their heads. Kal was pretty certain that Scabbs had shot one of them as he raised his hands, but nobody else seemed to notice so Kal kept that piece of information to himself.

After the firefight, Kal tossed the borrowed lasgun to the floor and sat down on the edge of the marble dais.

‘Someone want to tell me what in the hive happened here just now?’ he asked.

Katerin pulled out his handkerchief and ran it over his sweaty head. ‘I would, Kal,’ he said, ‘but I need to check on my men and re-establish control over this chapel.’

He trudged off through the crowd, which had quieted down, but also needed tending to. Most were beginning to huddle in their own little groups again to check on the wounded and gripe about the state of affairs in the Spire.

Kal turned to Kauderer and Valtin, but Valtin had already disappeared. ‘Well, hawk-nose?’ asked Kal. ‘Looks like it’s up to you to explain.’

Kauderer glared at Kal, and then pulled his tux vest down to straighten it out and nodded at him. ‘You know most of it,’ he began. ‘Someone tried to kill our Lord Helmawr and then tried to have you killed as well.’

‘Uh huh,’ said Kal. ‘And I played the lightning rod for you all. How long did you know it was Ramone?’

Kauderer shook his head. ‘We didn’t. That’s why we needed you to go along with this charade. We were pretty sure it was someone inside the house. Especially after that assassin tried to kill you. Our security is too tight for anyone outside to get in that easily. She must have had inside help.’

‘Okay,’ said Kal. ‘But where did Bobo come in?’

Kauderer glanced at Kal, briefly, with a ‘how did you know that?’ look. ‘I set him up as a hired assassin to flush out the culprit, but we had to make it look like he’d turned on me; that he despised me enough to even kill me.’

‘That couldn’t have been too hard,’ said Kal.

‘It worked,’ said Kauderer, ignoring the comment. ‘He was contacted last night by an intermediary, so we still didn’t know who was behind it. But we were pretty sure that when he failed to kill you before the end of the ceremony, it would force the assassin out into the open.’

‘You just didn’t count on Ramone being prepared with backup, huh?’

Kauderer stared at Kal for a minute before answering. ‘No.’ he said, and it was obvious that was the end of the discussion.

Scabbs came over and sat next to Kal. ‘I found these for you,’ he said and handed Kal his pearl-handled laspistols and his sabre.

‘Thanks, Scabbs,’ said Kal. ‘I need to find a way to hold onto these better. Perhaps rope or glue.’

‘What do I do with this?’ asked Scabbs. He held up the crown that the priest had almost put on Kal’s head.

‘I’ll take that, if you please,’ said a loud, booming voice from the back of the hall. ‘I do believe it belongs to me.’

A hush descended upon the murmuring and complaining crowd as all eyes turned towards the double doors. The fountains magically receded to mere bubbling so everyone could see the doorway. There, surrounded by guards and flanked by four scribes who busily scratched away at their parchments, stood Gerontius Helmawr apparently fully recovered.

Valtin stepped in front of his lord and announced him. ‘Ladies and gentlemen,

gathered nobles and guests, people of the Spire… your Lord, head of House Helmawr, ruler of Hive Primus and all of Necromunda… I give you, Lord Gerontius Helmawr.'

'The rumours of my death were most unfounded,' said the silver-haired man.

He looked like a fit man of fifty, although by all accounts he was at least two hundred. Nobody else was alive from that long ago, so there was really no way to know his true age. He definitely looked much better than when Kal had seen him lying in bed being kept alive by tubes and wires.

'Now, what in my hive has been going on here?' he continued as he moved through the crowd. 'Looks like a war zone. This is my house, isn't it?'

Valtin nodded. 'It is, sire,' he said.

'Then it shouldn't look like a war zone, should it?'

Nobody answered.

'Should it?' he bellowed.

'No sire,' said Valtin. 'Of course not.'

'That's better,' said Helmawr. He walked up to Kal and looked down at him. 'Who are you?' he asked.

Kal could tell that Helmawr's vitality had returned, but could also tell that his mind still wasn't entirely all there. Valtin had played a calculated risk bringing the old man in here. His presence amongst the assembled nobles would certainly quash any rumours, but if he went off the deep end, the plan could backfire.

Kal thought about having just a little bit of fun at his father's expense, but knew that if the rest of the Spire did find out just how batty their lord truly was there really would be a coup d'état. And if that happened Valtin would probably try to put that damned crown back on his head.

So, Kal swallowed his pride and playful spirit and simply bowed before his lord and father. 'Just your humble servant,' he said. With that, Kal took the crown from Scabbs's hands, brushed off the dead skin that came with it, and placed it on Helmawr's head. He then bowed and backed away.

Helmawr smiled a knowing smile, which made Kal wonder if his old man had been playing with him instead. He then turned to the assembled guests and said, 'I am alive. Now all of you – get out of my house and get back to work… for me.'

As the guests filed out, Kal, Yolanda and Scabbs walked at the back of the crowd. Yolanda's parents tried to come over to her as she walked, but she raised her borrowed lasgun and shook it at them. They disappeared back into the crowd.

‘Is it over?’ asked Scabbs.

‘It’s over,’ said Kal.

‘Can we go home now?’ asked Scabbs.

‘Yeah,’ said Kal. ‘Let’s go home and get back to our old lives.’

As they left the chapel, Scabbs asked, ‘But aren’t you two married? And whatever happened to Bobo?’

EPILOGUE:

TWO HONEYMOONS AND A FUNERAL

Markel Bobo sat back in his seat and breathed a sigh of relief as the transport lifted off.

He glanced at Jenn Strings beside him. She looked absolutely terrified. Yet, even with stress lines bulging across her forehead and white-knuckled hands clutching the arms of her seat, she somehow managed to still look so damn cute.

He had no idea where they were going, but was fairly certain it would be safer than staying on Necromunda. After shooting Ramone and waiting to make sure that Kal and Yolanda were safe, Bobo had left the chapel and made his way to the wall. In exchange for the information about Ran Lo's contract on his life, Kauderer had gladly given Bobo a 'Get out of the Spire free' card, which had allowed him passage back through the wall.

From there, he'd gone straight to Madam Noritake's and grabbed Jenn. They were out the door in under two minutes. Her client at the time hadn't been happy, but he was even less happy when Bobo pressed his knife into the man's neck.

'What are you doing?' Jenn had asked.

'Getting us somewhere safe,' Bobo had replied. He pulled her down the street towards the industrial district. He had to find a certain rotund member of House Van Saar.

'Why aren't we safe?' asked Jenn. She pulled her hand out of his grasp and

stopped in the street, her arms crossed and her foot tapping the ground.

'I can't explain it all here,' he'd told her. 'You know my work is dangerous, right?'

She'd nodded, but still glared at him.

'Well it got really dangerous this week and now we have to leave.'

'But I don't want to go hide in the Underhive,' she'd said. 'I like it at Madam Noritake's. I have a nice bed and warm food.'

'I'm not taking us to the Underhive,' Bobo had said. He pulled her into an alley, as he was getting nervous about standing on the street. 'Look, I'm leaving. I want you to come with me. I promise a nice bed will await us on the other side, and hot food. Real food.'

'Real food?'

'Food grown naturally instead of being reconstituted. I've also heard of things called fruits and vegetables. Meat from animals, that haven't grown up drinking acid and eating poison waste. You name it, Jenn, and it's yours.'

She hugged him and they ran off. From there, it was just a matter of convincing Jenn's five-minute Van Saar client that his lack of stamina would remain a secret if he could quietly book them passage on the next transport leaving Necromunda.

A thousand credits for bribes and another thousand for the Van Saar merchant to help keep his mouth shut after they were gone got them two seats on a transport, waiting to leave Hive Primus behind forever. Jenn had looked at him funny when Bobo didn't even blink before handing over two thousand credits. But she didn't ask any questions.

Bobo didn't relax until the transport left the Hive City docks and rocketed into the sky above the hive. He sat back in his seat for a moment and just breathed. He'd done it. He'd beaten the Spire and lived. He had close to fifty thousand credits in his bag along with several changes of clothing from Jackal Bristol's wardrobe. Let Kauderer bill me, he thought.

Once they left the atmosphere, Bobo reached under his seat and pulled out a small package from his bag. It was a new outfit for Jenn, something silky and short. He'd bought it right after telling Kauderer about his conversation with Mr Smythe.

'Here,' he said. 'A little something for you to wear as we start our new life, Mrs Bristol.'

'Mrs who?' she asked.

'We're now Jackal and Jenn Bristol,' said Bobo. 'And our lives are just

beginning.'

Jenn took the package and made her way to the bathroom in the back of the transport. Bobo sat back and closed his eyes. It was over. His nightmare trip to the Spire had finally ended and it had all turned out for the best.

'You're wrong about that, Mr Bobo,' said a male voice next to him.

Bobo opened his eyes to see Mr Smythe sitting next to him. Without his years of training, he might have looked surprised. But surprise dulled the senses. He would never allow that.

'Wrong about what?' he asked.

'Your life is not beginning,' said Mr Smythe. 'In fact, it's about to end.'

He opened his coat to show Bobo a laspistol hidden underneath.

'Your employer is dead,' said Bobo. He shifted in his seat to face Mr Smythe. His hand slipped down into the seat cushion for just a moment as he turned. 'There's no reason for you to seek revenge.'

'Oh, this isn't revenge,' said Mr Smythe. 'It's business. I have a new employer now. I think you've met him. Lord Ran Lo. Apparently you and he have unfinished business and I'm here to…'

Bobo's hand shot out, sticking the poison dart he'd stashed in the cushion into Mr Smythe's stomach. Smythe gasped as the fast-acting poison coursed through his body. Bobo grabbed the gun from his hand and dropped it into the bag.

He got up from his seat, moved the gurgling Mr Smythe over against the window and buckled him in. As Jenn came back from the bathroom, Bobo picked up his bag and took her hand.

'That looks great on you,' he said. The silk draped ever so nicely on her lithe form. 'Come on,' he said. 'That man wanted our seats. We're moving up to first class.'

Jenn hugged him and Bobo smiled. 'In fact, it's first class from now on for the Bristols.'

'But he never finished the sentence,' said Yolanda. 'I was there, okay? He said, "I now pronounce you Lord of the Hive and…" He never finished the sentence.'

The trio sat in their usual spot in the Sump Hole. Three wildsnakes sat on the table; two of them completely untouched. Only Scabbs was drinking. Kal and Yolanda just sat there, staring at the table.

Scabbs set his empty bottle down and took a moment to swallow the squirming worm from the bottom. He'd gotten a little better at that lately. It really wasn't much worse than swallowing the cook's runny eggs.

‘He did finish the sentence,’ said Scabbs. ‘I heard him.’

Kal and Yolanda both stared at him. Kal still wore his wedding coat. He’d even gotten a tailor to replace the missing epaulet. Yolanda had gotten out of her wedding dress almost immediately. In fact, her mother had to close the dressing room door lest everyone see as she ripped it off.

She had kept the spiked gauntlets though, and now Scabbs was a little worried that she might use those spikes on him.

‘Explain yourself,’ said Kal, quietly and slowly.

‘After Ramone interrupted and weapons started going off all over the place,’ said Scabbs, looking back and forth between Kal and Yolanda, ‘the priest and I ran for cover behind the arch.’

Scabbs looked at his empty bottle and thought about ordering another one, but Kal reached over and grabbed him by the lapel. ‘And…?’ he asked.

‘Oh,’ said Scabbs. ‘While we were down there, I heard the priest say “wife”.’

‘That doesn’t mean a thing,’ said Yolanda. ‘You might have misheard him or he was worried about his wife.’

‘That’s just what I thought,’ said Scabbs. ‘So I turned to him and I said, “What?” and he said “I now pronounce you man and wife”. I guess he had to get it out of him or something. You know priests. They hate to be interrupted when they’re on a roll.’

Kal and Yolanda lapsed into silence and stared at the table a little longer. Scabbs reached out and pulled Kal’s bottle towards him. He drank as the two fumed.

‘I’m married,’ said Kal after a while.

‘I’m married,’ said Yolanda. ‘To you!’

Kal sat back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. ‘I never thought I’d get married,’ he said. ‘I’m Kal Jerico, Underhive bounty hunter. Not Kal Jerico, family man.’

Yolanda jumped out of her chair. ‘It’s your scavving family that got us into this mess,’ she screamed. ‘And your family will get us out of it.’

Kal just sat there with an odd expression on his face. Scabbs wasn’t sure if it was concern, contemplation or simply gas.

‘So,’ said Yolanda, standing over Kal. ‘What are you going to do about this?’

Kal looked up at Yolanda. Her breasts were heaving beneath her tight, leather vest and the veins were practically popping out from beneath the gang tattoos on her forehead. He smirked at her.

‘Well, it’s my wedding night,’ he said. ‘And I plan to do what every married

man does on his wedding night.'

Yolanda reared back and slapped Kal across the face. But his smirk remained in place.

Just then, a barmaid came over to see if they needed anything else. Kal grabbed her around the waist, pulled her onto his lap and gave her a long, deep kiss. She wrapped her arms around Kal and kissed him back.

Afterwards, Kal looked up at Yolanda, his smirk still in place. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I don't need you for what I have in mind.'

Yolanda slapped him again and stormed out of the Sump Hole.

The barmaid, her arms still around Kal's neck, watched Yolanda leave. 'What was that about?' she asked.

'Don't worry about her,' said Kal. 'That's just my wife.'

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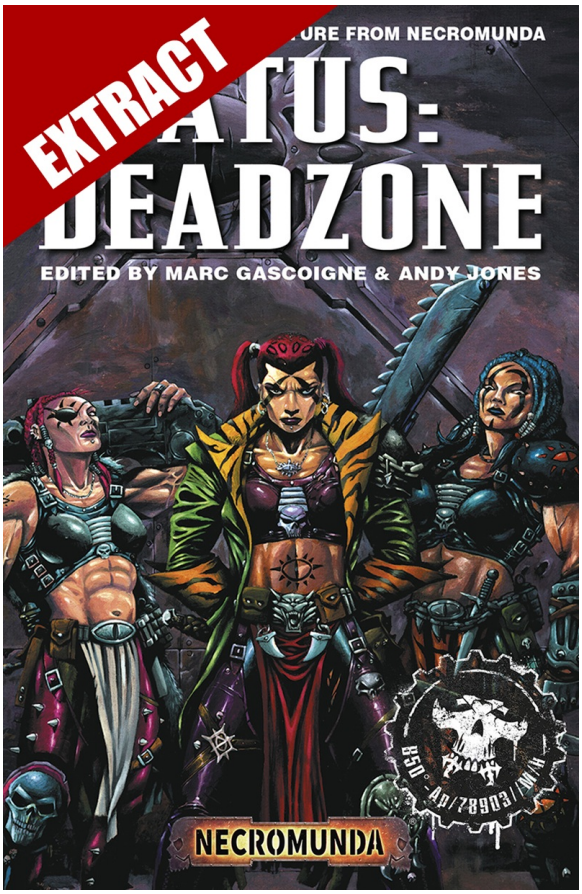
An extract from *Status:Deadzone*.



The floor raced before him, yellow guide lights casting harsh shadows across the face of his driver. The thin hum of an electric engine, rubber wheels dashing across the steel, the rush of the air; the connecting corridors were lonely, humanless places. Fingering his las pistol, to a passer-by Aldus Harkon would have seemed to be simply scratching an irritating itch under his coat. Aldus watched the driver closely; an unimpressive-looking man, but his enemies knew Harkon was cautious of hit men and his escort ready for anything.

'Shuttle Bay 5b, sir.' The driver spoke with a mid-hive lilt.

'Come up in the world?' Aldus returned his hand to the cane lying upon his lap.

'Yes, sir. Used to work on the factory floor. Brother went down-hive; I was recruited up. Saved the foremen from a Delaque assassination attempt.'

'Made your masters proud, no doubt.'

The man saluted. 'Ran Lo shuttle number five should be docking shortly.'

The transport's wheels skidded briefly, only to be muffled by the sound of the rush of depressurising air as the cart entered the landing bay. Almost immediately a throat-searing rush of fumes hit Aldus full in the face. He inhaled deeply, painful though it may be – the shuttle bay would be witness to the biggest deal of his life.

The transport cart scuttled away, small wheels competing to keep up with one another. Aldus dusted down his coat and stood, cane in hand, poised near the edge of the eight mile-high precipice. About him men struggled with fuel pipes, prepared magnetic clamps and clung to the sides of the shuttle bay as though at any second the whole thing would lurch forward and toss them out into the night sky, down through the noxious clouds to land a bloodied pulp in the ash wastes so far below.

Aldus loved Hive Primus. If you were strong-willed there were places for you. Places to find greatness, places to make a life for yourself in a giant city almost bursting with the pressure of millions of souls. If you were cast of iron like the

city, you could go far. Aldus stepped closer to the edge of the shuttle bay's entrance. Winds battered him, slapping him hard in the face, stinging his old, cunning eyes. Peering out into the night air, he breathed deeply. A freshness unknown to his sickening body filled his lungs. The stars in the sky, every one a new solar system, were each a place for those of iron to reach greatness.

Aldus hacked hard into the front of his mouth. Sliding the phlegm about his mouth he manipulated it with his tongue until it met his approval. Large and heavy. He leaned forward. A bay attendant behind him shrieked. Aldus delicately raised his hand and cast the phlegm from his mouth. The dark yellow globule dropped into the rushing winds and was swept around and backwards into the gusts. Now part of him would travel into the wastes, carried, perhaps, for ten miles or a hundred before it dropped upon the dead earth below. Aldus smiled within.

'Sir!' An attendant, arms replaced by machine loading mitts, screamed into Aldus's ear. 'The hunting party… their shuttle!'

Aldus nodded and began the long walk to the end of the runway.

From beyond, from the dark sky, a bright green light burst into view.

'They're going too fast!' A tech-priest looked up at the flickering, ghost-washed display panels before him, sweat running down his green-lit face, tracing the contours of the electronic sight that replaced his eye.

Aldus remained stationary as the bay was suddenly plunged into bright red light, warning beacons alerting fire safety crews to prepare for action.

The jagged shape of the shuttle grew larger. Aldus could make out the Ran Lo signature on its cockpit, the arcane R and L set in their white circle contrasting sharply with the arched windows above.

'Sir, get behind the fire wall!'

Aldus remained still, with the exception of his calm hands fondling the silver cast at the top of the cane.

As the shuttle continued its wayward plummet towards them, attendants began throwing themselves to the floor, the strobing lights staggering all movement. The tearing of metal screeched about the runway, the shuttle throwing sparks into the smoke-choked air as its wings clipped the sides of the bay. Bulbous wheels screamed like agonised creatures as they struggled to slow the oncoming craft. Small fires leapt up on the floor as the white-hot sparks ignited patches of fuel.

The shuttle sped towards where Aldus stood, noxious fumes pouring from its vents. The shuttle veered off its path for a moment, almost colliding with the

wall, only to spin back on line with Aldus.

With an unutterably deafening screech, the wheels finally succumbed to the brakes and the shuttle screamed to a halt, its steel nose cone so close to Aldus' misshapen body he could have reached out and patted its flaking metal prow. The beaming face of a young man smiled down at the stationary figure through the arched cockpit windows. He waved and Aldus shook a hand in recognition.

Attendants rushed about the shuttle bay, pouring foam directly from their augmented limbs onto the spot fires. Meanwhile priests moved in to consecrate the machine's safe landing with oils and unguents. Amidst the flurry of movement, a staircase was lowered from the shuttle's side, its gradual release incongruous with the speed of the men. Four body-suited figures, two boys and two girls, leapt from the access port. Only a robed man, leaving the shuttle last, used the stairs. This, Aldus Harkon knew instantly, was Terrak Ran Lo.

The sage old man walked gracefully towards Aldus, grey hair and groomed goatee painted red in parts. About him the youngsters leapt and shouted, slapping one another on the backs. Their combative prowess was immediately noticeable as they aimed mock kicks and lashed out at one another, pulling short with bladed weapons mere muscle spasms from one another's faces.

'I must apologise–' Terrak Ran Lo began.

'Scared as a cess rat!' The young pilot from the ship grinned at Aldus like a big dog, nodding his shorn head, revealing it to be tattooed with the kill marks of a seasoned hunter.

'Aadon, you oaf, you almost ripped the ship to pieces!' A woman in a tight-fitting body suit, dark, lacquered braid curled tight in the customary manner of all of the women warriors of Ran Lo, spat out the words at her companion.

'Does it matter. What about the thrill?' Aadon snapped back.

'Aadon, you're a genius, did you see them run for the barricade?' laughed the other boy. He was huge, a full head taller than those about him. 'Call me Takarr. Thanks for making this hunt possible, Mr. Harkon.'

'Don't mention it,' Aldus replied. 'You should thank Lord Terrak for having the sense to come to me.'

'You can guarantee that everything will be in place by the time they get down there?' Terrak Ran Lo asked, his voice calm and commanding.

'Yes. As long as they keep to the schedule they'll be having the hunt of their lives.'

'You'd better hope so, Mr Harkon,' the dark-haired woman said snootily as she stepped forward. 'You're being paid a small fortune to make sure this is good.'

‘I’ve had ten years’ experience dealing with Underhivers. Four miles below us I have over thirty seasoned contacts; at six I have another forty. I’d like to think that my dealings with these scum has provided me with enough insight to know when something is worth it.’

‘Excellent,’ the young woman purred and spun on her heels. ‘The mice will be in trouble tonight.’

High above the Underhive, the air is cold. High above the Underhive you cannot breathe for the lack of atmosphere. Ten miles above the savage wasteland of Hive Bottom is where the city’s peak lies. This is where the souls of the dead will travel. This is where they gather. This is where they are blown across the four winds. Scattered like shards of glass. Scattered souls bear no memories. Blood…

Blood ran down Knife Edge Liz’s face. She could feel it sliding down her chin, charting a course past old scars, through the valleys of new wounds. Liz reached her hand up to her face. She might as well have been attempting to lift a steel girder. She let the limb fall to the ground again. Slow waves of red washed over her eyes again.

High above the hive the air is cold. Liz no longer felt her legs. High above the hive you cannot breathe for lack of atmosphere. Liz drew a heavy breath into her lungs. It fell short and sunk only as deep as her throat. She dragged her hand across the ground, feeling for something, anything that could help.

Her hand came across something soft and moist. Feeling up it – a small ring, piercing stone cold skin. Tattered cloth. The small face of a girl, eyes open. Big round eyes like a cat.

Kat.

Kat was dead.

Liz snatched her hand away. Blood rushed to her head. Liz rose to her feet pushing hard so that she fell away from the corpse. She staggered forward and fell upon a cushion of flesh. Arms slick with someone else’s blood. Underneath her she could feel the cold grip of death. Someone was beneath her. Dead. Liz rubbed at her eyes, grit tearing at her pupils. For each layer of blood she wiped off, another would arrive – hers or the corpse’s, she could not tell.

‘Hive daemons take me!’ Liz groaned, rolling off the corpse in panic.

Liz’s limbs struck at the ground, each fist striking in search of a dry place, a steel place. Somewhere where there was no blood. A fist ricocheted off a steel case. Pain shot up Liz’s arm, sending spasms about her shoulder and shooting

tendrils of needle-sharp pangs about her. The steel case. Liz ran her fingers over its mesh texture, searching for a sign. She flipped the case over and felt again. Small cross-hatches, like the mesh of the walkways she knew were above her. The criss-cross ended abruptly; a smooth disk lay in the centre of the case, medical cross engraved into its surface.

Liz flipped the medi-kit open and rummaged inside it with trembling fingers. She swallowed pills, wrapped bandages about her wounds. Took out a hypodermic, shook it and was rewarded by the slosh of the liquid within. She had to stab four times before she found a vein. Arm rushing with warmth, Liz fell back and continued falling.

In the darkness there was heat. In the darkness the sound of the hive drifted away. Liz rolled around. The painkillers, like the hands of a lover, held her tight and ran their fingers about her body. They sank deep into her skin. Deep into her soul. They traced patterns across her back. Spelt words she could not understand. Rubbed thoughts into her tired brain.

Kat was dead. She'd come from the streets. Wanted to join a gang. Looked for a way to find a meaning. A meaning for the Underhive. Couldn't have been more than sixteen. Dead so young. Half a life is more than none. Half a lie.

Liz rocketed into consciousness. A lie. Somewhere there was a lie.

Liz snapped her eyes open and looked about her. Smoke still rose from potholes in the ground. Electric conduits still buzzed and swung from the platforms above her. Beside her lay the medi-kit, plundered of all its contents. A few bright red stims lay scattered about on the ground. Liz carefully picked these up and secreted them down the side of her boot.

Something bit sharply into her ankle. She struggled with the boot and removed a hard, white card. Guilder credits. The lie was unravelling itself. Liz regarded herself in the sheen of an effluent pool. Her leggings were torn. Deep gashes carved their way through her flesh. Her hair, once dyed blue, was a deep brown, nearer her natural colour.

Liz had fallen close to Bekka, Bekka the Harvester. Liz stared over at her corpse. Deep pock marks had cracked open that seemingly impenetrable body of hers. Hundreds of hours of weight-built work, cast aside like a child's rag doll. For so many Bekka was the paragon of Underhive womanhood: in control, strong, with a mind as strong as steel.

Beside Bekka lay her weapon, its kill markings still as bright as they were the day they were scored. The day they captured that heavy bolt gun from their rivals, the Sump Pirates, had been one of their greatest. An offworld weapon,

and ammunition too; an incredible prize! It was a victory that had led them through every bar in Deep Town. They'd got drunk on Second Best and collapsed on the bar-room floor.

From the signs, a story unfolded: the blood-sprayed walls, laceration wounds to her dead comrades. They had come to ambush someone. It should have been simple. A mistake? They took it too easy? Something had gone wrong. Desperate faces, terrified eyes – the dead faces betrayed much. Bekka. Her augmented eyes and powerful weapon would have given her the drop on any assailant. By the ruby scores, sunken into her flesh, perhaps she had been the first to go. A trail of light imprints in the earth belied some rapidly moving assailant. Liz slowly rose and staggered forwards, hand clutching delicately at her leg. With each step the wound tore open a little.

The imprints led to the body of a stranger, wired into a still-pulsing fighting suit. Bloodied mat of hair, disgorged eye sockets. The mechanical enhancements that had once filled these places lay torn on the ground. The stranger was young, Kat's age perhaps. Bladed gauntlets still moist with blood hung by his side. Liz regarded her leg.

'Liz!' A scream from behind her. She spun around, lasgun at the ready. Kat was holed up behind a rock, heavy shells like blast caps erupting the rock from about her. Kat kept her head down. Liz scanned the smoke-filled tunnels for her assailant. Somewhere above, at the narrowing of the walls. Text-book bottle-neck. They were surrounded.

'Liz, hel–' Kat gargled into silence.

Liz spun to catch sight of her comrade. A dark figure stood over where Kat had been hiding. Unashamed, he held part of an Escher girl above his head like a trophy.

'Sonofa–!' Liz threw herself towards the figure that was now dancing about Kat's shredded remains.

Cracking explosions splintered girders, concrete flinging dust into the air. Liz threw herself through this haze and fell upon the figure, unleashing a fiery beam of death from her lasgun. Hot shells crashed about her, some searing her skin as they bounced about the ground. The figure leapt, lightning fast, and threw itself towards Liz, sharp blades like cleavers dripping wet.

Liz spun about, anticipating her assailant's speed, and clipped him. Right arm a mangled pulp, the figure swept hard with its left. Blades sliced across Liz's leg. A sharp pain and sudden dizziness rushed over her. She rolled through the filth,

the dirt clogging the wound, blood rush stemmed to a trickle. Liz unsheathed her chainsword and flicked its spinning teeth into action. The figure darted to one side and tumbled across the ground, its suit pumping stimulants into its dying body.

Chainsword buzzing, Liz lightly swept it in front of the oncoming figure's head. Her timing was on line. Like spearing a sump eel Liz timed the blow to anticipate the movements of her attacker. The chainsword caught on the augmentation about the figure's head. Its weapon suit sputtered into a death rattle as armour plates and implants were ripped from its body. Both Escher and attacker crashed to the ground. Liz readied her lasgun and took aim on the hidden sniper's position. Using a bent girder to brace her arm she peered into the darkness.

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