

THE HAND OF HARROW

Denny Flowers

Caleb Cursebound is the underhive's ninth most dangerous man. Probably. The ambitious cat burglar's hunt for the legendary Hand of Harrow leads him to conduct a daring heist at an exclusive ball, and he and his ratskin accomplice, Iktomi, must use all of their resources to escape with their lives – and their prize.

In Denny Flowers' witty, fast-paced Black Library debut, we follow Caleb and Iktomi as they venture into the spires of Necromunda's upper hive in search of a mysterious treasure.

Lord Harrow raised his hand.

The theatre fell silent, all eyes rising to the royal box. There was a tremble to his movement, his gaunt fingers twitching as they curled about the throne's gilded armrest. But his eyes were clear and, though his voice lacked power, his words still carried weight.

'My friends,' he said, addressing the auditorium. 'Once again, we stand together in celebration of our house, our family and, most of all, our future. On this night we bid farewell to our children, for the next time we see them they will be fully fledged members of our house. This is a path paved with trial and trepidation, but I know that every single one of them will exceed my expectations.'

Caleb didn't think it was a bad speech, but he held only half an ear to it, his focus on the ruby signet ring adorning Harrow's left hand. He remembered the dingy office in the depths of Slag Row, where Mr Kreep had first outlined the plan. Everything hinged on that ring.

'The museum can only be accessed by the ring's wearer,' Kreep told him, his voice but a whisper. 'Cameras, alarms, security measures – the ring bypasses everything. Once you have it, you merely stride down this passageway and open this door.'

'And without it?'

'You're either incinerated or decapitated at about the halfway mark.'

Caleb leant closer, pretending to scrutinise the schematics splashed across the far wall. Kreep certainly made the job sound compelling: a priceless artefact languishing in a disused museum with sophisticated, but easily circumvented security. It was the perfect target – low risk, high

reward.

Why was he nervous?

‘Care to share your thoughts?’ Kreep said. ‘Surely the underhive’s ninth most dangerous man isn’t intimidated by a simple burglary?’

He grinned expectantly, his artificial eyes gleaming. Since his ejection from House Delaque, Kreep had replaced his bulky ocular implants with lifelike replicas of crystal blue. The effect would have been less disconcerting if he still remembered how to blink.

‘What’s our exit strategy?’ Caleb asked, playing for time.

‘You leave via the window,’ Kreep replied, tracing with his finger. ‘Security protocols are deactivated providing the ring-wearer remains in the museum. That way he or she can take their time with the exhibits. But there’s a flaw in the system. Not only does the internal security go down, but so does the shielding on the outer hive. I have access to a drainage valve a few levels below the museum. Your partner makes a short climb, cuts a hole through this access port, and the two of you grav-chute to safety.’

A short climb. Kreep had a gift for speaking from both sides of his mouth. In a sense it was a short climb; the hive was both mountain and pit, the spires of the upper houses stretching to the mesosphere, the tendrils of the underhive infesting the planet’s crust. Set against this vast scale the path outlined on the schematics was nothing, little more than half a mile. But it was a vertical climb, through acid rain and choking ash clouds, across the twisted frame of the outer hive.

He glanced at Iktomi. The ratskin stood a little behind him, keeping the office’s doorway in her line of vision. She studied the proposed ascent, her eyes framed by the crimson scars worn by her tribe. She nodded.

Lord Harrow was still addressing the crowd.

Caleb blinked, trying to focus on the moment. Whatever his reservations it was too late to back out now. Iktomi would be scaling the hive’s exterior. Until he deactivated the museum’s security system she would be stranded out there. The ratskin was as tough as anyone he’d ever met, but even she had limits. No one could survive long in those conditions. He needed the ring.

He made his move, picking a path through the throng towards a stairway

that led to the upper balcony. Most of the revellers ignored him, intent on Lord Harrow, but more than one glanced as he passed. He looked nervous, but why shouldn't he? He was dressed as a valet, but clearly a flustered one, cringing and bowing as he earnestly made his way through the crowd, a shining pocket watch clearly visible in his hand. A few of the nobles, resplendent in their finery, eyed his drab attire with contempt or sympathy; most paid him no attention at all. He was a servant, and from all appearances a bad one at that. Why would anyone waste time on him?

The stairway was not unguarded. The two men were not especially imposing, at least not physically. But Caleb knew them from their stance: proud, even arrogant, but always in perfect balance. Always alert. They were most likely enforcers, or the nobles' equivalent.

Caleb lowered his head as he approached, stumbling through a carefully crafted speech. He had forgotten his master's prize heirloom and had been sent to retrieve it. If he was delayed, if his master was left waiting but a moment more, the consequences would be dire. Neither seemed particularly convinced by his story, but it was their job to be suspicious. A brief retinal scan seemingly confirmed his credentials, and neither guard wished to waylay him and risk offending one of the nobles.

'Our opening will be the debutantes' ball,' Kreep had told him. 'There are so many protocols and sacraments to observe that the whole process is virtually automated. Once your biometrics are added to the data logs you will become just another cog in the machine. They won't even notice you.'

That part still didn't sit well with Caleb. Kreep was a skilled info-broker and still maintained contacts from his time in House Delaque, but it was difficult to believe even his influence extended this far uphive. Something didn't sit right. It was the second most troubling part of the job.

On the far side of the auditorium Lord Harrow's speech had almost concluded. It was clear the old man was tiring, but there was still iron in his closing words.

'I now bid farewell to all of our debutantes,' he said. 'But most of all I bid farewell to my daughter Elissa. It saddens me that the girl I love so much will soon be gone, even though I could not be prouder of the young woman who will one day take my place. But the time for words is over. My family and friends, please let me present our future!'

With this the theatre went dark, all except the main stage, which was now bathed in an amber haze. Music rose from the orchestra, the symphony soft and soothing, like honeyed wine. The curtain rose to reveal a spiral staircase of burnished bronze. Arm in arm, the debutantes descended, mirrorglass robes flowing from their shoulders, the mesh so fine that it rippled in the sudden breeze. Caleb sniffed, his eyes drawn to the main intake fan. He'd never smelt air like it: fresh and so sweet that it was almost sickly.

He risked a glance to the royal box, where Lord Harrow slumped in his throne. His arm hung limp by his side, the signet ring loose on his gaunt fingers. But his eyes were clear and fixed upon the performance. The debutantes had silently reached the main stage, their footsteps stifled by micro-stummers embedded in the heels of their ripperskin boots. With practised grace they fanned out into a semicircle, their robes falling from their shoulders. Each wore a corset or waistcoat of sombre black emblazoned with the Harrow family crest: a golden blade on a scarlet field. Most were also bedecked in shimmering headdresses forged in the forms of beasts and birds. Some wore wings upon their backs crafted from gold-leaf. A single feather was worth more than he saw in a cycle.

He crept along the balcony, his gaze flitting from the performance to the royal box. With the audience intent on the stage the old man seemed to have shrunk further into his throne. He motioned to his attendant, who lifted a gilded respirator to his lips, and he drank deep, emerald fumes wafting about his face. As Caleb watched, his posture shifted, straightening, his hands twitching involuntarily, the ruby ring sliding a fraction down his finger.

'The dance is your opening,' Kreep had explained. 'The audience will be too busy cooing over the performance to pay you much attention. Harrow's own daughter is one of the debutantes this year, so the old man will be particularly distracted. Just slip the ring from his finger and replace it with this replica. It's simple sleight of hand.'

Caleb took the ring, pocketing it. Kreep had worn a broad smile, though the expression didn't extend to his artificial eyes.

'I thought pickpocketing was One-eyed Tippet's forte?'

'I no longer work with him,' Kreep replied, his expression barely

flickering.

On the main stage the dancers lined up for the minuet, the debutantes taking centre stage. Behind and beneath them the rest of the ensemble shuffled from the shadows with faux awkwardness. Their costumes were neither elaborate nor finely wrought: stained leather and tarnished iron cobbled together with wire and chain. Some wore extravagant wigs in neon pink, styled into crests and spikes the length of a sword's blade. Others were clad in vivid survival-suits bedecked with hazard markings. Their faces were dour as they assembled on the left of the stage, loose wires trailing in their wake.

On the right a trio of performers bumbled into place. Their movements were clumsy, restricted by bodysuits so padded that the performers were almost as wide as they were tall. As one they flexed their swollen frames, eyes crossed as they stared blindly into the crowd. There was laughter.

Then came a commotion in the orchestra pit, the musicians stuttering their way through a carefully crafted cacophony as dancers scuttered between them, rummaging through sheet music and stealing drumsticks. As they crept onto the stage the nearest turned and bowed to the crowd, wax dripping from the candles flanking his helmet. He gave a slack-jawed grin, exposing blacked-out teeth. Despite himself, Caleb found his gaze lingering on the stage as he approached the enclosed entrance to the royal box. Perhaps it was satire. Perhaps this was honestly how the nobles saw them. For it was clear even to him that the dancers were dressed as a crude parody of the underhivers.

The orchestra surged to life as the debutantes extended their hands. The faux-underhivers took them with graceless bows, pirouetting about the stage. As the pace quickened the underhivers stumbled and dithered, the debutantes remaining perfectly poised, heads held high, each with one hand clasped behind their back, the other directing their partner like a puppet on a string. On the next pass the underhivers staggered, almost falling as they seamlessly switched partners. The debutantes turned, feet wide, arms spread like wings, their fingers curled into talons. The music had risen to a crescendo now, the string section sawing at their instruments, the beat pounding like a hammering heart.

His own heart was pounding too. He was close now, close to the biggest

score of his career. He'd heard the stories, that the Harrow family held an artefact from another age, a treasure known only as the Hand of Harrow. Some said it was a weapon so powerful that it could topple a hive, others that the ancient technology could cure any illness, or even stave off death itself. He didn't know for sure, but that wasn't what worried him. What worried him was that, from what he could tell, Kreep didn't know what it was either.

'The Hand?' Kreep had said, a frown briefly passing across his ashen face. 'I already told you, it's an artefact, an old family heirloom. Priceless to the right buyer, worthless to the general populous. You procure it, we split the profit fifty-fifty.'

'What sort of artefact?' Caleb persisted. 'A gemstone? A sceptre? A historic battle cannon?'

'It's small, easily transported.'

'But what is it?'

'I don't have a detailed description. You will know it when you see it. The entire museum is built around it.'

'How am I supposed to steal something when I don't know what it is?'

'It's a museum!' Kreep snapped, his mask slipping for just a second. 'There will be a label or description on the cabinet. I assume you at least can read?'

This last remark seemed to be directed at Iktomi. If she registered the insult she did not acknowledge it.

'You're not telling me something,' Caleb said as Kreep sighed, turning to his desk and retrieving a bottle of Wildsnake from the bottom drawer.

'Obviously,' Kreep replied, popping the cork and pouring three glasses. 'There are lots of things I'm not telling you – my contact in Harrow's family, the name of the buyer. I'm an info-broker, it's my job to keep everyone informed without letting anyone know too much about anyone else. This is a theft from the upper hive, we need to be discreet.'

He handed Caleb a glass before turning his gaze to Iktomi. She shook her head.

'I'd feel better if I knew exactly what I was taking.'

'I appreciate that, I really do,' Kreep replied, leaning against his desk and taking a sip. 'But I've told you all I can. You will have to trust me.'

‘Isn’t there an expression about trusting a Delaque? Something about it being wiser to kiss a sumpkroc?’

‘Now that is hardly fair. You know I am estranged from the House of Secrets.’

That was certainly the rumour. Kreep had apparently been ejected for some slight against House Delaque. The precise details of his crime were unclear, as was the reason the house had not sought restitution by removing some of his organs. The two prevailing theories were that he either held information that was of such value that his former house was reluctant to move against him, or that he had never actually been ejected at all and his apparent fall from grace was part of an elaborate scheme.

Still, thus far his relationship with Caleb had been mutually beneficial.

‘I fear your paranoia is getting the better of you,’ Kreeep sighed, setting down his glass. ‘This is a simple job with a tidy payoff. Surely it is not beyond the skills of Caleb Cursebound? Are you not the ninth most dangerous man in the underhive?’

‘So they tell me.’

‘The man who single-handedly brought down Bonesnapper’s Badrock Boys?’

‘I had to use two hands, but sure.’

‘The man who slew the Unseen Beast of Sumptown?’

‘Well, it was hard to tell for sure without actually being able to see the body, but—’

‘The man who survived the Blood River Massacre, saving a poor ratskin brave in the process?’

He nodded to the spot where Iktomi had formerly stood.

She was no longer there.

Instead she was now behind Kreeep, her arm hooked around his throat, a blade poised above his left eye.

Caleb rose slowly, reaching out and lowering her arm with practised calm.

‘We don’t talk about it.’

Harrow was still intent on the stage. The faux underhivers had been herded into centre stage, the debutantes encircling them. They still moved with the same polished grace, but this was no longer a dance. There was no

pretence of harmony or partnership. One by one they struck and the underhivers gasped and fell, collapsing from the stage or rolling behind the curtain, until a sole survivor remained. He cowered as the killers surrounded him, his spectacles shattered and his longcoat torn, exposing ashen flesh. He begged for clemency, hauling reams of parchment from his pockets, promising knowledge and secrets, anything if only they would spare his life. But the killers were unmoved by his pleas. As they raised their talons one last time there came a blinding flash of crimson, a final surge from the orchestra's pit. Then the debutantes were gone, abandoning the stage to the body of their final victim.

There was silence.

Then the auditorium exploded in thunderous applause. At that moment, Caleb slid into the royal box. Harrow's security moved to intercept him just as his entourage surged to their feet, pressing against the rails as they cheered and whooped. Caleb appeared to stumble in the press of bodies, slipping from the guards' grip. He fell forwards, his hands outstretched to Lord Harrow's throne. The switch took a moment, the oversized ring easily departing Harrow's finger, the replica just as quickly taking its place.

The guards pressed around him. He cowered before them, the pocket watch brandished like a talisman.

'My l-lords,' he stuttered. 'Forgive me, I entered the wrong box. I did not mean...'

He trailed off, aware that he was no longer their focus. From his prone position he turned, following their gaze.

Lord Harrow was staring straight at him.

Caleb made sure to tremble as he prostrated himself before the head of the Harrow family. He risked a glance at the old man's face. There was no malice there, nor anger or ill will. But a cold intellect resided behind those eyes, and a terrifying certainty of purpose. For a long moment Caleb thought that Harrow had recognised him for what he was: a thief and a liar. But then the old man dismissed the guards with a wave of his finger, as if wholly unconcerned by Caleb's presence. His focus returned to the main stage, where the debutantes had gathered for their encore.

The passageway was quiet bar the patter of Caleb's footsteps. He moved tentatively, waiting for the silence to be broken by gunfire, or some

sophisticated death machine unfolding from the darkness. He glanced to the Harrow family ring on his finger, half expecting the ruby to glow. At least that would indicate it actually *did* something.

Kreep had been adamant the security systems were entirely automated, that the ring shielded its wearer from otherwise certain death. It was quite possible. Caleb had no doubt the nobles had access to such sophisticated technology, and there was some logic to the head of the family holding the keys to the vault. But only a fool would rely on a single means of protecting his legacy, no matter how secure the key. Caleb had looked into the man's eyes, and he knew Lord Harrow was no fool.

At the corridor's end lay the museum's main entrance. It was rather uninspired, adamantium blocks seemingly carved into the walls of the corridor, separated by a stiletto-thin seam. The only adornment was a datapoint on the left door, a small concave housing framed by the Harrow family crest.

Caleb raised his hand, the ring loose on his finger, and pressed his fist to the lock.

He felt it before he heard it, the distant whir of motors buried deep beneath him. With barely a moan the impenetrable doors slid open. Beyond lay an ebony corridor of polished stone lit by glass braziers.

He slipped through, hugging the wall as he followed the passage through the atrium. Aisles unfolded before him, but it was too dark to make out his surroundings. The walkways could be lined with snipers, or a regiment of Harrow's personal guard stationed behind the shadowy displays.

He slowed, hissing into his comm-link.

'Iktomi?'

There was no response. He'd known the signal would not penetrate the auditorium but he'd hoped that the museum would be less heavily shielded from the outer hive. He'd have felt better with her at his side. The ratskin's presence was always reassuring. For one thing she tended to be the target of the first few volleys.

From beneath his collar he unfolded his infra-goggles, slipping them into place. His view shifted from pitch-black to a dark green. He could make out the walkways and aisles, but the roof of the dome was beyond his vision. There were no heat signatures or other energy fluctuations besides the flickering braziers. The museum was as quiet as a tomb.

He moved faster now, either emboldened by the silence or because his fear overrode his caution. Kreep had provided the museum's layout, but Caleb had not grasped the scale of the place, the aisles stretching in all directions like the threads of a spider's web. He glanced briefly at the displays as he passed, but in the darkness it was difficult to discern their content. Most appeared to be paintings or textiles. He hoped that the Hand of Harrow was something a little more robust. As he moved, other braziers silently blossomed into life, presumably triggered by his passage.

There came a crackle in his earpiece.

'Iktomi?'

The only response was static.

Before him lay the access port, a lavish silver frame that glistened in the gathering light. Beyond lay a chamber of cold iron, at its end a plasteel doorway, the final barrier to the Ash Wastes.

He tried the comm-link again.

He could hear her now, but the words were garbled, broken by static and the roaring gale outside the hive.

'Iktomi? Can you hear me?'

More static. But then he heard it, the whine of a thermal charge. The chamber began to glow like a furnace. He turned his head, shielding his face from the heat, even as the silver frame warped and ran like wax.

It took a moment for the smoke to clear. Then a figure emerged through the twisted bulkheads, bound in a bloodstained leather duster, a keffiyeh tied around her head. She removed her goggles, wiping blood from the lenses. The fluid had a particularly unpleasant purple sheen.

'What happened to you?' he asked.

'Spiders,' she shrugged, removing the duster. 'There was a nest halfway up.'

'Are you all right?'

'I've seen worse,' she shrugged, nodding to her forearm, where the long-healed welts from a dozen bites were still clearly visible. 'Help me with the rest of it.'

Between them, they hauled Iktomi's pack through the opening. The grav-chutes were laid out by the access port while Caleb secreted various cutting tools about his person, along with his laspistol. He was relieved to have his hands on a weapon again.

‘Have you found it?’ she asked.

‘It’s too dark to find anything,’ he sighed. ‘There must be a better lighting system. This is supposed to be a museum. How is anyone expected to appreciate the exhibits?’

Iktomi did not answer, her focus drawn to the dome’s distant roof. She frowned.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

She paused. ‘Something is up there.’

Caleb followed her gaze, scanning with his infra-goggles, but he could detect nothing – no heat signatures or energy emissions.

‘I can’t see anything,’ he said. ‘Do you want to try my goggles?’

She shook her head.

‘Well I’m telling you there’s nothing there. Are you sure you’re okay? You didn’t get bitten?’

‘Only slightly,’ she shrugged with a wave of her hand.

‘There is no such thing as only getting “slightly” bitten by a giant spider.’

‘You get used to it,’ she murmured, still intent on the upper dome.

‘Fine,’ he sighed. ‘You stare at the sky, I’ll find the Hand of Harrow, and we can get out of here. Okay?’

She nodded, but her gaze never wavered, her hand curled round the handle of her hunting knife.

Caleb swore but turned away, scrutinising the displays. More and more braziers had blossomed into life, and the lower levels of the museum were now bathed in a soft blue glow. The paintings made little sense to him. Most featured members of House Harrow, recognisable by the insignias on their breastplates, engaged in savage duels with hideous troglodyte creatures emerging from the darkness. The armour and weapons were unfamiliar to him – presumably poetic licence on the part of the artist. He moved on.

The next display held a selection of artefacts: broken weapons, a breastplate torn by a trio of parallel slashes. He scrutinised the items for a gauntlet, or even a severed arm, but nothing stood out, and nothing seemed to be labelled.

‘This is impossible,’ he sighed, glancing to Iktomi. She was following silently, still intent on the dark above. ‘You want to help me look?’

She didn’t answer.

He strode to the next cabinet. More paintings, more celebrations of House Harrow's triumphant warriors slaying pitiful creatures. Except none of the warriors seemed in eminent danger. Their armour was impenetrable, their weapons bestowing death and ruin. The longer he looked the less it seemed like a battle. It was just a massacre.

His theory was proved fact by the next cabinet. It was full of skulls.

Most appeared human, or close enough if you forgave the odd fang or additional nose cavity. Some must have belonged to xenos creatures, or perhaps something foul from the depths of the underhive. A few were fitted with bionic enhancements, though these were corroded and worn.

'Well, I suppose this is progress,' he heard himself say, his mouth suddenly dry. 'All we need to do now is find the cabinet filled with severed hands.'

'We shouldn't be here. It smells like death.'

Her voice was calm, but Caleb could tell she was scared. Which, logically, meant he should be terrified.

'Then let's hurry this along,' he said, moving on to the next display. 'Since you have the exceptional eyesight maybe you should try...'

He trailed off. Before him was the display he'd first encountered on entering the museum. In the half-light he'd mistaken it for textiles. He'd been right to a point.

Human skins.

Most were mounted on the walls like the hides of beasts. Some had been fashioned into garments and ornaments. Here and there were features of their previous owners – empty eye holes, or the stretched remains of fingers. Though aged and worn, a few still bore distinct tribal markings: crimson scars across the eyes.

He whispered her name, but Iktomi was already beside him. She wore the same expression she'd had the day he'd first found her, bleeding from a dozen wounds but somehow still alive, the same cold, dead fury etched on her face. She'd been sprawled in rubble stained red by her family's blood. The skinless bodies of her tribe had been dumped in the water. The killer was never found. He'd presumed it was some terrible creature from the depths of the underhive. When he'd asked her of that day she'd spoken of daemons with steel wings, monsters who breathed death and laughed as they hunted her people for sport. He hadn't understood then. But that was

before the debutantes' dance, before the museum.

He knew what they were now.

Caleb never heard it approach, but he must have sensed something. He'd already half-turned, pistol in hand, when it struck. The impact lifted him from his feet and sent him tumbling across the stone floor, losing his grip on his weapon. Iktomi was a shade faster, her knife already raised when she was seized, steel talons piercing her shoulder. A curse formed on her lips, but it was choked by the blood and foam frothing from her mouth. As Caleb struggled to stand she was hurled aside contemptuously, her body crumpling as it struck the stone. She convulsed once then lay still.

Standing over her was the daemon.

Its face was a multitude of sensors that glimmered in the half-light like the eyes of a spider, its body segmented steel. Its forelimbs ended in bloodied talons fed by an array of cables and tubes. Though hunched, it still stood a head taller than him.

'Your dog was impressive,' said a voice. Though distorted by the helmet it sounded human, almost familiar. 'This suit renders the wearer invisible to the most advanced auspex, and yet I swear she almost spotted me. These savages are quite remarkable in their own way.'

Caleb didn't reply, crawling towards Iktomi. She lay still, eyes half-open, her foam-flecked lips tinged blue.

'She won't have suffered much,' said the voice. 'The venom is quite potent.'

He hadn't heard the creature move but it was beside him. Instinctively he reached for his holster, but the weapon was gone.

'You, on the other hand, are something of a disappointment,' it continued. 'Caleb Cursebound. Vanquisher of the Badrock Boys. Slayer of the Unseen Beast. Ninth most dangerous man in the underhive.'

It laughed.

'You know me?' Caleb asked, buying time, his gaze darting around the museum, seeking his lost sidearm.

'I'm afraid not,' it replied. 'I'm just reading from your bio. I like to familiarise myself with my prey before the hunt. This list of accomplishments sounded very impressive. But you,' it continued, seizing his arm and effortlessly dragging him to head height, 'you seem barely worth the effort. Slow, clumsy. You couldn't even take the ring

convincingly.’

Even with the distortion Caleb recognised the voice.

‘Harrow?’ he whispered.

‘Lord Harrow,’ was the response, as the creature tossed him aside. ‘The Red Knight, the Lord of the Honoured, the Weaver of Legends. The greatest hunter of my line. Once upon a time.’

Caleb rolled on his shoulder this time, rising awkwardly, his hands rummaging through his overcoat for a weapon. His fingers fastened around a cold metal disc.

Harrow closed on him, hydraulic sinews propelling him forward.

‘Sadly, I am now too old to hunt with the newbloods,’ he sighed. ‘That is my children’s duty and privilege. I am reduced to luring greedy rats into traps.’

‘Some rats bite,’ Caleb replied, sweeping his coat aside and brandishing the metal disc.

‘A pocket watch?’

‘Yeah,’ Caleb said, his gaze falling to his palm. ‘That might have sounded better if I had something a little more intimidating.’

‘You choose to mock me. Do you think that is wise?’

‘No,’ Caleb continued, his thumb sliding over the watch’s stem. ‘It’s actually part of a plan. Well, a sort of plan. Maybe.’

‘You’re babbling. And I am now bored.’

Harrow surged forwards, his massive frame moving with terrifying speed. Caleb stood unmoved as talons were raised to deliver the deathblow. At the last moment he clicked the stem to the side, hurling the watch at the monster’s face as he threw his arms over his head. Even with his eyes shielded he felt the blast burn into his retinas, the photon flash grenade flooding the chamber for a few scant moments with the light of a star.

Harrow screamed but Caleb was already running. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw the monster clawing at its faceplate. At such close range the blast should have burned out most of the sensors, but the armour was beyond anything Caleb had ever seen. He had no idea how long the effect would last. He needed a weapon.

He turned, sprinting down the aisle, taking a left then right and slipping behind a display. There he squatted amongst malformed bone and flayed

skin, his gaze hunting the relics for something that could penetrate Harrow's armour. Before him stood a winged statue, surrounded by the remains of a dozen victims. Behind it a painting depicting returning heroes clad in the livery of House Harrow ascending from the underhive back to the peaks of the Spire, their armour bedecked with trophies. Beside it a row of glass tanks displayed severed heads preserved in sickly green fluid. The furthest had begun to show signs of decay, but those in the nearer tanks were almost lifelike, and the closest was more than a little familiar. Caleb had wondered why Kreep had not recruited One-eyed Tippet for the heist. He now knew the answer: Tippet had already been recruited, he just hadn't been very successful.

There came a hiss, followed by a sudden onrush of dark microfilaments, like spider silk. Caleb was already moving but the blast caught his sleeve, pinning it to the wall.

'So you do have a few tricks.'

The voice was no longer distorted. Caleb turned his head and saw Harrow approaching, arm outstretched, the wrist-mounted webgun trained on him. His helmet had been discarded and the old man's sallow skin seemed out of place amongst the nest of wires and cables, as though his head had been severed and mounted on some cybernetic monstrosity. Emerald fumes roses from the respirator situated just below his jaw, but his breath was still laboured.

'It would seem you have earned a spot beside the other thieves,' he smiled, nodding to the parade of heads. 'I must confess to an overreliance on sensors and targeting systems. Thank you for helping me address my weakness.'

He raised his taloned hand, the weapon poised to unleash a second blast, but as he moved Caleb slipped free from his overcoat, ducking through the display. He felt something sail over his head, tearing out hair by the roots, but he kept moving. Iktomi's body lay just ahead. She must have something on her besides that hunting knife. Without his helmet, one shot between Harrow's eyes could finish it.

He was a few yards away when the blast caught his legs. He staggered, tumbling forwards but never quite reaching the ground as the web constricted, suspending him in place. He was still scant feet from Iktomi. He stretched his hand as far as he could, but she remained out of reach.

‘Our hunt is at an end.’

He heard Harrow approach this time, the wheeze of his breath and click of metal on stone. The old man strode into view, bending down beside Caleb.

‘Something of an anticlimax,’ he sighed, his expression sour. ‘Still, you weren’t the worst I’ve faced. I suppose I should take some solace in that. Are you ready to claim your prize, thief? Are you ready to die at the “Hand of Harrow”?’

His face was inches from Caleb’s own, framed by the emerald fumes wafting from the respirator. The smell was familiar, a cocktail of stimulants and combat drugs. Caleb breathed deeply and felt his own heart pounding as a red haze descended on the edge of his thoughts. The fumes seemed to emanate from a thin glass canister plugged into a side housing. It looked like a recent addition to the armour.

‘Any last words before I add your head to my display? If you can think of something memorable I may add it to the plaque.’

‘You need to do your research more thoroughly,’ Caleb replied, keeping his voice steady. ‘That bio was a pack of lies. The Beast of Sumptown, killing Bonesnapper – I never did any of that. I’m honestly not that much of a killer, I don’t quite have the stomach for it. I’m more about misdirection and distraction to be honest – she always delivered the killing blow.’

‘Your dog?’ Harrow smiled. ‘How did that turn out?’

‘Were you part of the Blood River Massacre?’ Caleb continued, ignoring him. ‘I just stumbled across it. She had survived for days. Even fell in a spider nest and somehow crawled out again. Never seen anyone with that many bites. She was comatose for a week. I didn’t think she’d pull through. Were you there that day? Did you make the river run red? Did you exterminate her people?’

‘You’d need to be more specific. I’ve slaughtered a lot of vermin in my time.’

‘They have markings around the eyes. Like scars.’

He nodded to Iktomi’s body. Harrow tilted his head a fraction, staring down at her prone form.

Caleb’s hand snaked out, tearing the canister from Harrow’s face. It tumbled to the stone, smashing and engulfing the three of them in a

noxious cloud. Caleb held his breath but still felt as though his blood were bursting through his veins. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. He glanced at Harrow; the old man was shaking, each breath a jagged rasp. His eyes had haemorrhaged, the whites stained scarlet, the pupils pinpricks. He swayed, almost falling, but the stabilisers in his armour held him on his feet.

His face snapped back to Caleb, eyes twitching, teeth bared. He made a sound, a guttural roar that might have contained words, and raised his taloned hand for the final time.

Iktomi burst through the cloud, screaming through blood-flecked lips, burying her blade in Harrow's eye socket.

He shuddered, teeth still bared, claw still poised. For a moment it looked as though he would somehow deliver the deathblow. Then his head bowed, his eyes rolling back in his head, his armour still.

Iktomi stood heaving, her lips tinged blue, her eyes bloody. Both hands were clasped around the handle of her blade, which was still lodged in Harrow's skull. From what Caleb could tell this was the only thing keeping her upright.

'Emperor's breath,' he whispered. 'How are you still alive?'

She swayed, glancing across at him.

'S-spider venom,' she stuttered. 'Y-you get used to it. It just took a moment.'

She lost her grip on the knife, falling to her knees.

'Hey, stay with me,' Caleb said, reaching awkwardly for her shoulder, his feet still webbed to the floor. 'We have to get out. Check his suit for a solvent or something. He must have a way of unsticking his victims.'

She nodded but didn't reply.

'Iktomi?'

'Not yet,' she said, her eyes fixed on Lord Harrow's armoured gauntlet. 'Not empty-handed.'

Kreep's office was fitted with a range of surveillance equipment. It gave enough warning for him to dive behind the desk before his door exploded, spraying the room with shrapnel. He was rising, his hand snaking into his longcoat when he felt the blade press against his throat. Fingers grasped him by the ear, dragging him to his feet.

‘Hello, Kreep,’ Caleb said, emerging from the smoke, a sack slung over his shoulder. ‘I bumped into One-eyed Tippet.’

Kreep opened his mouth to speak but Iktomi hushed him with a slight twist of the knife, a bead of blood pooling on its tip.

‘So, we had a difficult few days,’ Caleb continued, perching on the blackened desk. ‘It turns out that the Hand of Harrow wasn’t so much an artefact as an opportunity to be flayed alive or decapitated by a geriatric psychopath in an armoured battle-suit. The whole thing has left my colleague and I at something of an impasse. We cannot decide whether you sent us to our deaths deliberately or you were just so damned greedy you failed to spot some very clear signs. Mr Tippet’s disappearance for one thing.’

‘Please,’ Kreeep whispered, ‘I had no idea there—’

‘See, I knew there had to be a misunderstanding,’ Caleb grinned, slapping Kreeep’s shoulder. ‘Just pay us our fee and we will say no more.’

‘Fee?’ Kreeep said with a gulp. ‘But you said there was no artefact.’

Caleb reached into the sack, retrieving a bloodstained gauntlet and slamming it on the desk. Half an arm was still attached to it.

‘The Hand of Harrow,’ he proclaimed. ‘Now where’s our money?’