

# CITY OF BLOOD

*Matt Smith*

*Matt Smith makes his first foray into Inferno! as no stranger to the dark parts of the Underhive. Matt's enviable ability to create a richly detailed backdrop to his stories combines with his fast-flowing action and produces a tale of a mysterious outbreak that will have you on the edge of your seat.*

The barmaid just took a shotgun to a man's guts. The smell of blood soon mixed with the damp in the air. The bar's patrons jumped and turned to check that no one was pointing a weapon at them then went back to their drinks. They had been startled, but not surprised. The victim's friends drew weapons of their own but were swiftly set upon by a pair of gene-bulked bouncers who had rushed in from the entrance and beat them to the ground.

Jesca watched all this through the half-light of flickering lumen globes hanging from the low ceiling. She sat in the darkness at the back of the room drinking something that tasted like dirty water and fermented cado root. More bodies, drunks and mutants, piled into the brawl and isolated fights broke out seemingly spontaneously around her as more patrons took the opportunity to settle their own petty grievances. The room was soon filled with a cacophony of shouts and the dull thudding of fists against flesh. Jesca pressed herself back into the shadows and willed herself to be invisible but it was already too late for that.

There was a man at the bar. He was tall, broad-shouldered, healthy. No average underhiver for sure. He wore leather armour and carried mismatched autopistols holstered on each thigh. A mercenary maybe, Jesca thought, but something didn't fit. He sat too straight and his hair was shaved too neatly, short at the sides and flat on top – a military cut. He'd seen her too. He tried to be subtle about it but she had noticed. His eyes flicked all around the room but always back to her. Who was he? Did he live here? She hadn't seen him here before, and was that sunburn on the end of his nose? That was wrong, very wrong. Definitely an outsider, but then who had sent him?

Should she run? No, she had been down here too long to get sloppy now. How long had it even been? Too long already, and if she wanted to get out she had to stick to the plan. Wait for the signal.

‘Here you are, lady,’ the barmaid appeared through the crowd, shotgun casually resting against her shoulder, and set down a glass of murky red-brown liquid.

‘What is this?’ Jesca asked. She sneered as she held the glass up to inspect it.

‘We call it a slick shiv. Seems you have an admirer. Enjoy.’

This was the signal and not a moment too soon. Shiv was a code word she had agreed with her contact. It confirmed the location of their meeting. She looked back towards the suspicious man but he had moved. Jesca’s eyes flicked through the crowd until they caught sight of him again.

A part of her had known this would happen but she had hoped that part was wrong. She couldn’t hide. Now was the time to run. She could try to slip out before he reached her. That way she’d get out of the bar but he would soon realise she was gone and pursue her. If she wanted to get away cleanly she would have to confront him. She watched as he approached. He prowled like a hunting cat, taking an indirect route towards her. Jesca gulped down her newly acquired drink and watched him in her periphery. The outsider slipped through the crowd until he emerged beside her, pistol drawn.

‘Come with me,’ he said as he closed in.

Jesca finished the last sip of her drink then threw the glass into the side of his face. He fired blindly but Jesca was moving. As she stood up the solid slugs sent her stool skittering across the floor. She rolled, closing the distance, drawing her laspistol. She came up as her attacker recovered. He grabbed her wrist and sent her first shot through the ceiling. He adjusted his aim but Jesca stepped close, wrapping his arm under hers, and drove her knee into his groin. The attacker wheezed and doubled over. Jesca wrenched her hand free and placed her pistol against his temple. She fired. The outsider slumped to the ground. Jesca put two more shots in his chest to be sure. She kept the weapon in hand as she made her exit.

Obergard Secundus had been built on top of an ancient subterranean transit network. It had long since fallen out of use and had become home to the lowest of society. Jesca had been hiding out in Scavtown, a large

shanty town of plywood and corrugated metal that had grown up around an old maintenance depot. In the claustrophobic maze of uneven corridors it would be easy to get lost, but Jesca had used her time trapped here well. She knew where she was going. She turned right and set off at a brisk walk, holstering her laspistol. The air was humid and oppressive and the ground was slick. Water that had fallen from the sky hundreds of years ago found its way down here eventually and seeped into the structures, riddling them with black mould and rust. She turned right at a junction and passed a vendor with a rotting wooden stall, selling charred vermin on sticks. The scent of burnt meat stuck in her throat and she spat, trying to clear it. She turned and climbed a ramp that creaked beneath her. She had to go north and up several levels to reach the meeting point. It was a long way and she had to avoid the prowling gangs if she was going to get there on time. This route was quiet – the sounds of bustling crowds, gunfire and screaming were muffled and distant below. She pushed on, ducking into the shadows at the sound of footsteps ahead, but it was just a pair of drunk gang serfs. Jesca let them pass.

She found a ladder up to another level. At the top she went left then turned right and stopped. Someone was waiting for her. He had the look of the man in the bar, the same strong posture and haircut, but he was taller and broader across the chest. In addition to his leathers he wore a flak armour chest piece and carried a lasgun across his body.

‘Damn,’ she cursed and started to backtrack. The man followed.

‘Escape and evade,’ she mumbled to herself. A mantra she lived by. She turned away and sped up as she rounded the corner. Another outsider was ahead, a woman this time, clad like the men, lascarbine in hand. Jesca’s heart began to hammer – she was exposed. She turned back and tried to discern a new route, mind racing. There was still a way through. She passed the ladder and cut left again. Her heart sank. It was blocked. A piece of scaffolding had bent, dragging the wall in and blocking her path. She had come this way to the bar not an hour earlier. It had not been this way then. She turned back again but the outsiders stood barring her way. Jesca heard footsteps approaching from behind them. Something growled. The outsiders pressed their backs to the wall, allowing Jesca to see beyond. Deep red eyes stared back at her. A quadruped with a hide of burnished silver, a cyber mastiff. It prowled towards her, head held low,

teeth bared. A step behind the mastiff was its master.

He was tall and gaunt. He wore a long black stormcoat, riding boots and a brass breastplate embossed with the Imperial aquila. His right eye was gone, the socket sealed shut by an ugly scar he made no attempt to hide, and the right sleeve of his jacket was pinned up at the shoulder. His hair was white and his remaining eye was a steel blue. He walked with a pronounced limp to his right leg and on his belt were a string of grenades, of both conventional and esoteric designs.

‘Private Veil,’ the newcomer said, his voice filled with righteous authority and no small amount of threat. ‘I am—’

Jesca interrupted. ‘I know who you are, Timur.’ She also knew what him being here meant. She wasn’t going to be able to talk her way out of this. She’d have to improvise. She took a deep calming breath and stood up straight, proud, fearless.

‘That’s Commissar Iovac to you, deserter.’

‘Right, right – hero of the Cecillian Crusade under whose gaze no assault ever wavered and for whom each man would fight with the strength of ten,’ Jesca said with mocking gravitas.

‘You ought to be showing more respect,’ a female outsider spat, taking a step forward and jabbing her weapon towards Jesca.

Oh, this one has a temper, Jesca thought.

The commissar held up a hand for quiet. ‘If you know who I am then—’

‘Speaking of gaze, is that why you spend your days rounding up strays now? Did one side of your assaults start becoming wildly unreliable?’ Jesca said, gesturing to the area the commissar’s right eye had once filled. Iovac didn’t rise to the bait but Jesca took pleasure in the subtle tightening of his jaw. Iovac stepped closer so he could look down on her. When he spoke his voice was calm and clinical.

‘I capture and execute deserters because I am good at it. I have spent my entire life watching for the signs of cowardice in fighting men. I can see into a man’s soul. I know what he will do. I know where he will run. That is how you have come to be trapped here and why I have let none escape the Emperor’s justice.’

Jesca paused and considered his words. ‘Did you know I was going to kill your man in the bar?’ she asked. ‘It wasn’t even difficult. Who are these whelps?’

The woman took another step towards Jesca. '101st Kothek Fusiliers, designated S Company.'

'Kothek?' Jesca said. 'Aren't you the ones who fled from the archenemy on Delvin's World?'

The female guardsman snarled and took another step forward. She was close now. She made to open her mouth but Iovac cut her off.

'I am done listening. If you know who I am then you know that this is over.'

'Do it then, or will you have your thugs kill me for you?'

'I take pride in sending cowards to the Emperor's judgement personally.' He paused. 'However, it need not come to that yet. You may still come with me quietly and return to the crusade.'

'Don't play me for a fool. You're not going to let me live.'

'Of course not. You are a deserter. The only future left to you is death and damnation. But I would much prefer a court martial and a public execution over an anonymous death in this hole. It is much better for morale.'

'And why would I do what you would prefer?'

Iovac bowed forward, bringing his eyes in line with hers. 'If you surrender yourself to my custody I will see that your body is burned to ash. If you do not, I will take your head as proof of my work and leave the rest of you here for the vermin and the cannibals.'

Jesca looked down and let her body sag, allowing herself to appear broken, defeated. When she looked up, she forced a smile. 'How can I refuse?'

Iovac straightened up. 'Good, now hand me your weapon.'

Jesca reached for her laspistol and both soldiers trained their weapons on her. She removed the pistol slowly between her thumb and index finger and handed it to Iovac.

'Good,' Iovac said and turned away. 'Restrain her.'

The male trooper stepped forward, withdrawing a pair of manacles. He grabbed her wrist roughly and pulled it behind her back.

Jesca looked the other in the eye. 'Your comrade, the one I killed. What was his name?'

'Shut your mouth,' she spat.

'You disdain me for cowardice. He would have disappointed you. Before I pulled the trigger, he begged for his life,' Jesca lied.

‘I said shut your mouth,’ the soldier said and stepped forward, aiming her carbine at Jesca’s head.

Close enough, Jesca thought, and attacked. She threw her head back. Her skull collided with the man’s mouth behind her. Simultaneously her foot came up and kicked the carbine from the female soldier’s hands. The restraining soldier still held her wrist. Jesca used her free arm to elbow him in the temple and he staggered against the wall. The mastiff was barking.

‘Restraining her!’ Iovac ordered again. The female soldier made to tackle her but Jesca threw her aside, sending her barrelling into her fellow as he tried to recover. She made for Iovac but the mastiff stepped between them, steel teeth bared. Jesca dived over it as it lunged at her. As she rolled to her feet she threw herself at Iovac. They fell back against the wall, which buckled under the impact. Jesca grabbed one of the grenades from his belt then shoved herself away and ran. Behind her the commissar spoke two words.

‘Hound. Retrieve.’

She heard its footsteps first, the rapid cadence of a quadruped. Its bark filled the air, artificial and malicious. Jesca was fast. She was yet to meet a human she could not outrun, but even with the adrenaline coursing through her she knew she could never outrun the mastiff. She couldn’t fight it either, not unarmed. She looked at the grenade she had taken from Iovac. It was translucent silver and sparked inside with crackling blue energy. She could use it now, but such a thing was valuable and may better serve her later. She strapped it to her own belt. She may yet escape on her strengths alone. She thought of hiding, but even in the darkness she knew the mastiff could see her clear as day, hear her breath, smell the sweat on her skin. Its footsteps grew louder. Its bark grew closer. Her heart pounded in her chest. She needed a plan. She scanned her mental map of the area. There was a chance. She just had to get there. A whole tower had collapsed recently during the escalation of hostilities between the Bone Grinders and the Reaping Dragons, leaving a jagged hole running through Scavtown’s structure like a badly cored fruit. Jesca would be able to navigate it in a way the mastiff could not. That was her way out. Breaking left, she dropped down through a rust-eaten hole in the floor. She listened for the clang of pursuit. It came four seconds later as the mastiff dropped behind

her. Too close. Snapping could be heard now too – its jaws biting at the air in anticipation. She cut right. Nearly there. She could hear the servos in its legs whirring. Its jaws snapped shut around a loose strap on her empty holster. Mercifully, it tore free. She cut right. Here.

The narrow walkways opened up into a wide clearing. It was a mess of bent and broken piping where the structural supports had given way. Large rough-edged metal sheets had fallen and got jammed at awkward angles. The whole area was pockmarked with las-burns and bullet holes. She only had a second to assess it but she saw what she needed. A thick strut jammed into both sides of the hole. She could reach it, just.

‘Emperor grant me strength,’ she prayed, willing life into her tiring legs. She hit the edge of the opening and jumped. Her hands wrapped around the beam and her momentum carried her forward. She swung her hips and let go, sailing through the air. She hit the far side between levels, the impact knocking the wind out of her. She started to slide back. She scrambled for purchase but found none. She looked down at the jagged shards below and saw the mastiff leap after her. It ignored the fallen scaffolding. It ignored the deadly drop below. It leapt at her fearlessly, its powerful hind legs launching it towards its quarry. Jesca felt something rip and she stopped. The sleeve of her bodyglove had snagged on the sheared edge of the floor. The mastiff was almost on her, teeth bared. She could have laughed at her fate – to be saved from falling only to be killed by the beast.

A shot rang out. It was painfully loud and reverberated around her. Sparks burst from the mastiff’s hide and it lost its momentum. It fell away, mouth snapping at her, short by inches. Jesca watched it drop and exhaled but she wasn’t safe yet. She looked up to begin climbing and saw him.

Standing over her was a giant. At first, Jesca thought it was an ogryn but the figure wasn’t quite *that* big. Although far from handsome, his bald head showed none of the abhumans’ deformity, except that the left side of his face had at some point been severely burned.

‘You were supposed to be the one finding me,’ the giant said.

Jesca frowned, then realisation dawned on her. ‘Heizer?’

The giant nodded. ‘Veil. You gonna get yourself up here or do I have to?’

Jesca growled. With a groan of exertion she regained her grip on the ledge and pulled herself up. At the top she got to her feet and eyed the giant. He was wearing a black fatigue jacket, though the stitching looked

strange, like it was being worn inside out, and its arms had been torn off. She could see that burns covered his left arm too. She also noted the heavy revolver, cross-holstered at his left hip, and wondered how anyone could fire such a thing without blowing their own arm off.

‘How’d you like the drink?’ he asked.

‘The underhive sunrise?’

‘Don’t play games with me. The slick shiv.’

‘It was disgusting.’

The brute laughed. ‘Yeah, I like tricking people into drinking those.’

‘Well, thank you. I must say, you’re not quite what I was expecting.’

‘I get that a lot. No time to talk now though – those off-worlders are still following you.’

‘How did you–’

‘Nothing happens down here that I don’t know about. Ain’t that why you sought me out?’

‘I sought you out because I need to get off this planet. Can you make that happen?’

Heizer nodded. ‘Yeah. Plan’s already in place but it’s time-sensitive so let’s move.’

He led them away in silence. Jesca stayed a step behind, watching him. He walked with a hunched back and a heavy stride. His breathing was laboured and he kept scratching the burns on his cheek and neck. He led them east. Progress was slow and cautious.

‘Where are we going?’ Jesca asked.

‘Quiet. We’re not safe yet.’

The further Heizer led her the more uncomfortable Jesca became. She had formed her own backup plans in case this deal didn’t pan out. Heizer’s scheme may have worked but she couldn’t leave it to chance. That was why she had tracked down the smuggler. With every turn they made Jesca tried to discern his plan but nothing she could think of made sense. She didn’t work well with others. She liked to be alone and independent. Ceding control to anyone, especially a stranger, made her uneasy. He led them up through level after level until Jesca could start to make out stalactites above them through holes in the roof of the shanty structure. Eventually they came out on a rooftop, tucked away where the rest of the slum still rose around it. They were close to the cave wall, north of the

main transit tunnel. Extending out from the stone was a pipe large enough to walk through. Heizer stopped and turned to her.

‘We should be clear now. So, you got what we agreed?’

‘You want to do this now?’

‘We ain’t going any further without it.’

Jesca reached back and removed a small case that was strapped to the small of her back.

‘Of course,’ she said and placed her thumb on a small silver panel. The case flipped open and Jesca turned it in her hand so Heizer could see its contents – a small brass sphere. ‘You can place this into a decent cogitator and it will grant access to major shipping accounts belonging to the Draycons, the Obergards, and the Tuls. If you’re smart you can skim credits off them forever without ever being noticed. Or you could just sell it.’

Heizer snarled. ‘You said three houses. The Tuls are nobodies. No deal,’ he said.

‘What I’m offering you, even for a single house, is a fortune. Are you really going to let this kind of information on the Draycons and Obergards slip by because you’re not interested in the Tuls?’

Heizer paused for a second. ‘Fine, but this had better not set the tone for our business relationship. I don’t like being played,’ he grunted. ‘Hand it over.’

Jesca snapped the case closed. ‘Neither do I. This seal is bonded to my life signs. I die, it stays closed. It’ll be yours once I am safely on my way off-world.’

‘How do I know you’re not lying?’

Jesca met his eyes and shrugged. ‘You don’t.’

Heizer snorted. ‘Not good enough. You need me, I don’t need you.’

‘I think you do. I know your kind. You think you’re three steps ahead of everyone, always looking to the next score. You do well but you still need investors. You owe people, impatient people, and I’m paying too well for you to let it slip by. Opportunities like this don’t arise every day. Why else would you come looking for me?’

Heizer scratched his neck. He reached into a pocket in his trousers, then to his mouth. Jesca saw a speck of something white, a pill of some kind.

‘Well, ain’t you smart,’ Heizer said begrudgingly. ‘Come on. This way.’

He turned.

‘Not yet. I want to know your plan.’

‘Fine,’ Heizer said and turned back. Jesca glared at him until he continued. ‘We’re going to walk out along Access Road Alpha Forty-Seven.’

Jesca’s jaw almost dropped and she rolled her eyes. ‘Are you insane? Alpha Forty-Seven is sealed, caved in.’

Heizer stomped back to her. ‘Do you think I’m stupid, girl?’ he spat, his face inches from hers.

‘If you think intimidating me is going to work, well, I’m waiting for you to change my mind.’

Heizer growled and took a step back. ‘They’ve been clearing the blockage for weeks. An hour ago they got through.’

‘Then what am I paying you for?’ She laughed. ‘I’ll walk myself out.’ She turned to walk away.

‘Not so fast.’

A hand engulfed her forearm. Her eyes traced the scarred tree-trunk arm until they met Heizer’s. ‘Let. Go,’ she said, sternly enunciating each word. Heizer didn’t respond immediately. Jesca could tell he wanted to oppose her. Her glare dared him to do so. Then his grip relaxed and his arm fell to his side.

‘It’s not that easy. You even know why they were clearing it?’

A memory flashed through Jesca’s mind that sent a chill down her spine. ‘I have an idea,’ she replied.

‘Does it involve flesh-eating monsters?’

‘They’re calling them the Afflicted.’

Heizer laughed. ‘No such thing. Some snot-nosed spire-born and his friends come down here thinking they’re gonna hunt underhivers for sport. Run into someone they can’t handle. Probably one of the House Sang gangs. Whoever it was made an example outta them. When the kids don’t come back the families send the enforcers down here to find ’em. All they find are ragged bones. One story leads to another and suddenly there’s flesh-eating monsters down here.’

‘You don’t believe it?’

‘I believe what I see and I see everything, but I ain’t seen no cannibal monsters. Now though, the roads are open, so the Obergard Militia can

move in. Governor Elspin's been pressuring Lord Obergard to get the situation dealt with so Obergard's ordered a purge. They're going to sweep through this whole place and wipe the so-called Afflicted out. That's their plan anyway.'

'You don't think it's going to work,' she said.

'No. If Obergard thinks he can roll troops through here and clear the place out he's as moronic as he is obese. They're not gonna find any monsters and the gangs are going to get riled up. Trust me, soon this whole place is going to become a war zone. Besides, Alpha Forty-Seven leads out of Amstar and because you got yourself tailed we're running late. The militia have already taken the main accessways. That's why we're here.'

'Where is here anyway?' Jesca asked.

'An old maintenance tunnel, I think,' said Heizer as they walked in. Jesca followed.

Heizer started to scramble over the ledge into the tunnel. Jesca gracefully hopped up in a single movement and waited.

'When we get inside let me do the talking,' Heizer said as he got to his feet. 'These maintenance ways belong to the Tunnel Runners.'

'And?' Jesca asked.

'And we're not getting along right now.'

'Maybe I should do the talking then.'

Heizer shook his head. 'They may be mad at me but at least they know me. They really don't like strangers.'

'Alright then. So what did you do anyway?'

'Why do you think I did anything?'

'I've known you almost an hour now and you've pissed me off twice already. I expect it's an effect you have on people.'

'Well, it ain't your business, but what I've learned about you is we're not gonna get anything done if I don't spell everything out for you so here goes. The Tunnel Runners help me move product, out of sight of the big gangs. They're not house affiliated so they just take a cut of the profits. Everyone's happy.'

'Except they're not.'

'Last job didn't go well. The Runners got a bunch of my stock stolen. They seemed to think I'd pay 'em for what they didn't lose. I said what they lost was their cut. Things were said. People got shot. They've been

real quiet ever since.’

‘Maybe we should go through without them seeing us.’

‘Nuh-uh.’ Heizer shook his head. ‘They know every inch of their turf. They’ll find us one way or another and if we look like we’re hiding that’ll just piss ’em off.’

‘So what happens when they find us?’

‘If we’re lucky they’re open to patching things up.’

‘And what really happens?’ Jesca asked sarcastically.

‘They’re not.’

Scavtown faded behind them. The tunnel rose steadily, occasionally flattening out and regularly turning back on itself. It got too dark for even Jesca’s well-adjusted eyes to see. A light reached out from beside her. Heizer was holding what looked like an Astra Militarum lamp pack. Its light was weak and flickering, but it was enough to see what they were doing. Occasionally they passed narrow side burrows or ladders leading to other levels that they had to step around. Heizer stopped and placed a hand on Jesca’s shoulder. She shrugged him off but stopped nonetheless.

‘Here we go,’ said Heizer. He shone the lamp pack further ahead and Jesca could make out mounds of stacked rubble.

‘Hey!’ Heizer called out. ‘Anyone up there? Skeechee? Parrow? It’s Heizer, I’m here to talk. Don’t shoot me.’ He looked down at Jesca. ‘Or my friend,’ he added.

There was no reply. Heizer went on anyway. Jesca followed. The lamp pack flicked off for three long seconds before the light returned. Heizer shook it with frustration, sending the light dancing around the walls. Everything was coated in a thin layer of pale rubble-dust.

‘Piece of junk,’ Heizer growled. They reached the mounds. Jesca expected to be staring down the barrel of a gun. She wasn’t. In fact, she couldn’t see anyone, or even hear them. Heizer was expecting people, so where were they? She listened and heard nothing but there was a smell, a familiar one. Her heartbeat quickened. Her head darted around. She saw a flash of something dark streak through the pale dust. The light went out again. All she could hear was Heizer pounding the lamp pack into his palm.

‘Lousy piece of—’

She heard glass break. Heizer was stomping around, his heavy footfalls

even louder in the enclosed space.

‘Shhh,’ Jesca hissed.

‘Gimme a second.’

‘I saw something.’

‘Well, ya ain’t gonna see it again ’til we get some light so gimme a second.’ There was a burst of static that set Jesca’s teeth on edge.

‘What was that?’ Jesca asked tersely. The smell had her on edge. She wished she still had a weapon.

‘Some device I bought off a tech-scav. It says stuff in machine speak. It’s supposed to activate the old Mechanicus emergency lighting. Doesn’t do a damn thing though.’

Jesca noticed her hands were shaking. She took a deep breath to steady herself. ‘Well, it does something. It may be the lighting that’s not working. Let me see.’

‘Sure. Over here.’

Jesca followed Heizer’s voice in the darkness until she could feel his body heat beside her. His hand grasped her forearm and she flinched.

‘Relax, I’m just showing you where it is.’ He took her arm again and directed it to a point on the wall in front of her then let go. She felt something smooth and solid. It was covered in the same rubble-dust as everything else. Her hand moved down and felt cold metal. The object narrowed near the bottom. Her hands painted a picture in her mind. It was a servo-skull. She tried to lift it but it was stuck.

‘Got a knife?’ she asked.

A moment later she felt the flat of a blade touch her arm. She flinched again. She heard Heizer chuckle and fought the urge to punch him in the throat.

‘What’s got you so jumpy?’

‘I told you, I saw something,’ she said irritably, taking the knife and turning it in her hand. She prised the skull from where it had corroded into its housing.

‘I’m sure it’s nothing. Only thing in these tunnels are lousy gun smugglers and even they ain’t showing themselves.’

Jesca returned the knife and inspected the skull with her fingertips. ‘It doesn’t feel damaged. Maybe its power source has simply expired. Hold this,’ Jesca said and thrust the skull into Heizer’s sternum a little harder

than necessary. She reached in and pulled a lifeless crystal from what had once been a man's neck. It trailed a bundle of wiring that she carefully removed. The crystal came free and Jesca unceremoniously discarded the failed energy source into the darkness. She then removed a power pack for her laspistol from a pouch on her belt. It would have been fiddly work even in the light but eventually she had wired the pack into the skull.

'It's not ideal but let's give it a try,' she said.

There was another burst of static that made Jesca wince. Nothing happened.

'So much for that,' said Heizer.

'Give it a moment.'

The servo-skull started to hum, its repulsion plate lighting up. It hovered up out of Heizer's hand. A dull white light speared from its left eye socket. It was weak and narrow but in the new light Jesca could see what had caught her eye. The dusty stone walls were streaked deep red. That familiar smell – blood.

'Look at this,' she said.

'Don't worry about it,' Heizer replied.

'Heizer, it's blood.'

'So the Tunnel Runners got in a fight. Explains why they're not here. We should go.'

For the first time Jesca heard something in his voice. Something like fear. She looked round to see Heizer walking away, silhouetted by the servo-skull's dull light. She jogged to catch up with him. The tunnel wound on. They passed another area that looked like it had once been inhabited, mouldy sheets and empty food cans strewn around. More streaked blood. Heizer kept his eyes forward, never looking around or breaking stride. Jesca's heart felt like it was trying to beat its way out of her chest. Every muscle was tense. She fought constantly to control her breathing. The effort was starting to wear on her. Then the scratching started.

It was quiet and irregular but seemed to come from all around. Jesca's head darted about impulsively but all she could see in any direction was Heizer's impassive face.

'Do you hear that?' she asked him.

'Yeah,' he replied, still looking forward.

Jesca paused, waiting for him to continue. When he didn't she pushed the

matter. ‘Well? What is it?’

‘Nothing, maybe rats.’

‘That doesn’t sound like any rats I’ve heard. You must have big rats down here.’

‘Yeah, but that’s not it. The acoustics down here are strange. Whatever is making that noise is further away than it sounds.’

Jesca wasn’t convinced. She trusted her own senses far more than she did this smuggler’s. She had no reason yet to trust him any further than she knew her payment would take her. Just because he wasn’t going to shoot her himself didn’t mean he wouldn’t get her killed through incompetence. Jesca had long since learned to be wary of men who believed themselves infallible. The scratching rose and fell as they went. At times, it was punctuated by hisses and snarls or whimpers of pain. Jesca started at each new sound but Heizer just kept looking ahead. The scratching grew louder. Jesca waited for it to quieten again but it grew louder still. A new sound joined the confusing cacophony. A rapid tapping.

‘It’s just our feet echoing,’ said Heizer.

‘No, it’s faster and if it was us why are we only hearing it now?’

‘It’s nothing,’ Heizer insisted, his voice betraying his growing aggravation.

‘It’s something, Heizer, not rats, not us. What are you not telling me?’

The sounds shifted. They were no longer coming from everywhere. They were behind them. Jesca knew what the sounds were. Part of her had known the entire time. She suspected Heizer had too. It was what had brought fear to his voice, such fear that he had gone into denial. Jesca snatched the servo-skull from the air and turned it to face behind them. She didn’t want to see what was there but she knew she had to.

Two creatures were running towards them. In form they were human, clad in mismatched armour over ragged clothing. Their foreheads were distended and swollen. Blood coated their faces. Crimson streams had dried below their ears and painfully bloodshot eyes. Their flesh was pale and thin, displaying intricate webs of purple and black. Where the veins clustered most densely the skin was marked with sore dry growths. Their hands and mouths were wet and glistening. They were fast. By the time Jesca could brace for a fight the first had hit her and barrelled her to the ground. Her back and shoulders scraped against the floor.

‘Throne,’ she cried out involuntarily.

Lashing out into the darkness, Jesca grabbed the monster by the throat. She held its snapping jaws back inches from her face. It sprayed her with bloody spittle. Its breath smelled of death. She spared a look at Heizer but saw nothing. The servo-skull hovered between them. Unable to illuminate them both at once it snapped back and forth in its attempts to compensate but only served to surround them with a disorienting strobe effect. Jesca elbowed her attacker in the head over and over. She felt its eye socket shatter but it paid no heed, still desperately pressing down on her, teeth snapping for her face. It lashed at her with a sharp-nailed hand. Jesca caught the arm and pulled as she pushed away with the other hand around the creature’s throat. It lost its balance and fell beside her. It scrambled and swiped at her but Jesca was quicker. She got back to her feet and stepped away, the swing passing in front of her. It lunged again. This time she was ready. She sidestepped and kicked its legs out from under it. It fell into the tunnel wall. It cried out angrily and tried to reach back but Jesca grabbed its head. She drew it back and smashed it against the wall, again and again. With each blow its body grew more limp and slid down. Jesca continued until she was driving its face into the ground and didn’t stop until it stopped thrashing.

She caught flashes of Heizer. The second creature was on his back and he shook desperately to dislodge it. It had an arm around his neck and its teeth were trying to bite through the collar of his jacket. Jesca darted towards him. As she got close, the strobe lighting became solid once more, the servo-skull’s quandary resolved. Jesca reached up over the creature’s head and dug her fingers into its eyes. It yelped and blindly clawed at its own face. She wrenched back. It fell to the ground before her and scrambled back up to turn on her. She kicked it in the chest and it stumbled back, right into Heizer’s massive hands. He clamped them around its head like a vice and squeezed until it gave way. The body slumped heavily to the ground.

Jesca and Heizer stood staring at each other as they tried to catch their breath.

‘Those are—’ Heizer began.

‘The Afflicted,’ Jesca finished.

Heizer looked stunned. ‘I-I can’t believe they’re real. How did I not

know?’ he said. He started to scratch and hurriedly reached into his pocket again, putting a pair of pills into his mouth. ‘We should go, before any more find us.’

The scratching was still there though, the hissing, the snarling, the footsteps, close and closing.

‘They’re already here,’ Jesca said, looking back. ‘Run!’ She set off as fast as she could, sparing only a brief glance to check Heizer was following. He was fast for his size, but not as fast as her and not nearly as fast as the Afflicted. The servo-skull’s grav plates refused to carry it faster than a slow walk and it was left behind. Moments later there was a crunch of splintering bone and its light went out. Shots boomed behind Jesca, deafeningly loud. She looked back again to see Heizer firing his revolver into the darkness. The muzzle flare lent snapshots of the horrors behind. There was no telling how many were there now. They filled the width of the tunnel many times over. In the darkness, they tripped and fell and were trampled to death by those coming behind. Jesca looked ahead again. Her legs were burning. Her breath came in ragged gasps from exhaustion and fear.

‘Emperor preserve me,’ she prayed.

She saw light. The tunnel curved and a world beyond came into view. Jesca could see the sides of white-painted prefab buildings marked ‘Adeptus Mechanicus Station Tetra-Alpha-Rho, Amstar’. Looking over her shoulder she could see Heizer and the horde. They were almost on him. He wasn’t going to make it. She thought of the grenade she had taken from Iovac and was thankful she hadn’t used it earlier. She detached it from her belt and thumbed the activation rune. The arming light turned from red to green and she tossed it back. The tunnel flashed and crackled with gravitic energy. She felt herself being pulled backwards and fought against it.

‘What did you do?’ Heizer yelled.

The majority of the pursuing horde had been caught in the stasis grenade’s field. Their malnourished bodies were dragged to the ground. They crawled, reaching out and snarling with enraged incomprehension. One broke through and charged Heizer as he tried to reload. It was bigger than the others, stronger. Heizer raised his weapon but froze.

‘Skeech?’ he said.

The Afflicted hit him, knocking the revolver from his grip. Heizer was

holding it back by the shoulders while the creature tore at his arms. Heizer was grunting with pain but not fighting back. Jesca ran to them. She jumped and kicked the Afflicted. It stumbled back but recovered quickly and came at her. Heizer didn't move. Jesca grabbed his knife from its sheath. She turned back as the Afflicted lunged again and she drove the blade up under its chin. It sprayed dark blood as she withdrew it and the monster fell forward. Heizer was staring at the dead creature.

'That was Skeeched. How—'

'I can't explain now. They're not going to be held back forever. We need to keep going,' she said. She cleaned the knife on Heizer's jacket and handed it back to him. 'You're welcome,' she added.

Heizer recovered his revolver and they started running. The end of the tunnel swiftly grew as they ran. Jesca could hear footsteps chasing them again.

'How far is the drop at the end?' Jesca asked.

'About three storeys.'

'How much ammunition do you have left?'

'Not enough.'

'Then jump.' Jesca reached the tunnel mouth and leapt, only realising her mistake as she began to fall. She hit the ground hard, letting her momentum carry her down into a roll. She heard Heizer land heavily behind her.

'Emperor's chafing—' The last word was cut off by a grunt of pain.

'Heizer. Now would be a bad time to be blaspheming.'

'What?' he said. 'Oh.'

She knew he'd seen what she had, what she was still looking at. The barrels of twenty Obergard Militia lasguns.

They were clad in grey camouflage fatigues and flak armour. Their faces were hidden behind rebreather masks. Behind the lines of guardsmen were a pair of Chimeras. An officer stood up out of the turret of the one to Jesca's right. In one hand he held a laspistol, in the other a bullhorn.

'Hive scum. By the authority of Lord Obergard and Governor Elspin, you are in violation of edict 6172785.2 addendum 586, obstruction of Hive Militia forces during a sanctioned purging operation. Hand over your weapons and surrender yourselves.'

Jesca held up her hands. 'Wait,' she said. 'Up there, in that tunnel. There

are Afflicted coming through.'

The officer glanced up then back at her. 'Nonsense. Our intelligence indicates the Afflicted are only active in the lower levels. Levels you are obstructing us from reaching. Now I repeat, you are in violation of edict—'

'We surrender,' Jesca said.

'Veil?' Heizer hissed.

'Do it,' she snapped back.

'Good,' the officer said smugly. 'Corporal, take care of them.'

The nearest trooper stepped forward, weapon still raised. 'Place your hands on your heads and get down over there,' he said, pointing behind the Chimeras. 'Trooper Selvin, take their weapons and watch them.' The corporal gestured to the two of them with the barrel of his lasgun and they followed his directions. Another trooper separated from the patrol and followed.

'Hand me your weapons and get on your knees,' the following trooper ordered as they came to a halt. Even through the rebreather he sounded young and lacked authority. Heizer puffed out his chest and straightened to his full height. Jesca could tell he was thinking of something that would get them both killed. She kicked him in the shin. His head snapped down to her with a look of barely restrained anger.

'Do as he says,' Jesca said, meeting his gaze.

Reluctantly, Heizer complied, handing his revolver to the trooper who almost dropped it, surprised by its weight.

'You're all gonna die, you know,' Heizer said as he got down onto his knees. He was squirming, rubbing the side of his neck against the collar of his jacket.

The trooper scoffed. 'We are the Second Obergard Hive Militia, the Unyielding. We can handle whatever mutant wretches you have down here.'

Jesca could still see the tunnel mouth. It was sparking blue. Then it stopped. She listened, trying to ignore the rumble of the Chimeras' engines. She heard rushing steps and spitting mouths. The sounds echoed from the tunnel as if it were a serpent of nightmares.

'Here they come,' she said quietly.

The first fell from the opening and landed flat in front of the troopers. Their weapons snapped round. The Afflicted got to its feet and lunged at

the nearest soldier. It was shredded by lasfire before it could reach him. More came behind it.

‘Get weapons on that opening!’ the officer in the Chimera ordered. The next Afflicted ran straight into a hail of fire and spilled out dead. Trooper Selvin spared nervous glances away to see how his unit fared. He laughed as he turned back.

‘See. The Emperor guides our hand.’

‘I hope you’re right,’ said Jesca.

She too was watching the fighting. What she saw almost made her heart stop.

They rushed from the tunnel mouth like water streaming through a broken dam. Their momentum carried them out, legs still pumping. Most fell, others stumbled, some hit the ground running and were on the militia before they could be brought down. From where she was knelt she saw a trooper with a flamer pour fire into the horde, but the Afflicted kept coming, clothes burning, skin melting, and fell upon him. He disappeared screaming. Jesca heard his flesh tear. The militia drew back, closing ranks. Disciplined volleys had given way to desperate bursts on full auto. The enemy was so densely packed it was impossible to miss, but the Afflicted shrugged off all but the most grievous damage. The militia couldn’t hold them back.

Heizer was still itching and groaned in discomfort. He took his hands off his head, using one to scratch his neck – the other reached inside his jacket.

‘Hands where I can see them!’ Selvin barked.

If Heizer heard him he showed no sign and kept scratching and squirming, growing ever more agitated.

Selvin turned to Jesca. ‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Is he turning into one of them? Is this how it starts?’ Selvin asked, growing frantic.

‘No, I—’

‘That’s it.’ Selvin raised his weapon to his shoulder.

Jesca leapt to her feet. Selvin turned his lasgun on her but Jesca was already too close. She grabbed him around the waist and threw him. He hit the ground with a lung-emptying thud and Jesca struck him in the solar

plexus as she yanked the lasgun from his grip. The young soldier let out a mewling whine and huddled into a foetal position.

The battle raged. All form of order was gone. What had begun as a defensive line had become a dozen individual battles for survival. The Afflicted clambered onto the transports. Jesca watched as the officer on top tried to retreat inside but he was too slow and was torn kicking and screaming from the hatch. The Afflicted shredded him on top of his vehicle. More swarmed over the second Chimera. A fuel line was torn free and Jesca caught the stink of promethium. It was ignited by a spark from the Chimera's heavy bolter and engulfed the front of the vehicle in flames. More still ran from the tunnel mouth, disappearing in all directions.

'Get up, Heizer, we have to go,' Jesca said urgently, and she reclaimed Heizer's gun. He didn't respond. He had fallen onto his side and was writhing in pain – his eyes were closed and his teeth gritted. Jesca reached out and grabbed his arm. She started to pull but he was far too heavy to move. Something reached him though. His eyes flared open and he rolled to his knees. As he pushed to his feet he snatched his weapon from Jesca's hand and shoved her to the ground. Then he ran, still squirming, away down the street, not looking back.

'Emperor damn you, you ugly whoreson!' she shouted after him. She got to her feet and tried to follow but she felt something around her ankle. She kicked it away then looked down. Trooper Selvin was still huddled on the ground.

'Please, help me,' he pleaded.

Behind him the last of his unit were dead. The Afflicted poured through the flames of the burning Chimeras towards them.

'Are you not unyielding?' Jesca replied and turned away. She just had to reach the access road. Looking ahead though she saw this was no simple task.

Enforcer patrols and gangers spilled out of prefab structures and repurposed haulage towers on either side of the street. They carried the horrifically wounded and fired behind themselves. Jesca saw terror in their eyes. More Afflicted followed, tearing down fighters as they attempted to flee. With every passing moment the battle turned closer to a massacre, the Afflicted feeding gluttonously all around. She had almost lost sight of Heizer. She ran into the madness, firing controlled bursts from her lasgun.

Her eyes scanned ahead for every opening in the crowd. She slipped past desperate duels between enforcers and gangers and stepped over half-eaten corpses. She was a wraith, a ghost on the battlefield, but the openings grew fewer and tighter. She finally lost sight of Heizer. An Afflicted burst from beneath a pile of fallen bodies and grabbed her leg. She bludgeoned it with the butt of her rifle until its skull gave way. Another grabbed her from her left. She stuffed the lasgun in its mouth to keep it from biting into her shoulder. She staggered back and tripped, the monster falling on top of her. She could see more coming towards her, sensing an easy meal. She could not stop them all. She was going to die. She was going to fail.

‘Emperor forgive me,’ she breathed.

Heavy weapon fire boomed over the sounds of slaughter. The horde began to fall away. Spaces formed – between them Jesca could see her saviours, a trio of sentinels, autocannons flaring. For a fleeting moment she felt relief, then she looked down at their feet and it was dashed.

‘Jesca Veil!’

Leading the sentinels was the unmistakable figure of Commissar Iovac. He had shed his stormcoat. In his left hand was a bolt pistol. Fixed to the stump of his right arm was a clenched power fist. He was coming straight for her, flanked by his retinue.

‘You have had your chance, Veil!’ Iovac barked. An Afflicted charged him from his left. He shot it in the chest and head in quick succession, without breaking stride. ‘You have abandoned your duty as a servant of the Holy Emperor. You have deserted his blessed crusade. You assaulted an officer of the Officio Prefectus. These are crimes for which there can be no forgiveness.’

A group of gangers, led by a brute with a large industrial hammer, charged at him. While the guardsmen gunned most down in short order, Iovac struck the leader with his power fist. The ganger’s torso liquefied, his limbs splattering noisily to the ground.

‘You understand that I cannot allow you to leave. All must face justice for their crimes. As the Emperor’s voice in this darkness, I sentence you to death. May you burn for eternity, never granted His holy benediction.’ He levelled his pistol at her and fired.

Jesca was already moving. She threw one of the Afflicted aside and shot it as she scrambled back to her feet. She took in her shifting surroundings.

The Afflicted had been thinned but not stopped and the battle was drawing more of them into the street. Gangers were fighting both sides. Alpha Forty-Seven was ahead, beyond Iovac. There was no avoiding it – she had to get past him. She ran right, making for the shadows of the pre-fab towers. Bolt rounds slashed past her, their propulsion burners distinct and terrifying. A shot buried itself in a wall as she passed and detonated, spraying shards of stone into her face. She shot an Afflicted as it charged out of a tower and then something grabbed her. She twisted and rolled under the arm, bringing her lasgun up.

It was Iovac's female bodyguard. Jesca pulled the trigger but the rifle was knocked from her grip. A blade rose up towards her abdomen. She turned it aside but was immediately struck in the jaw, and her head snapped around. She turned back in time to see the knife slashing towards her throat. She let it come, struck the woman's arm above the elbow and pulled on her wrist. The joint broke. The guardswoman cried out and dropped the knife. Jesca caught it before it could hit the ground and drove it up through her enemy's throat. The Kothek woman coughed blood and fell back, the knife still embedded. An Afflicted fell on the bleeding body but slumped dead a second later, two great craters blown in its back. Iovac stood mere feet behind it.

Jesca fled. Everywhere she looked people were running in all directions. It was so loud she couldn't make sense of anything. The air reeked of blood and promethium. Jesca shoved and elbowed her way through the crowds. She stumbled over bodies, struggling to keep her footing. Every time she dared look back, Iovac was there, smashing monsters and gangers aside with his power fist, unstoppable, implacable.

'This is your fault, Veil,' he called. 'You have angered the Emperor so grievously that His rage has affected these people. Only with your death will He be appeased. Only with your death will their suffering end.'

Jesca kicked a ganger aside only for her path to be blocked by a pair of Hive Militia. They held their lasguns like quarterstaves before themselves. The first swung for her with the butt of the rifle. Jesca swayed back and raised her foot into his crotch then rammed his rifle back into his face. He fell back, relinquishing his weapon. The second adjusted his grip to fire but Jesca swung the lasgun in her hands like a club and knocked the barrel away. She stepped into a reverse swing that snapped the guard's head

around and he crumpled into a heap. She felt a wave of concussive energy blindside her. She was thrown forward, losing her grip on the lasgun, and landed on top of a dead ganger whose entrails were spilling from his torn stomach.

Iovac, he was right there behind her while she was flat on her face and unarmed. She was dead. Then she saw it. The ganger had died with a stubber in his hand. Jesca crawled over the body, shielding the weapon, and prised it from the ganger's fingers.

'Do not feign death, Veil. Meet your end with a little dignity at least,' Iovac said. 'Face me.'

There was no time to check the clip. 'Emperor save me,' Jesca whispered as she rolled. She brought the stubber up and fired. The first shot hit Iovac in the hip. The second glanced off his armour. The third dug into his shoulder. The fourth only dented his breastplate but the fifth broke through. Iovac's eyes went wide with shock. 'No,' he gasped as he fell.

The stubber was empty and Jesca tossed it aside. She pushed to her feet. Everything ached and she was slick with blood from her cheek to her knees. She looked down at Iovac. He still stared in disbelief up into the cavern ceiling. Jesca felt dizzy and her head hurt. She raised her hand to it and it came away bloody. Was it hers? She tried to focus. She had to get to Alpha Forty-Seven. What was she going to do when she got there? Damn that coward Heizer and his half-cocked plan.

Something was coming. She could hear bodies being bludgeoned and trampled. She squinted and made out a green-bodied Cargo-6, its rear covered in a dirty white canopy. It was rushing towards her. She saw an Afflicted roll over its engine house and crack the windscreen before it fell aside. She tried to move but her legs wouldn't react.

Before it hit her the truck slewed sideways and came to a halt. The door swung open. 'Get in.'

It was Heizer.

He had turned his jacket the right way to reveal camouflage matching the Hive Militia. He had a white armband stretched around his bicep, marked with the symbol of a corpsman.

'What're you waiting for?'

Jesca staggered towards the open door when a shot erupted behind her. It ricocheted off the cab and detonated, blowing a burning hole in the canopy.

Jesca glanced over her shoulder. Iovac was on his feet. He was unbalanced and his arm shook – he was struggling to hold his pistol aloft.

‘The Emperor protects me, Jesca Veil. He will not allow me to die while you still live.’

He screamed. An Afflicted with no legs had bitten into Iovac’s calf. He fell to one knee. He pressed the bolt pistol against the Afflicted’s head and blew its skull open. Another creature ran at him from behind. Its momentum bore them both to the ground as its teeth bit into the back of his neck. Another crawled out from under a pile of bodies and bit his arm. Jesca watched, frozen with horror, as he was devoured.

‘Veil! Now!’

Heizer’s voice snapped her back to reality and she turned back to board the truck. They were moving before she had shut the door. Lasfire whined past them. Jesca looked back to see the last of Iovac’s guardsmen. He was chasing them, covered in blood, and roared with fury as he fired until he was lost to the crowd.

‘Put that on,’ Heizer said, gesturing to a militia uniform jacket bundled in the footwell. He had regained his composure. The cab was strewn with medical supplies. It looked like it had been ransacked.

‘I thought you’d gone.’

‘Shut up and put it on. This is the plan. Any of that blood yours?’ Heizer asked.

Jesca put the evidence together in her mind. Heizer was an addict. What exactly he was taking she didn’t know but he couldn’t exist long without it. That made him a liability.

‘A little maybe.’

‘Well, pretend it is. Look,’ Heizer pointed ahead. Jesca peered through the cracks in the windscreen.

Access Road Alpha Forty-Seven was a long steep slope, reaching up out of the underhive into the smog-filtered light of the lower city. It had once been wide enough to accommodate heavy drilling equipment but was now strewn with heavy boulders and rubble. A space wide enough to allow trucks and Chimeras access had been cleared by enormous cranes. At the foot of the road was a platoon of Hive Militia dug into a sandbagged checkpoint. Heizer drove straight for them.

‘No, Heizer, this isn’t a plan.’

The truck came to a screeching halt.

‘What’re you doing, trooper?’ she heard someone say, but Heizer’s bulk was blocking her view.

‘What does it look like? I’m getting injured outta here.’ He pointed back at Jesca. She could see the soldier now. The pins on his collar marked him as a sergeant. ‘Do you know who that is?’ Heizer growled.

‘N-no.’

‘Idiot. That there is Major Carovenko, one of the favourite students of General Astor Sang, and if she doesn’t get to Aegis Outpost in thirty minutes she’s going to bleed to death here in my truck.’

‘Trooper—’

‘Corpsman,’ Heizer corrected him.

‘I am your superior officer, corpsman. No one hurt by the Afflicted is to leave the underhive. Now turn around. That’s an order.’

‘She didn’t get hurt by the Afflicted. Some gang scum jumped her. Now do you want to be the one to explain to General Sang that one of his best died because you stopped her getting the help she needed or should I?’

The pair locked eyes.

‘Let them through!’ the sergeant yelled,

Heizer floored it and they left the raging battle behind.

Minutes later they emerged. The lower city was dank and grey but compared to the underhive it was blinding. Jesca didn’t like it. She felt exposed and pushed herself back into her seat. Troop transports and Munitorum cargo movers rolled past them. Jesca held her breath but none of them paid the medicae truck any notice. They came up on the outskirts of the hive, a few miles from the outer walls, in a complex of tall water-processing plants. The road led into the centre of the city, further than Jesca could see. Heizer pulled them off a slip road and onto the narrow streets that wove between the plants. Jesca was looking for something to start cleaning herself with when something hit her. It smacked her head back against the seat. It took her a moment to register it as Heizer’s fist. When she snapped forward, the edge of a blade was against her throat. Heizer was still driving, only glancing over at her sparingly. She chastised herself for letting her guard down. He didn’t want her dead though, or else he wouldn’t have come back for her.

‘What do you want?’ she growled.

‘Who are you?’ said Heizer.

Jesca sighed. ‘Private Jesca Veil, former 151st Hadran Rifles. Deserter.’

‘You’re lying. The way you move. Your skills. Whatever that thing was you dropped in the tunnel. You’re no rifleman.’

‘I was a scout, recon division.’

‘Stop. You’re a bad liar and it hurts to listen to ya.’

Jesca flinched at his words. If there was one thing she prided herself on it was her ability to lie. For a moment her ego demanded she prove him wrong and she began to craft a new falsehood. Then reason took over. Trying to fight her way out was too great a risk. Getting off-world was all that mattered. The truth would serve her better than any lie now.

‘Okay, I’ll do you a deal.’

‘You’re in no position to negotiate.’

‘If I tell you the truth you’ll become a target. People will come for you.’

‘People try to kill me every day.’

‘Not like this. Make the deal and I’ll do what I can to keep them away from you,’ said Jesca.

‘I ain’t scared.’

‘Yes, you are. I saw you in the tunnel. The Afflicted terrify you and who comes for you will be worse.’

The knife moved away from her throat. ‘What’s the deal?’

‘Simple. A truth for a truth. You first.’

The truck came to a halt. Heizer turned as far as the cabin’s confines would allow.

‘What’re you taking?’ Jesca asked. ‘You’re addicted to whatever it is.’

Heizer scoffed. ‘An addict? That’s what you think? Well sure, if you call not wanting to feel like I need to rip my own skin off being addicted, then I guess that’s what I am. I take this morphodone stuff. It keeps the pain away but I’m out, that’s why I needed to get up here so bad.’ He leaned towards her, his face stern. ‘Your turn.’

Jesca sighed. ‘Jesca Veil. Servant of the Holy Ordos.’

Heizer’s jaw dropped.

‘That you believe?’ said Jesca.

‘Now you’re not lying. You’re an inquisitor?’

‘No,’ said Jesca, ‘just a servant, a spy, my master’s eyes where he is not.’

‘The Afflicted, you knew about them. You need to get off-world to report

to your master but why not just use an astropath?’

Jesca shook her head. ‘I can’t trust them with this. The affliction, it’s not natural. It was created by men.’

‘Who could create those things?’

‘Heretics. They are a weapon and this city is a testing ground. I found the perpetrators but they found me too. I managed to escape so they sent Iovac to kill me.’

Heizer shook his head, struggling to take it all in. ‘Get out,’ he said as he exited the truck. Jesca did so cautiously. Heizer went through a hole in a wire fence then climbed a spiral staircase running up the side of a vast water tank. Jesca followed. They crossed the top then climbed again to the top of a tall processing building. Around the sides were a network of thick pipes. Jesca could hear water rushing as she slid between them. In the centre was open space. Heizer turned to face her. He held out his hand.

‘Sphere,’ he said bluntly.

‘When I’m clear,’ Jesca replied.

Heizer withdrew a small device from the pocket of his trousers – it was a rectangle with a short antenna and a blinking white light. ‘I got you passage on a rogue trader’s vessel out of the system. When I press this button it’ll send a signal and he’ll send down a transport. Now pay up.’

Jesca eyed him warily as she detached the case and opened it. She offered it to Heizer. He took the sphere and weighed it in the palm of his hand. With the other hand he pressed a button on the transceiver. The blinking light became still.

‘It’s done,’ he said.

They stood in silence until a shape descended out of the smog. It was sharp and angular with narrow swept-back wings. It came in low between the buildings. Jesca and Heizer stepped back as it set down. A hatch on the side popped open.

‘It’s for you,’ said Heizer.

Jesca looked up at him then over to the lander. Without a word, she walked away. As she reached the hatch, Heizer spoke up.

‘Jesca.’

She paused and looked back to him but said nothing.

‘If you ever come back here, leave me out of it.’

Jesca stepped inside. She hoped she would never have to see this world

again.