



MATTHEW FARRER

FACES

WARHAMMER
40,000

A HARLEQUINS STORY

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Faces – Matthew Farrer](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Legal](#)

[eBook license](#)

FACES

Matthew Farrer

In the end Jann couldn't stay away, and so here she came again creeping back into the tower's red-blurred shadow, hunched over with a rusted torque-stave in her hand. The shouting, drumming storm was two days gone now, and no matter how hard Jann listened all she could hear was the soft crackle of her footsteps in the sandflake drift and her own breathing, dry and frightened. At this hour, at this angle, the depot tower was a lightless block of black against the blood of the sky behind it. No movement, no voices. Even the great metal bulk of the pipeline was inert.

The storm's trailing winds had smoothed out the ground, and the only footprints in front of the south door were Jann's own. They staggered and lurched out from the little storm-hatch and disappeared behind one of the giant pipeline buttresses, the spot where she had crouched and shivered all through the night at the mercy of strange, taunting dreams. Now the slower, softer prints stalked back out of hiding and up behind her, padding steps, trying for a stealth that she knew would make no difference. She would have to go in there and find them, all of them. She would have to show her...

...face.

She took light steps towards the hatch, holding the stave this way and that, trying to think how she could best swing it if one of them were waiting just inside. It would be dark. The only parts of the tower that were ever properly lit were the control room at the top and the living deck. For a moment that thought almost soothed her. She thought of the dark rooms and halls, dark country she had never seen, riding high and quiet over it,

and strange mountains kissed with silver light, but that image split and twisted her thoughts and her strength fled her for a moment. She moaned, softly, and craned up to the sky, but there was no white moon there to help her. There should have been a white moon. Jann had never seen a moon, not of any colour, but there should have been a white moon.

She dropped her eyes from the sky and stood swaying in the doorway for a moment. It seemed as though she were about to break through to some understanding of what was happening to her, but a blink and a breath and it was all gone like

(moonlight)

smoke through her fingers and she found herself stepping through the storm-hatch, breathing hard, trying to force her eyes to dilate, gripping the stave so hard that the corroded texture of its haft bit into her palms. She held it closer to her, like a walking-staff, and found a little comfort in that. No moon-gems, but it would do.

The engines embedded in the tower's thick foundations sent their rumbling beat through the walls. A deep beat, a walking-beat, for a slow promenade before the dance began. The implications of that thought gave her chills but her steps, already in time to the engines, began to quicken. The emergency lights shone in their little cages high on the rockcrete walls, red like blood that washed from the sky, yellow like the sparks flying up from an anvil. Jann didn't know whose thoughts these were any more.

Staring into the light, she thought she heard a movement somewhere in the dimness, but the accessway behind her was empty. Jann turned her

(or was it really her)

face inwards towards the red-lit corridors, and pressed on.

She found Gallardi in the machine-shrine, as she had expected to. He had broken the bright blue-white floodlamps that Tokuin had always kept bathing the hall, and now worked only in the same dim red emergency light that Jann had walked through. He had thrown open the maintenance shutters to the enginarium crypt below them and the machine-noise was louder here, a furnace roar. Conduits and energy sinks glowed cherry-red and added their light and heat. The air was clear, but Jann's senses brought her the faint touch of smoke.

‘Brother?’ she whispered. Gallardi was standing with his back to her, his slabs of shoulders working, his thick body swaying and folding where the fat overhung his belt. From the other side of him came the ring of metal on metal.

‘Brother?’

In the racket of the shrine, the engines below and half a dozen of Tokuin’s workshop machines running, there was no way the sound of her whisper could have reached him. But his body shivered at the murmur of her voice and he turned. Good Gallardi with his callused hands and soft voice, who’d liked to watch the sunset with her from the tower’s roof. He’d sung songs with her (but what songs? Why couldn’t she remember them?) and... and danced... under six white moons...

There was no white moon. Jann had never seen a moon. She sobbed and took a half-step forwards. She wanted her friend, so blessedly familiar. His thin legs, of which he was so self-conscious. His belly, with the old runnelled scar from the solder-splash accident years before they had met. His grizzled, shaven head and his, his...

...face.

There was a hammer in his hand, and he raised it.

‘I can’t greet you the way I want to, my beautiful little sister,’ he said. Was his mouth moving? One moment Jann thought so, and then thought not. ‘You’re welcome and safe in my home, always, you know that. But I must work.’ There was a shrieking hiss from behind him. The steelcutting press, left to run unsupervised, had overheated and was trying to shut itself down.

‘We aren’t safe, brother, either of us!’ Now she found proper voice, although her words sounded strange to her own ears, high and singsong, almost not her own. ‘It’s happening again. I heard them fighting up on the operational deck.’ Her memories seemed to float and split. The brawl between her crewmates splayed out and overlapped itself like a pict-screen trying to show half a dozen images at once. But every image horrified her. There was nothing she wanted to see. ‘He knows! He...’ She stumbled over the name. Crussman. He reared up through every one of her memories, stinking of lho-smoke and of the blood that slicked the front of his coveralls and dripped from his hand. The simple picture of him sent a

killing scream through her thoughts, and still she stumbled over his name, because couldn't she also remember...

(Crussman twisted around the edge of the driver's seat in the high, cramped little cabin of the crane-rigger, looking down at them. 'Lifts like a dream!' he shouted over the engine and the winches. 'Easy to see how beat-up it got. Who knows how far the storm threw it to get to here?' There was a huge, cheerful grin on his face. This was the best bit of storm-scrap they'd ever...)

'Crussman,' she managed to say, although somehow she thought she had mangled the word again, made it something shorter, guttural. 'He knows about... about you. He knows you're here. He knows...'

Knows what you did. Knows where we are. Knows what he has to do. Knows what has to happen. None of the answers that sprang to her mind made any sense. From somewhere around them she thought she heard footsteps, light as rushing air, and faint laughter. If Gallardi heard it too, he didn't show it. The red light shone steady from the emergency lamps but seemed to flicker on the man's

(that's not his real)

face as he hefted his hammer again and turned away. Jann followed him around the machine-shrine, stepping over Tokuin's corpse without looking down at it.

'He was too strong for me,' Gallardi said in a voice gruff with sadness, and let one hand drop to point to his leg. 'Too strong. I forged my very breath into my steel, and what did it aid me? No, no. It's done now. I've given the last one to Sabila, but that path is not mine. Bloodletting is his. His soul is there. And mine is here. Bound here.' Jann looked where his hand pointed. Her vision swam and doubled. She saw Gallardi's bare, pale foot beneath the cuff of a standard-issue rust-brown crewman's legging, and she saw a leg thick like a pillar, muscle-packed, anvil-heavy, riven and bent under the scars of the terrible wounds that Crussman had dealt when he had dragged Gallardi back here, mutilated and bereft, and picked up his chains.

Crussman had never been down here. This place had been Tokuin's. It had been sacred to him. A place where he came to work as a supplicant, a priest, where Gallardi had come as a master. Jann understood why they had fought, but she couldn't understand what she was seeing now. The dark-

skinned man with the big scarred belly was as true as all her memories, but yet she knew the limping master of the anvil as truly as she did the shining features of her own

(but is this really my)

face. She cradled her stave in one hand and reached the other out to him.

‘I ran and hid,’ she said. ‘I... I think I slept. I think I dreamed. I dreamed about us. I don’t know if I dreamed about you and... him...’ she pointed back to the body behind her, unable to think of the name of the engineer with whom she’d lived and worked for two years, ‘...or if I remembered. I saw you fighting him...’

(‘Gallardi!’ Tokuin had screamed. Augmetics covered the adept’s eyes and nose but his mouth was flesh, not a vocoder, and there was ugly organic fear in his voice. ‘Stop it! Stop what you’re doing!’ He had coughed and doubled over as a fist had found his belly, then arched the copper-inlaid utility-arm that sprouted from the base of his spine, arched it like a scorpion’s tail to block the downwards swing of the pneumatic clamp that Gallardi had loaded his other fist with. The clamp bounced away with a clang and the arm shot forwards snake-fast into Gallardi’s chin, but it was only a push, not a blow. Tokuin didn’t really understand what was happening, he had not done the thing that the rest of them had done that Jann’s memory couldn’t quite piece together. Tokuin didn’t understand the wrongness of this, didn’t understand that Gallardi had to take mastery of the forge or everything was false, in a way even she struggled to understand. Tokuin pushed Gallardi and held him, and Gallardi thrashed for a moment in the eight-fingered mechanical grips as they held him by the jaw before he battered the slender end-joints of the arm with the clamp and shook it loose.

‘You’re deranged, Gallardi!’ Tokuin was a man of the machine-cloisters, no brawler, and he had staggered back through the workshop jerking with feedback as his battered arm malfunctioned. ‘You’re damaged! Jann! All of you! Where’s Merelock? Make her take command again! You’re all damaged!’ He was retreating deeper into the forge and Jann wanted to call to him to stop, to explain how much more wrong he was making it, with his alien voice and his strange half-and-half face, but Gallardi was closing in again. ‘It’s those things, they’ve driven you mad! Gallardi! Jann, talk sense to him!’ One of the mechanised pallet-jacks came to life

and rolled forwards, Tokuin trying to manoeuvre its drive-block in front of Gallardi's body, its tines under his feet, but he spun and danced around it, lurched, caromed off the pipe-lathe and closed in. 'Take it off, Gallardi, it's wrecking your mind, Gallardi, listen—' And she had run away, then, because her friend was about to beat the engineeer to death and she had already watched Crussman snarling as he hacked at Crewman Heng's arm while Heng grinned and giggled and looked on, and she knew Sabila was going to try to make everything right and she already knew what would happen, even though beneath that she didn't know what was happening at all. She had covered her eyes with her hands and staggered away as behind her Gallardi began the murder.)

'There are two of us,' Jann said. She padded around Gallardi, walking a slow circle around him as he leaned against the welding cage, his head hanging. Jann could see the sweat and grime coating his skin, and the way his shoulders sagged. He must have been labouring all night, unsleeping. She couldn't imagine how exhausted he must be – but he couldn't be exhausted from working here, could he? This was his place, he and his forge were part of each other. How could he tire from this labour?

'We are at war within ourselves,' she went on. Gallardi didn't move. It had been a stupid thing to say. He knew they were at war. Had he not forged that war's weapons with his own hands here? But that didn't make sense either, she could remember that Gallardi had only taken possession of the forge a day, two days ago. Every answer was wrong, every question was wrong. She continued in her circle, her steps careful and rhythmic. It soothed her, seemed to move things towards familiarity again. 'Not between us but within us. Can you feel it? Two things in you? Have you dreamed it? Do you feel yourself to be... not your own?' She was three-quarters of the way around her circle, and movement seemed to be helping the words come, as her thoughts drifted into alignment like moons in the sky. She thought back to how Gallardi had spasmed and struggled as the half-forgotten other had put out a metal hand and seemed to push his
(but it didn't look like his)

face, push it almost loose from his skull. That meant something. She was sure of it. She let her eyes drift half-closed, started to turn in circles as she finished her orbit of Gallardi. Even as she was thinking how ludicrous

the movements were, the circles within circles quieted her, helped her thoughts ride soft and quiet in courses that felt familiar.

She opened her eyes and saw clearly. Only for a moment, but enough. Gallardi was standing in the middle of an idiot chorus of rattling, over-revved workshop machines, all Tokuin's engines with their controls jammed into working positions with crudely glued or soldered fragments of metal or plastek trash. One had already overheated and failed, two more were rattling ominously. Tools and debris littered the floor. Panniers and slider shelves where Tokuin had reverently arrayed his tools and spare components were tipped and smashed, their contents piled up at their feet. And in the middle of it all, here stood Gallardi, half-naked, dull-eyed, animal-filthy, standing at a work plinth and crashing his hammer down as though he were an old smith from the hive-fringe shanties working an iron blade. But instead of a hammer he swung one of the heavy subsonic solid-reader wands they used to test the strength of pipeline segments, the gauge in the tip (which could look like a hammer to a blurred eye in dim light) already with its casing split and the smashed internal components visible, and on the plinth no glowing-hot metal bar but the shattered remains of a running-light assembly from the crane rig.

Gallardi brought his improvised smithy hammer down again, sending plastek chips scattering. He had always been too big, too heavy for grace but Jann had always admired the powerful, confident economy with which he moved. Now his movements were empty, jerky, like nothing living. She tried to read his expression in his eyes but when she cast her gaze up to his
(no please what's happened to his)

face she cried out, spun through a circle, looked again but couldn't unsee what she'd seen, and ran from the forge. If he had called after her, even her name, even just a wordless cry, perhaps she could have found the courage to stay, but here came that slippery, kaleidoscopic haze again, splitting and doubling her thoughts, and although she resisted it, somewhere in that haze came a knowledge that this was ordained, this was right. Gallardi was bound to his place. Her dreams would not change that.

('Can we winch it?' Gallardi asked in her memory as they stood looking at this thing they had found. It was hard not to stare. The thing's shape had a way of pleasing the eye, leading it softly along curves and through gentle turns. Jann thought of the strange, scalloped lines of the fungi that grew in

the coolways under the hive-sprawls where they took their leave rotations, and then she thought of the lines of the muscled arms and shoulders of the boy she'd stepped out with when last she'd been there. That made her redden, but none of the others had noticed. Crussman and Heng were talking in quiet voices, Gallardi was simply looking at it. It was a made thing, but all the made things Jann had ever seen had the sledgehammer-heavy arrogance of Imperial design, all blocky angles and hard surfaces. Here Jann couldn't see a single straight line or flat plane. She didn't quite dare walk closer to it, none of them did until they'd told Merelock what they'd found, but she hunkered down and leaned forwards to stare at it. If those were control grips, then that had to be a seat, and if that were a seat then those things behind it were running-boards like their crane-buggy had, for them all to hitch and ride on? And along the back, under a tangle of shimmering cloth whose colours seemed to ripple and shiver in the corner of her eye... an engine? A mechanism? Or a container? A saddle-pannier? Jann wondered if there were cargo in there, what this thing had been carrying, and how bitter it was to her now that they had not smashed the thing, burned it with their torches, driven the crane-buggy back and forth and back and forth over the cargo panniers, treading them to splinters without any of them ever opening them and looking inside.)

Her eyes blurred with tears as she ran up the stairs and she misjudged the width of the exit. The ends of the torque-stave clanged into the doorframe and it bent her over at the midriff, unhurt but groaning with shock. The stave fell from her hands and she folded and dropped through the doorway, crawling clumsily onward without thinking to pick it up.

When she remembered it, she pushed herself against a dry, slick wall, and clambered half-upright. This was the storage level, a maze of tiny paths winding between the dark stacks of bales and drums and pallets. She leaned against the heavy plastic wrap around a stack of filter-blocks and looked around.

High, clear laughter drifted up through the red-lit door down into the forge, and her stave was gone.

Jann's breath caught in her throat but she made herself move. Her hands grasped air. This place was cramped, smothering whatever marginal use the stave would have had as a weapon, but it still felt like too much of a loss. She told herself it was a rusted, useless torque-stave only fit for

Tokuin's scrap-furnace, but the feeling that she had lost a part of herself clung to her as she shuffled away from the forge door. The stacked pallets and drums were all edges and angles, no soothing circles, and she could feel her chest hitching and jerking, wanting to echo the laughter she had heard.

'He must fight on his own,' Merelock's voice murmured at her shoulder, and although Jann made to jerk and scream with the shock, all that she gave was a gentle shudder and gasp. As Jann half-turned Merelock placed the torque-stave in her hands.

'A staff should no more be left in the grass than a spear, little cousin,' Merelock whispered. Her voice doubled on itself, acquired an echo. 'Would be good to have you running at my flank, little one, if you'll stay with me. Green and white above the trees.' The sentence made no sense to Jann but the words had an odd power over her, and she tilted her head back as though she could look up through the thick walls and roof and see a night sky where the green and the white...

But Merelock was away, darting through the narrow spaces between the stacks. Jann smiled as she glided along behind, picturing Merelock as a night-hunting raptor, beak sharp as a spear, talons slitting the air, eyes as keen as its talons staring into the green-tinged darkness. But that laughter from the forge door would not leave her head now, and she found herself wanting to laugh, too, softly sing as she ran to and fro.

'On and ahead, cousin!' came the gruff hunter's whisper down the trail, and Jann quickened her pace even though she knew it was only Merelock's reedy voice from the other side of a pallet of hygiene packs. 'On and ahead to the Great Caern! We'll touch the stone for luck and turn about to hunt them!'

The geography of this place unfolded in Jann's mind with the quiet certainty of dream-knowledge, but as she ran up and down the aisles between the stores, her stave clanging awkwardly against crates and fittings, she was more and more aware that the place she was running through seemed phantom-like. Her mind kept dancing away through some great forest (she was sure that was the word; the last supervisor, Merelock's predecessor, had read books and had described forests to them), gliding between the boles of trees, up into the rich canopy, slipping

along through the underbrush, airy as a moonbeam, following her fierce hawk.

All the places of the forest were known to her, their names talismanic weights in her mind. The Great Caern, the Tree of Hands, the Crying River, the Sky Hearth. Glorious places, wild places, and Jann cried out because *now* she was singing her dreams in the sky over the forest to a chorus of wind-chimes, and *now* she was tottering back and forth in a cramped and grubby storeroom, watching her portly little supervisor trotting ahead brandishing a splintered piece of pallet like some sort of spear, exulting at a mad beauty that she couldn't convince herself she was really seeing, laughing in the dark while her friend shuffled around in the forge with Tokuin's blood on his hands, crippled and beaten and... chained?

There was that strange ghost-certainty again. Chained? She had seen no chains. Gallardi had killed Tokuin and taken the forge as his own. Why did her mind cling to the memory of him defeated and bound?

Pad-pad-pad came Merelock's feet around the end of the aisle. The supervisor had kicked off her workboots and was running barefoot, leaving bloody prints from where something had cut into her left heel. She had plastered engine grease across the rank swatches on her jacket and crude garlands of torn fabric flopped around her brow and her biceps. She shook the spear in one hand. Her other, Jann realised, was dangling at the end of a broken arm.

'This isn't the path,' said Jann, propping her stave across the aisle to block Merelock's way. 'Ma'am? Merelock, do you even know where you are? Do you recognise this place? Do you recognise me?'

The other woman stopped with her belly up against the pitted metal of Jann's torque-stave, then stepped back and hefted her spear. Jann suppressed a wince as Merelock's broken arm banged against a crate corner, but the supervisor didn't even seem to notice. In the dimness her *(how could I have ever thought that was her real)*

face was impassive, perhaps a little watchful. The designs around her eyes and across her cheekbones curled like rich summer leaves, like falcon-wings.

'What strange questions you ask, little cousin! Have you been dreaming again? You should have asked me before you came down to sleep. There

are places where it's not safe to sleep, and your dreams are too precious for any of us to risk. Enemies make their way into the wild places, cousin. Stay close to my side.'

'Merelock, listen to me! Where are you? Can you tell me where you are? Can you describe where you are? Do you know what happened to Gallardi and Tokuin?'

'I...'

Merelock began, and then straightened. Her broken arm still hung but the other lifted her makeshift spear in a pose that brought back to Jann that maddening *deja vu*. 'I run the trail like the moon and the wind, little cousin. I am the sound of my horn and the flight of my spear. When the nights chill and the green moon walks silent and alone, so there do I walk under it.'

Other voices, other sounds. Something danced in Jann's vision like the ghost of a hololith display in the instant after it was shut down. Merelock seemed to stand in the centre of a larger form, something tall and mantled in beast-pelts, lifting a lean arm, her/his words wrapped around by the dim sounds of wild horns and quick breathing. Merelock's voice struggled for power and melody but Jann could feel the words coming from that other silhouette too. Their rhythm made her want to chorus along, dance in a circle with her stave lifted high before she could laugh and sing, leap and hang in the air, shine high and bright above...

The sensation was like jolting awake just before the final release into sleep: Jann broke the reverie, pulled back from the brink, immediately felt guilty at disbelieving that beautiful voice. Before the guilt could lull her and draw her under again she gritted her teeth, squeezed her eyes almost shut and hit Merelock's broken arm with a clumsy, looping blow.

The supervisor wailed in pain, but although she lurched she did not fall and the chunk of pallet stayed gripped in her fist the way the stave stayed gripped in Jann's. For a moment, behind the sound, something in the darkness that might have been a sigh or a chuckle, but when Jann cocked her head to listen it was gone.

'I am wounded, but not beyond fighting or mending,' said Merelock, bent halfway to one knee before Jann and cradling her arm. 'But see, Jann?' Jann shook her head, not understanding, and for a moment not recognising the name Merelock had used. Her name, she was sure, should be longer, softer, more like a breathy lullaby on the tongue.

‘See, now?’ Merelock went on. ‘See how wrong it all is? My own domain, my hunting-paths. I climbed to spy and wait for my enemies and the bough cast me down. Wouldn’t bear my weight.’ Her head swimming, Jann got a hand under Merelock’s good shoulder and helped her to her feet, craning over her shoulder to follow the woman’s gaze. Her first thought was that of course it wouldn’t have borne weight: she was looking at a ripped stretch of tarpaulin over stacked drums of distilled water, and who would ever think that Merelock’s stout, stiff-limbed little frame would let her clamber up there without something going wrong? And yet it made perfect sense to her when Merelock talked of the stack as though it were a great tree, and one that had done her a personal wrong by breaking its branch and letting her fall. Falling. Falling and hurting. Jann breathed hard, shook her head, reminded herself of her purpose.

‘Look at it again, Merelock. Please, ma’am. Is it what you think it is? Look at me, do you see your cousin? I think I almost have what it is that’s happening to us, ma’am, almost in my mind, but will you help me to try and understand it?’ She could hear herself cracking and begging, near tears, but she seemed to have broken the trail of Merelock’s delusion. Hope bloomed warm in her. She met the other woman’s gaze, held it. Let her be jarred by the pain, Jann thought. Let her think! Let her see it in my
(but it isn’t even my)
face.

For a long moment there was no sound, and then Merelock began making a low noise in her throat. Jann leaned in, listening for words, but there was just a soft moan of breath. Jann kept her eyes on Merelock’s, trying to ignore what her senses were telling her about the woman’s features, trying to pull insight out of the air by simple concentration.

‘Jann?’ The doubling of Merelock’s voice was gone. It was a simple voice now, the voice Jann was familiar with, but it was faint and confused. ‘Jann, is that you? I can’t recognise you. What happened to us? What happened? I hurt, Jann. I hurt. I can hear the forge engines. Where’s Tokuin? Jann?’

‘We’re going up from the forge,’ Jann told her. ‘Up to the top level, where that thing is. I know we... weren’t always like this. I dream how we were before we found it. I think if we all go and find it we might understand about those people in my dreams.’

‘Up,’ said Merelock, still in that small, childlike voice. ‘We’ll go up.’ She tried to hold out her broken arm but it wouldn’t quite extend. ‘You and I. Together.’ Merelock wouldn’t release her grip on her spear, so Jann held her as best she could under the broken arm and tried to help her along. ‘We’ll walk together. You and I. Together in the dark.’ Grunting, Jann got Merelock to the end of the aisle and into a broader space where they could more comfortably walk abreast. ‘You and I, walking in the dark,’ Merelock said, ‘and not our first such journey, no,’ with an almost-chuckle that chilled Jann’s blood. The sound seemed to be picked up and echoed in the gloom around them. Jann thought she heard soft, rapid footsteps counterpointing the echoes, but who could tell any more what was happening around her and what was the ghost-pantomime in her own head?

‘Gallardi, Klaide, fetch a pair of piston-grips,’ Merelock said. Her voice, never very powerful, was fighting against the stiff wind on the tower roof but there was still enough snap in it to cut through the arguments. ‘Tokuin knows we’ve had a find, but he has some sort of ministration to attend to below before he’ll come up and look at this thing. We’ll make a start ourselves.’

‘Ma’am, Jann thinks there’s definitely tech in there,’ said Crussman, ‘and I agree with her. Look, that long curve has the line of an engine cowl, and if you look under it you’ll see, well, I’m sure it’s machinery.’

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ Merelock said as Klaide, Gallardi and Heng came past pushing the big piston-grip pedestals on their rumbling wheels. ‘But the tech is the only thing I’m having him look at. If that stuff you think is machinery is part of the Mechanicus mysteries then we’re best served by keeping them sweet from the start, but whatever there is here that’s not machinery is legal salvage of the Filiate Guilds. There’s no lack of piety in doing things by the letter and sorting out what’s ours.’

That was what Crussman had wanted to hear, and he and Sabila had actually clapped as the pedestals halted next to this thing they had found, the thing like a long iridescent arrowhead that looked so heavy and lifted so light, with its strange controls and its riding-rails. None of them had openly discussed the bright gemlike crystals embedded in its sleek curves: most of the deep-desert pipeline crews held the same half-formed superstitions about gloating over salvage before the bonus warrants had

been signed. But Jann had found herself studying them, counting them, and wondering about the shapes she was sure now were cargo panniers. As Klaide shooed the others away and started working the controls, the arms extended with a piston-hiss and the three-fingered grips slowly positioned themselves over the pannier lids...)

Jann didn't want to think about it any more. Didn't want to dream, didn't want to remember. Wasn't it her dream that had begun all this strife? She had dreamed of uprising (although that didn't fit), she had dreamed of war between them all (but was that really what had happened?), she had dreamed of a bloodshed that the telling of her dreams had brought to pass, prophecy and fulfilment in one closed and shining circle like the edge of a full white moon. But she had never told anyone. She hadn't even been the one to see the thing wedged in under the pipeline by the winds. Who had seen it first? They had been out checking that the new fixtures at pylon 171 had survived the hypervelocity sandblasting of the previous day and Tokuin's drone had spotted something his image catalogues couldn't quite identify. They had gone to hunt it out. But Merelock hadn't gone with them. And wasn't Merelock the one who hunted?

The thought of her companion dragged Jann's consciousness back to the moment. Merelock was still muttering to herself.

'Oh, we ran together when the ghosts sang in the waterfalls, do you remember? And the quarrels, when I had rancour with my black-haired love, and you were always the quiet voice. You called to me when there was burning iron in the... the smoke... and you were the star by which my... my stave, my hunting, my friends...' That throaty, guttural note was creeping back into Merelock's voice like a hunting-cat slinking forwards through a thicket, but at the same time she was faltering, reaching for words as though each path of thought had run into darkness. That was wrong twice over. Merelock was the station supervisor, the order-giver, she should be the certain one. Merelock was one with her home, swift like running feet in the wild night, sure like the strike of a hunting spear or the lunge of the falcon. She should be the sure one, no indecision behind the features she wore.

Jann was still trying to work out what that thought meant when she looked up and saw the figure watching them. It held itself in the light from

the stairwell up to the living deck, and where that light fell on it it seemed to fray into crisscrossing sparks and threads. The thing moved a dancing half-step towards them and its whole skin cracked, shivered and crawled with glowing colour. For a moment the display calmed, and then it bent an elegant leg, cocked its head just so and somersaulted lazily backwards into the gloom.

Jann stood and gasped, her mind thrumming like a plucked string but empty of thought. Her heart wanted to leap at the sight of the thing, but her bones wanted to chill. On her arm, Merelock was still sagging and murmuring, and up from the forge level came a burst of laughter and an echoing, grinding crash.

Jann moved. She forgot about supporting Merelock along, simply dragged the other woman into a shambling half-run through the twisting, giggling shadows. Merelock stumbled at the foot of the stairs but pushed herself up with her spear and managed to keep pace. Climbing, Jann shot a look over her shoulder to see the supervisor panting hard two steps behind her, leaning forwards to run so she was bent almost double. Merelock's cap was long gone and her braid had disintegrated, her black curls hanging in her face, and Jann jerked around to face up the stairs again, glad that she hadn't seen Merelock's

(I can't even remember her real)

face in the brighter lights of the stairwell. None of the minds rioting in her head seemed able to predict what they'd see without the merciful blurring of the shadowy lower floors.

The light grew brighter as they rounded the hairpin and clambered up the second flight. The glow-loop over the door to the living deck was defective, Merelock never quite having managed to bully Tokuin into making time to fix it, and so they came into the ransacked dormitory and into flickering light and weeping.

The weeping voice was Klaide's, and peering past the clinking and winking of the light just above her Jann could make him out. He was slumped across a twisted nest of bedclothes and curtains, torn from the sleeping-booth partitions and now choking the dormitory aisle. In the middle of it all Klaide knelt tilted against one of the stripped curtain frames with one hand cupped against his face. It was a pose of grief so classic as to look contrived, as though Klaide was the centre of one of the

bright-lit tableaux that enactors performed in front of the temples on holy nights.

At that thought Jann's scattered thoughts seemed to interlock and move in unison. Insight was as brief as a bright moonbeam spearing down through clouds, but as powerful. She shook her arm free from Merelock and ran down the aisle, so fleetfooted she almost seemed to glide over the debris and litter, and knelt at Klaide's feet.

'Klaide? It's me, Klaide,' although if he had asked her who 'me' was she'd have struggled to answer. 'Klaide, it's okay. You don't need to grieve. We're not... like this. We're not...' It had seemed so clear in that brilliant moonlit moment but now she was grasping for the words. 'We're not who we are, Klaide. I think I understand. I've dreamed us as...' and her voice choked in her throat because she wanted to say ourselves and she wanted to say others, and both of those and neither were true.

'You don't understand,' Klaide told her, his voice a travesty: rumbling and chesty as Jann had known it in the years they had been crewmates, not the clear contralto she knew it should really be. 'He's gone, he's...' and Klaide's body began to shudder, not with weeping now but with some more profound convulsion. He began shouting, spitting out words in a half-shriek.

'Dying-dead-he's-dead-he-will-yet-die-he-dies!' and while Jann tried to hold the man's hands down and murmur soft moon-songs to soothe him, still she understood. He had gone away to die. Who had? Jann couldn't fix on a name, two separate sounds slid into and out of her mind, but she knew he was Klaide's (champion-child-student-subject-follower), and she knew that whoever he was he had gone to die. He had gone to fight. He was already dead and they mourned. He lay dying, his wound mortal and his blood bright red as a moon whose light waxed upon his death and drenched the green and white moons and drowned their beauty.

He was all these things, all these states, always walking out to his doom, always lying stricken, lying dead. In all these states he was timeless as the tableau they made up now: Klaide grieving, Merelock poised over them with her spear high, Jann kneeling and placating, speaking of dreams. Even as she fought back tears of grief and fear, the form the three of them made felt so right, felt like she was falling into the steps of a dance she

had been singled out for while even her own mother was yet waiting to be born.

She thought she heard a soft sigh of recognition from somewhere around them, but could see nobody but the three of them.

She looked at Klaide again. He had wrapped himself in a green curtain-cloth, and torn the front of his tunic so that the edges now echoed the crude garlands of torn fabric Merelock had adorned herself with. He had yanked off his metal collar of rank, and the electoo that ringed his bull-like neck, the badge of a Mechanicus-ordained lay artisan, stood out in the brightness. Its hard geometry made a cruel counterpoint to the tapering lines of Klaide's own features, elegant even in the depths of grief. It was not Klaide's own

(any more than this is my real)

face, but finally, finally Jann was coming to understand how that could be.

She found herself talking then, not even sure if Klaide or Merelock had mind enough left behind their

(I can almost remember their)

faces to understand, but letting the words pour out of her like moonlight. She talked about Gallardi taking the machine-shrine from Tokuin because of the steps and the songs that called him to the forge. She talked about her moonlit dreams flowered into prophecies as she spoke them, as her fingers traced the delicate intersecting circles worked into her strange, brittle skin. She talked about the memories she had dreamed and the dreams she couldn't quite remember, the strange, clumsy creatures they had all once been, with their brutish names (Gallardi, Klaide, Merelock, Jann, surely just the grunts and honks of beasts?) and the reeking, lumpen tower they called home. She talked about the temple tableaux and the passion-plays and the mythic dances, the pageant of Alicia Dominica where the Saint stood before a king with a face like the sun, sometimes to draw her sword on a traitor or sometimes to plead for her doomed children; the Life of Macharius, that her brothers had learned word for word, the general waging war across the heavens, the lay of the ninety-nine swords, the great strife of an aeon past when a murderous hand crushed the martyr-hero and spread his blood, so scarlet-red, the tales of the six magnificent warriors

who had walked alive from the end of that great tribulation, ready to hand on the light of their learning.

They were good stories, powerful stories, and they sang in her blood, danced the way she thought she remembered dancing in moonlight to the drum and the cymbal, even as she remembered them all crying and howling and jerkily trying to dance on the roof of the tower when they had found the

(I don't want to think about the)

faces, broken the locks and found them and...

Now it was Jann sobbing, oblivious to the surprised looks from the other two – this was not her part, these were not her steps. But she staggered to her feet, cast the torque-stave away from her. She had no staff, she had no moonstone necklace, barely had a self. As the stories and the dances solidified in her mind she could feel Jann fragmenting and slipping away. She wanted to tell them, wanted to shout it at them, but the weight of understanding was too great and all she could do was cry for what was happening to them. She struggled to her feet and leapt over Klaide, a broken leap for the broken thing that she had become, and ran for the next stairwell, still sobbing. Behind her, Klaide and Merelock took each other in a clumsy embrace, but Jann didn't see or care. She understood now. There was no hope.

The lights were out on the operations deck, and only the glows of the instrument and monitor banks shone back at her. She felt the scraps of her mind twist and reach in two different directions to try and make sense of them, and for a moment she paused in her stumbling run to stare at the clear plastek desk where she had pored over the meteorological charts and dune maps. The edges of memories brushed at her again. Sitting at that table hot-eyed and yawning when Merelock had insisted on having the route for a maintenance round ready by the morning shift. Sitting on the table at Quarter Relief, a cup of rough alcohol in her hand, helpless with laughter as Gallardi and Crussman did one of their little songs mocking the guild controllers. Looking at the weather auguries and telling Merelock that yes, they could head out now, it was safe to move, and plotting a route to where the alerts showed that something had been carried up against the pipeline by the storm.

She couldn't bear that thought, that any action of hers might have helped along what had happened. Jann slumped against the doorframe, lifting her hands to her eyes to blot out the table and its memories, and when she lowered them it was on the table watching her. The shock of terror rhymed and meshed with the shock of familiarity so that she couldn't tell them apart. She gulped and found herself stepping forwards, reaching out a placating hand that her fear then made into a fist. The tall thing on the table, fringed and crested in colours that swirled and mixed with the air around it, posed and mocked her movements, and then it went from wearing all colours to no colours, fading from her eyes as it stepped back off the table, leaving her just the ghost of laughter.

It wasn't a mirage, she thought dully to herself, and it wasn't a memory. Something really had been in here with her, perhaps was in here still. Something that had— but she found herself pushing that idea away before it had managed to get any traction in her thoughts. They were being watched, nothing more. Nobody had done this to them. They had done it themselves.

(They were hushed as they came in procession down from the roof deck, each carrying one of their strange new trophies. Their chatter had broken off after Crussman's shout, but now their silence was reverent instead of startled. Jann thought of the weighted silences that came over the throngs watching the grey and white banners unfurl from the sides of the hive spires the day after Tithing Day. Thinking of grey and white and silence, she felt empty eyes watching her from the thing she carried, which she knew was stupid. Crussman's words – 'It's full of faces!' must have unnerved her more than she'd realised.

And yes, once broken open the panniers had been full of faces. They had been mounted like artworks on the pannier's inner wall, each one veiled in a cloth of shifting, rippling colours the like of which Jann had never seen before. Some of the cloths had fallen away with the jolting of the craft and the cracking of the panniers, exposing the piece beneath it. Without realising it Jann had taken a pace towards one of them, a mask made to slip tightly over a head longer and slenderer than hers. Its features were odd and stylised, tilted so that the mask's wearer would always seem to have their face tilted slightly skywards. Stylised silvery-grey curls lined the porcelain-white face, and the alien features still carried a sweet and wise serenity that made Jann want to sigh.

She had caught herself and pulled herself back, and then looked around her and realised they had all reacted similarly.

'All right then, salvage divides equally,' said Merelock from behind them, trying to be brisk. 'We all know the rules.' And because it was the rules, Merelock took first pick. She reached out and unhooked a dark green mask, stern and masculine, with designs that might have been leaves curling about the cheekbones and the edge flaring with a design that seemed to evoke a tousled mane. Klaide pushed past her as she stepped away. One of these toys would be all right for his brother's little one, he muttered as though needing an excuse, and paused for a moment before he plucked up a mask that was as pale and delicate a green as Merelock's was dark, one that dusted to gold around the edges and on which a single deep-blue crystal tear glittered below one eye. Jann, equal in rank to Klaide, had darted in next for the face in white and silver-grey. It didn't seem to be warming from her hands, and in spite of how light it was she couldn't force it to bend or flex. Gallardi had picked a mask in a stunning orange-red which seemed to glow with its own light and pulse with yellow sparks when he turned it this way and that. The colour faded to an iron-black around the border, and Gallardi pronounced himself well pleased. 'I might even wear this back down there,' he had beamed, 'and see what Tokuin makes of it.'

Heng had complained about being left to last so Crussman had laughed and clapped him on the shoulder and sent him in next. Heng came away looking unhappy with a mask pinched in his fingers, a fierce and glowering one whose features struck Jann as somehow still feminine. Sabila, thoughtful, was carrying a golden mask, the set to its eyes and thin mouth speaking to Jann of youth and determination.

Crussman had been the daring one. There had been three compartments at the back of the pannier, three that were sealed tighter than the grips could easily break loose. Crussman had peered this way and that through the crumpled hull over them and seen a way to draw out what was inside. It was a mask the colour of old, rusted pig-iron, worked with rough designs that could have been streaks of corrosion or dried blood, worked into a snarl of such savage malevolence that when Crussman had held it up the very air around it seemed to darken and the rest of them had

flinched back as though struck. Whatever little joke he'd been about to make died and slid back down his throat.

The expression on that mask had haunted them all, and when the wind had picked up and Merelock had suggested they go below they had all unconsciously given Crussman a wide berth. He was still smiling and wagging the thing in front of him, but Jann could tell he was forcing it. She had gone to sit beside Sabila in the control deck as they worked to raise a link to the depot, sitting beside the vox terminal turning the white mask over and over in her hands.

When the screaming started, Jann never had a moment's doubt what had begun it. Crussman had succumbed. He had put on his mask.)

And Jann was running again, pushing herself up the stairs to the roof-deck where the craft still sat in the holding gantry, lashed down against the wind. Both of the splintered lines of thought racing in her head were now revolving around that memory. The thing they had found, the crashed craft and the two containers they hadn't opened. Sunlight, kingship, a golden sword. Surely there was help there?

She had forgotten about her last three crewmates, but not for long. On the roof of the tower, on the landing pad under the cranes and gantries, Crussman and Sabila were at war.

Jann found herself empty of surprise. This was just another piece of mad whimsy, even while it had the inevitability of night falling. Jann nodded to herself as she slunk into hiding beneath a crane gantry. It was all so obvious. Everything had led to this.

Crussman's right hand gripped a cable-cutter from which he had stripped the safety cage. Whether by purpose or chance (*purpose*, Jann's mind whispered, it's all on purpose) he had cut his left hand with it: the palm glistened red and a steady stream of blood dripped from it as he moved. She gasped at the sight, couldn't take her eyes off the bleeding hand as the skinny pilot brandished it, thrust it forwards like a threat, held it theatrically high to counterbalance the roundhouse swings of his cutter. She had known she was going to see it, should have been prepared: every time she had thought about Crussman now it felt like that bleeding hand was gripping her heart. But surely the hand was bleeding for Sabila, and surely Sabila was still alive?

And so he was, alive and fighting although he must have known as soon as he left Klaide crying below that he was good as dead. Creeping from cover to cover, Jann watched the cycles of their battle, circling back and forth across the wide circle of the landing pad, Crussman's cutter arcing and smashing against the length of ceramite rod Sabila had taken from Gallardi's machine forge, and which he swung at Crussman like a sword. The cutter rang off the rod, and though the impact sounded light Sabila was driven down on one knee. Crussman flung back his head and screamed, holding the cutter two-handed over his head, and the sound of it wrenched Jann down to her very core.

She crawled between the tanks of ornithopter fuel and then darted behind a crane stanchion, peering around it. Sabila was on his feet, squaring off against Crussman, holding his makeshift sword high in challenge as Crussman held out his bloody hand and howled. The challenge, the defeat, the one sword, the bleeding hand, timeless and ever-renewing, a cycle as unbreakable as summer's decay into winter.

They closed and battled again as Jann ran around the lip of the landing pad, Sabila's movements swooping and elegant even as his slender arms shook with exhaustion, Crussman fighting back with a wild predator's savage purity of motion. And now Jann could see another form creeping and stooping behind Crussman as he roared and fought. Heng was shadowing Crussman in a bouncing stoop, clutching at the air and jabbing his fist and stump back and forth in manic counterpoint to the clash of weapons. Each time Sabila was knocked sprawling Heng would give a shrill, reedy cackle that made Jann flinch down deeper into cover. She knew what would happen if Heng turned his

(but now I know who really owns that)

face towards her and set eyes on her. He would know her name, he would recognise her, cackle and call, and from then on every path she walked would lead downwards and every day the shadows would lean a little closer to her, and night would come slithering on velvet-soft scales. In the last moments before she managed to tear her gaze away and start crawling again, Jann saw that Heng too had wounded himself. His thick bare forearms were mottled with bruises and gouges from where he had clawed at his own skin, and bitten at the flesh of his wrist beneath the stump where Crussman had hacked away his hand. That struck a chord of

familiarity with her, a ripple of understanding like silver wind-chimes in her mind, but some of the wounds were bleeding and that was wrong, as wrong as the endlessly-renewed battle between Crussman and Sabila was right. Shuddering, Jann crawled towards the crane.

It was in there. A face they hadn't seen yet. She was sure it was the answer. The half-memory of it was in her mind now, like warm sunlight and her grandfather's voice, soft, meaningless comforting words to the tearful little girl who'd scraped her shin. She knew it had to be there. She could feel it.

Crussman howled again behind her, and mixed with it were two other cries: genuine pain from Sabila, and angry dismay from Heng. All Crussman wanted was to end Sabila, because all Crussman's nature understood was the ending, but somehow all three of them knew that ending it was wrong, something that would cast them adrift. Jann knew the reason, but she could barely have told them even if they had had mind enough left to listen. The wisdom was hers, not theirs, and that was part of the cycle too. The gritty bars of the gantry were under her hands now, and she grunted as she hauled herself up. Her reflexes seemed to belong to someone older than her but yet lighter, moonbeam-light.

She groaned as she closed on the craft and put her hands on it. Seeing it brought low like this grieved her, like seeing a beautiful dawn-bird cowering on the earth with a crippled wing, and she mourned for it with her heart even as the strange feel of its hull repulsed her skin. She stroked her fingers down the high spinal ledge, along the compartments ripped by the ugly metal arms, and found the final two, the ones they hadn't been able to breach.

Her fingers touched it and her thoughts seemed to touch it as well. She couldn't tell if she were remembering opening it, or thinking of opening it, or imagining opening it, or dreaming she had opened it. Behind her on the landing pad Sabila gave another cry, a choking, dying cry. Crussman's voice was ragged, his vocal cords worn to tatters; Heng's voice was the yowl of a cat in the dark. Jann barely heard them. This was salvation. Her senses were already reaching out for the voice she needed to hear. The sun-voice. The father-voice. The king-voice.

The compartment opened under her fingers. Jann retched, screamed, knew she was not dead but damned, poisoned, eaten, violated. Everything

that was left of herself rotted in an instant. Her body seemed to go strengthless, boneless. She sagged, and would have fallen but for her torso wedging itself between two crossed struts.

Jann felt infinite desire and infinite contempt. She was paralysed, body and mind, except for the all-drenching cascade of fear. The face at the bottom of the compartment held her, ran her through as though she were a damsel-fly run through with a sleek stinger. She could not even sense an effort in it, or a will: it was something in herself that made her helpless to it, held her fast. Tears stung her eyes and her vision doubled and blurred. That didn't help. That face's grip on her mind remained, iron-cold and silk-strong. Only when her balance finally gave way and she sagged and fell to the metal decking at the gantry base did the extra distance stretch and lessen the hold.

Still in a half-sprawl, Jann reached for a strut to try and pull herself up. She didn't know what to do, couldn't think of words or a plan. The thought of that wonderful voice and the touch of the sun on her shoulders, that was gone, dropped without a trace into the abyss that had opened under her mind. Trying to increase the distance between herself and the terrible, devouring silence that seemed to be welling out from under the open lid, she forced herself onto her knees and began to shuffle back towards the landing pad. Whatever Crussman did to her, she would almost welcome it now. Anything to dislodge the memory of that face.

She stopped dead when she saw them come out of the shadows.

Six of them made a half-circle that closed smoothly on Crussman. As fatigue took the pilot and he started to sway and then stagger a step this way and then a step that, the six moved with sinuous ease, step and counter-step, the formation never breaking. Crussman's murder-scream was now not much more than a rasping moan, but still he had enough fury to drive his muscles: he lifted up the cutter, ready to drive it through the dying Sabila's skull at his feet. Maybe he hadn't seen the figures, maybe he didn't care.

Either way, there was nothing he could have done. The semi-circle parted, three scintillating figures darting one way and three darting the other in graceful unison, and through the centre of the gap they opened up came another figure, leaping and turning in the air, wrapped in shades of red and flashing gold that sparkled and dripped in the early evening

gloaming. It landed on the balls of its feet and pirouetted, wheeling and spinning around Crussman's sagging, grubby form. The tails of a long coat whirled around it, now a rich blue, purple, silver, green, scattering shards and coins of light. A high crest of silver – hair or feathers, it was hard to know – ran up its hood and down between its shoulder blades, and Jann could hear the soft *shh-shh* as it whipped from side to side.

The bright shape froze in a deep fencer's pose over Sabila, and after a moment the dazzling sparks that had swirled around it coalesced onto it. Jann could see its lithe limbs, the crested hood, the outline of its coat and mask. One slender arm was up, staying the cutter's death-stroke. Dimly, she became aware that the six other strangers were echoing its stance in perfect, precise unison.

The newest stranger held its pose for a moment, and then suddenly its face and then its whole body flashed golden, pouring out a deep and beautiful light like sunlight that set Jann's heart leaping for a moment with a hope she couldn't quite understand or describe. But then its colours sank into black, shot through with coiling veins of red like cracks in the crust of a lava flow, and its upraised arm flicked through three curt, precise motions. For the first time since the faces had broken them all Crussman seemed to be speaking, or trying to, but now with his throat so delicately open he could not make the words. He crumpled, his legs folding and his arms falling into segments where the shining figure had cut them apart.

Heng, groaning and crooning, tried to scabble away from Crussman's killer, and the figure straightened to its full, frightening height and watched him go. Its companions closed in, now moving in low crouches that put them almost on all fours, keeping their colours muted so that lined up on each side of their master they looked almost like shadowy wings. As Jann watched, their colours shifted from smoke-grey to the dirty white of old bones, and their faces blurred and arranged themselves into screaming harridan masks bursting from shocks of scarlet hair. Wailing, they scabbled forwards hard on Heng's heels, caught his ankles and pinned them, caught his wrists and pinned them, held him writhing and gasping until the master stranger, still a shape of coal-black and smoulder-red, shot an arm out again. This time, instead of sparks of light, the arm was surrounded by dancing specks of blackness, swarming like cinders borne

up from a great fire, and with each twitch of the arm Heng's body shuddered, bled, died, bled more and finally came apart.

The masks, the grief, the madness, the deaths: Jann had little left to her now, but somewhere in the ruins there was still the survival urge, and the capacity for fear. She found her feet, turned, made to flee and hide before they could turn their attention to her.

It was standing behind her. Staring up, her gaze met the darkness of its hood.

This was not the horror that the simple mask had been. The darkness beneath the deep fold of cloth was a space. A neutrality. Her eye and mind could find no purchase in it.

Jann stood perfectly still. Her muscles seemed to relax, as though they understood that all this was finally ending.

The hooded figure's cloak whispered as it took a step towards her. Its arms were held demurely in front of it, the hands folded below the cloak-folds of its chest. The hands were five-fingered, slender, longer than a human's, and now they rose up to push back the hood.

'No', Jann wanted to say. Nothing more than 'no'. It was all she could think of. But the hood fell back.

It was Jann's own face she was looking at, and it made her weep. The beautiful maiden-face, upturned to watch the white moon, the sacred circles shining on its skin. One of Jann's own hands crept up and wonderingly traced the lines of her own features.

Then the face opposite her began to change. It stretched, deformed. It became a caricature of itself, an exaggerated travesty of grotesque eyes, canted cheekbones, a tapered chin and high forehead that mocked the lines of Jann's own... her own...

...face.

Her hands pressed in on the side of her head. The figure opposite her did not move, except that now its features changed again. Now it became a bestial face, a vermin face. Crude and gawping, the features lumpy, meaty, the eyes muddy, the mouth slack. A repulsive face. An alien face. The face she had carried all her life.

Jann's fingers began to work. She dug them into herself, drawing blood with her broken and dirty nails. She found sweaty, gritty skin on which her fingers skidded, and smooth and cool skin with a firmness that her touch

did not recognise. She dug and gouged and a bright bolt of madness sheared through her. Her fingers seemed to slide into her very flesh and she could feel her skull soundlessly parting. Her thoughts whirled and swarmed out of her into the cooling air like moths. She felt herself split and part. There was a sensation of bone cracking, tissue tearing, but no sound, no blood, no physical pain.

The white mask landed softly at her feet.

And now there was no kinship left with any of these strangers, no familiarity. There was the stink of blood and offal where poor sweet slow-talking Heng lay dead, and the butchered body of twinkle-eyed Crussman, and here she stood, and what was her name now? What was her name?

She jerked and fell backwards, rolled, got her feet under her by nothing more than blind chance, and ran, shrieking and wailing, not a scrap of mind left in her any more. She ran with nothing more than a merciful roaring void inside her, a perfect hollow, and her course took her away from the strangers, away from the gantry, towards the edge of the roof-deck. The rail was not high, and she hit it at a flat run.

Jann was still thrashing her limbs as she fell, trying to flee, but it was only a moment before the packed earth at the tower's foot ended it.

Quietly, without haste, they assembled on the roof. They made their way up through the stunted, squalid spaces where the animals had lived. They moved in soft procession, angular and high-stepping like bright wading birds, moving through precise sequences of poses both careful and utterly relaxed. Their colours and masks flickered gently in the dusk. None of them spoke.

They made a circle around the roof, then the circle became a spiral, leading them inwards, until they broke the spiral and spread into a pattern that made the fire-rune, the rune of lost glory and the dream of rekindling, with Ehallech at its crux.

Ehallech carried a bright mask in his hands, the Fire Mask, the visage of Vaul. Ehallech was learning the craft of the weaponwright and the myths of the crippled god of the forge had great meaning for him. It was only right that he be the one to take the mask from Gallardi, whose corpse now lay next to Tokuin's amid silenced machines below them.

The troupe broke after a moment and then silently formed around Lhusael, who carried the dark-green mask she had taken after her blades had killed Merelock. Lhusael was a devotee of her people's most primal, heartfelt stories, the stories of their parents and progenitors. Already she had mastered the spirit of Isha, danced that role, sang the grieving-songs, learned the intricate blade katas that represented the harvest-mother's tears. Now she was completing her grasp of those story-cycles by learning the role of Isha's husband, silent Kurnous, the god of the hunt, whose face was in the Hunter's Mask that had driven Merelock to prowl the dark paths with a spear in her hand. Behind her, moving in beautiful synchronicity, came Melechu, who had spent so long behind a bone mask dancing in the retinue of Nysshea the troupe's death-jester. Now was the time to balance the role of death with the role of a life-giver: Melechu's bridge into that role was Isha's sacred grief, and so she had taken the Mourning Mask from Klaide, the visage of Isha of the harvest, weeping for her dead champion and her lost children.

When Nysshea had danced in the jester's train, her brother Edreach had danced with her. Before that, when she had danced the role of the fire-ghosts in Vaul's train, he had mirrored her by dancing a water-sprite in the footsteps of Isha. Now that they had both been chosen for greater roles, he was balancing her again: as she took on the role of Isha, he became Eldanesh, the greatest hero of the mortal eldar, the champion upon whom Isha smiled, who went forth to do battle with bloody-handed Khaine and met his fated death. Deftly, elegantly, never falling out of the overarching rhythm, Edreach dipped low and plucked the Hero Mask from Sabila's corpse, holding it high and proud. Others before him had interpreted Eldanesh as a doomed victim, even a fool, but Edreach revered him as one whose courage was exalted by the manner of his death.

Sheagoresh kept his vigil over the two mon-keigh corpses as the others broke the circle and reformed around him, coalescing around those in the troupe who held the ceremonial masks aloft, each Harlequin selecting a mask and shifting the colours of their dathedi to match it. In moments the Fire Mask was surrounded by flickering orange; the Mourning Mask by the gentle golden-green of sunrise over an orchard; the Hunter's Mask by the dusk-dark shades of the green moon that was Kurnous's totem; the Hero Mask by bright silver and gold.

And still more came, running swift-footed up the stairs or alighting from the shrouded air-sleds that took silent position at the building's edges. When Dheresh'mel walked down the curved prow of her air-sled and stepped smoothly onto the roof, Sheagoresh rose and stepped back, muting his colours to yield to her. For many journeys Dheresh'mel had danced in the footsteps of Eldanesh, finding ways in every pageant they played, every war they fought, to interpret another telling of his story. But she had learned Eldanesh's sagas from Ytheommel, the Great Harlequin of her old troupe whom the green beasts had laid low under the forest-spires of Toiryll, and whose name-element she had taken to carry his story on. Since that war her spirit had darkened. Her performances had become rougher, tintured with anger. It had only been at their last resting that she had come to Sheagoresh and formally relinquished the Hero's Mask. Now it was time to step into a new role, and cast her life-story through a new perspective.

Sheagoresh bowed as she walked forwards, silently, already moving as though she were in armour, and reached down to Crussman's corpse. She straightened again holding the Blood Mask, the snarling face of Kaela Mensha Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God, lord of murder, whose wars had raged across heaven, slaying Eldanesh and binding the crippled and beaten Vault to his anvil. There was silence and stillness as she carried the mask away. The mythic roles would pass around the troupe at every performance, but always there was one to lead and define them, and a new heart in the portrayal of Khaine would mean changes.

Sheagoresh looked over to the gantry base, to where Jann had been standing, at the one who was closer to him than any lover or sister could be. Ythoelle did not pick up the mask for herself: as the troupe's Shadow Seer she wore the Mirror Mask, and would until her dying moments. But as he walked to her and past her he saw that she had taken up the Moon Mask from where the last of the thieving vermin had dropped it, the face of Lileath, the maiden-goddess, dreamer and prophetess, whose symbols were the white moon, the staff, the closed circle, the wind-chime. Her hood was forwards again; as he walked past he could see the Mirror Mask fading into and out of many faces. At least one of them, he knew, would be his own.

There was no one to wear the Moon Mask, not yet. Abhoraan, who had danced the part since she had first joined the troupe so many years ago on the dragon-steppes, had been one of the ones who had died when their air-sled could not outrun the storm.

Soon they would perform the elegy for Abhoraan and her companions, and it would fall to Sheagoresh to decide what form that would take, what performance, what elements of the great myths they would draw on to take this tragedy and weave into the fabric of their living stories, to give it meaning and closure. It was a task he did not expect to enjoy, but every tale had its songs of mourning as well as its dances of triumph, and the tale that was his life was no exception.

Shapes moved around him. His Harlequins bounded and swung up through the scaffold to the wreck of the air-sled, ready to free it so it could be carried with them when he gave the signal. Their colours and faces danced, each reflecting a role that the Harlequin felt it right to play at this task and at this stage in their own life narratives. He lifted his arm for silence and their forms stilled, their colours muted.

The last sealed compartment flowered open at his touch and he gave voice to a low, resonant song, a single sustained note from deep in his chest. Those around him took up the song and flared their colours in salute as he took out the Sun Mask, the face of Asuryan, the Phoenix King, Monarch of Heaven, the teacher of the six great Phoenix Lords. Sheagoresh took it, held it in both hands, stepped slowly back off the gantry. His flip belt engaged with a thought and he felt the shift as his weight all but vanished: he stretched out and turned as he fell, always keeping the mask above him, and touched down feather-light on the rockcrete pad, one knee bent, head bowed but shoulders square and proud, both paying fealty to the mask and claiming ownership of it.

He stayed there, muted his colours down and made his own face blank. There was only one mask left to collect.

All around him, the others knelt. Colours shut off into black and greys and faces became featureless. A jetbike, the bare off-grey of wraithbone given form but no colour, adorned only with a black swathe wrapping its tail vane, coasted to a silent halt in the middle of the landing pad and Sheyl'emmen stepped down from it.

Her face was in shadow, like Ythoelle's, but unlike Ythoelle she made no move to shift her stiff, flaring hood. Hair cascaded from it, void-black and marble-white, and white silver chains twined around her hands and hung jingling from each fingertip. Vanes of wraithbone jutting from her shoulders caught the wind; at the sound of that moaning whistle every Harlequin shuddered and closed their eyes.

Sheyl'emmen did not look at any of them. Her step was steady and her sombre expression did not change. She walked with the careful stillness of a prisoner walking towards the scaffold. At the gantry she lengthened her step into a bound, and with her belt taking her weight away she sailed smoothly to stand on a crossbar before the ripped-open pannier. The other Harlequins turned in place to present their backs to her as she reached in and plucked out the mask that the last mon'keigh had glimpsed.

The mask did not glower or snarl, it had no artful changes to its scale or features. It was the face of an eldar, classic, genderless. There was no expression in the eyes, no set to the mouth. It was a blank face, blanker than the featureless grey hoods the Harlequins had taken on around it. It was a face that could place itself over any nightmare the beholding eye could imagine.

Sheyl'emmen the Solitaire picked up the Hell Mask and, like Sheagoresh before her, leapt off the platform, spreading her cloak out to cast its dread shadow into the heart of every eldar on the platform. She landed opposite the Great Harlequin and the two of them stepped and danced and spun together, neither visibly acknowledging the other. When a half-circle was complete and each stood where the other had a moment ago, they raised their masks in precise unison and donned them. Sun Mask, Hell Mask, Asuryan and Slaanesh, the two faces that the grubbing vermin had not soiled with their touch.

Then, shadow-fleet, Sheyl'emmen was gone: astride her jetbike with a single leap, then arrowing across the platform and away through the night, the vanes on her back shrieking in the slipstream. Sheagoresh leapt into the air then, head back, throwing his arms wide. Light came, a beautiful blaze from the Sun Mask driving back the night, bringing the Harlequins' colours to joyous life as they capered and danced.

In that moment, each feature-shifting holographic face became the mask they all wore beneath every other, the Harlequin Mask, Cegorach the

Laughing God, trickster and knower of secrets. Every face was different, as every Harlequin's imagining of the leader of their great dance was different, but as Cegorach's features burst onto each of their faces every Harlequin burst into laughter. Some gave the coarse guffaws of an oaf who has seen a clumsy joke, some the elegant trill of a princess admiring the tumbling of her jester. There was the joyous laughter of tragedy from which a traveller has returned, and the wrenching laughter that casts a cloak of merriment over direst grief. Air-sleds and jetbikes left their holding positions and made interweaving circles, bright and laughing figures leaping up to catch hold and ride them, their colours leaving bright and shimmering mosaic-trails.

The laughter pealed out from the top of the tower like bells, and hung in the air behind the line of jetbikes and air-sleds like the wake of a boat. Deep in the wasteland beyond where the mon-keigh travelled they would slip into the webway, and soon they would be breathing the fragrant air of a maiden world, rich with spices and flower-perfumes, dancing in warm water across delicate coral sand while the waves chuckled in amongst the roots of the mangrove towers and the moons danced and pinwheeled overhead.

They would mourn their dead, and re-enact the greatest of their myths: the Dream of Lileath, the Veil of Isha, the War in Heaven, the Doom of Eldanesh, the Fall. With the tale-telling they would reconsecrate their precious ritual masks, the heart of the troupe, and then they would roam again, roam up from the coral oceans to the great sighing seas of grass. They would find the camps of their cousins and steal in amongst their tents and tethered dragons, dazzling and bemusing them with shadow and laughter, and then they would make themselves known, step into the light, and dance for them. Perhaps they would tell one of the great stories, perhaps they would tell one of the lesser, perhaps one of the younger stories of the Devourer or the bestial wars about the great Gate.

Or perhaps they would dance a newer story still. A story of strays and travellers, forced by the decay of their old paths to leave the safety of their webway and make quick and secret passage across a world of crackling dunes and bloody, moonless skies. A story of a monstrous storm that not even these swift travellers could outrun. A story of the search for what the storm had taken from them, something more precious to them than the

features of their own faces. A story of ugly, upstart animals who had meddled with something they should never have seen, a story of insolence punished, thievery justly rewarded, desecration turned back on itself. A story of how the great tales would try to play themselves out even through such lumpen mockeries of minds.

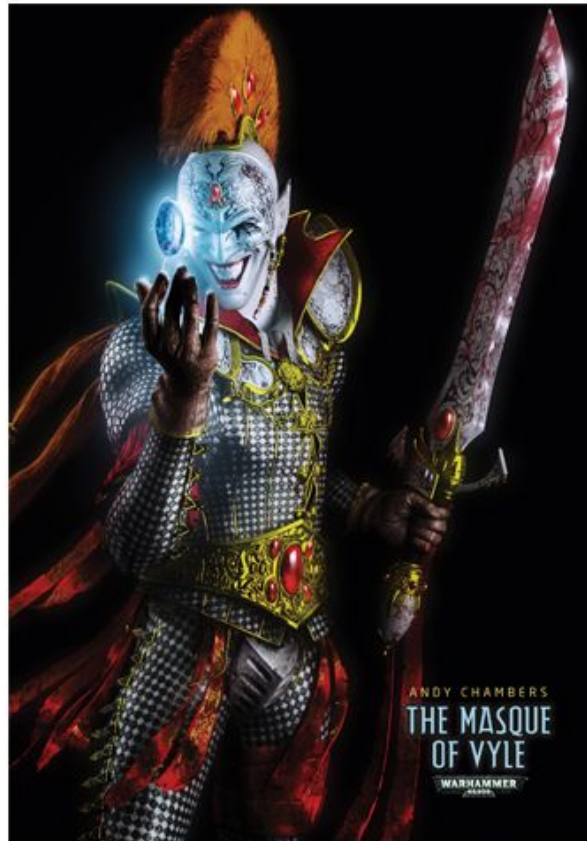
That was the power of the tales. That was the power of the masks. It was a story Sheagoresh had never imagined when he left his old troupe and wrought a new cast of great masks to form the core of a new one, but now they had lived it, the story was part of theirs, to tell and reinterpret and dance for themselves and for others all down the coming years.

The wind picked up, dust-cloud and nightfall drew curtains across the desert. Dull emergency lights glowed in the tower corridors, control telltales sparkled on the operations deck, a vox-alarm squawked unanswered. Nothing moved, and Pipeline Maintenance Depot 347-South-East was swallowed by the desert night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Farrer is the author of the novella 'The Inheritor King', which appears in *Sabbat Crusade*. He also wrote the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Crossfire*, *Legacy* and *Blind*, along with numerous short stories, including 'The Headstone and Hammerstone Kings' for *Sabbat Worlds* and the Horus Heresy tales 'After Desh'ea' and 'Vorax'. He lives and works in Australia.

When a Harlequin troupe discovers a dead Craftworld festering in the webway, they are determined to find the one responsible and exact punishment.



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First published in the *Fear the Alien* anthology in 2010.

First published digitally in 2011.

This eBook edition published in 2015 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Cover by Leo Lesfargue.

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ISBN: 978-1-78251-861-7

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