

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000



# HIDDEN DEPTHS

SANDY MITCHELL

**AN INQUISITOR AMBERLEY VAIL STORY**



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Ciaphas had once suggested the best way to find the local heretics was to crawl down the nearest hole. Like many of his apparently flippant remarks, this had struck Amberley as having an element of truth. As a successful Inquisitor, which was to say one who was not only still breathing but was still sane and relatively unscarred in both body and soul, she had often observed the tendency of the unrighteous to meet secretly in the warren of long-forgotten tunnels, service ducts and built-over bones of earlier cities that riddled the foundations of most Imperial conurbations. Those treading the paths of the Dark Gods needed silence and solitude for their blasphemous rituals, while the kind she was most interested in required storage space for their contraband.

On the other hand, dealers in indicted alien artefacts also liked to remain close to where the shuttles carrying low volume and high value cargoes grounded, which on Ironfound meant the small auxiliary spaceport at the pinnacle of the hive's highest spire. Emperor forbid that the local aristocrats had to wait even a handful of hours for their off-world indulgences.

'Just how reliable is this informant of yours?' she asked casually, slipping a hand inside the slit of her tabard to draw her bolt pistol from the holster at her waist. The garment was dark blue, a fortuitously fashionable colour, which, like the smoky grey of the bodyglove beneath it, blended easily into the shadows of the dimly-lit utility corridor running through the warehousing levels just beneath the landing pads. The public thoroughfares would be thronged with travellers and their entourages, not to mention the plebeians who actually worked there and who arrived and departed by air so as not to trespass on the hallowed precincts of their high-living betters.

'That depends on what you mean by reliable,' Pelton replied. His own sidearm, a starkly functional laspistol devoid of the intricate engravings entwining the Inquisitor's weapon, was holstered in plain sight. The bodyguards of a minor aristocrat like Amberley's cover identity tended to carry their

armament openly in an attempt to intimidate, since most of them were far from proficient in their actual use.

‘Seemed mainly rising, for a dock dreg,’ Zemelda put in helpfully, which Amberley mentally translated as ‘reasonably trustworthy’. Probably. The former street vendor looked like the most improbable lady’s maid imaginable, which, paradoxically, seemed to consolidate her cover with pretty much anyone she came into contact with – provided the bulge in her tabard went unremarked. It disappeared now, as the young woman drew her laspistol, a heartbeat faster than Pelton. He smiled, a proud mentor beaten to the punch by a promising student.

‘Usual drill,’ Amberley said, allowing the slight hardening of her voice to bring everyone’s attention back to the matter in hand. ‘Flicker, Zemmie, you’re with me. The rest of you cover our backs.’

‘An eminently satisfactory disposition of our forces,’ Mott said. Amberley inhaled, ready to tell him to be quiet, but the savant fell silent without prompting, the simple statement apparently having done nothing to trigger a cascade of tangentially related information through his augmented cerebellum.

‘Works for me,’ Yanbel agreed, in his distinctively Kaledonean burr, drawing a laspistol of his own. The tech-priest would be the most effective member of the rearguard if they did come under fire, but Amberley didn’t expect that to happen. At least she hoped it wouldn’t. Mott could handle a gun if he had to, but could easily freeze, too overwhelmed with the complexities of calculating the optimum trajectory to actually pull the trigger. As for the sixth member of the Inquisitorial warband...

‘Rakel,’ Amberley asked, ‘do you feel anything?’

‘Old,’ the psyker said in her rasping voice, her eyes focusing suddenly from infinity to the Inquisitor’s face. ‘Old, and undying.’

‘What is?’ Amberley asked, hoping, if not for a straight answer, at least for one with a couple of clues in it. Tau technosorcery could be strange beyond imagining, but none of their devices were alive. Or undying, which sounded disturbingly like not quite the same thing.

Rakel shrugged eloquently. ‘It’s singing to the void,’ she said, which was no help at all. ‘But the people can’t hear.’

‘People. Right.’ Amberley seized on that. ‘Can you tell how many?’

Rakel waggled the fingers on her right hand. ‘That many.’

‘Thank you.’ Amberley couldn’t tell if the psyker was trying to fold any digits down, but even so, five against three were pretty good odds, when two of them were her and Pelton – and Zemelda was perfectly capable of looking after

herself too. Unless Rakel had been trying to indicate more than five? Amberley decided not to think about that.

‘Bay seventeen,’ Pelton reminded her, *sotto voce*, although there was precious little chance of their voices carrying through the thick, metal access hatch he indicated. Like the rest of their surroundings it was encrusted with the detritus of millennia, and Amberley had to look hard to distinguish its outline through the dirt. At least there was little prospect of being ambushed, she thought; their footprints were the only ones visible in the thick carpet of dust, which rose in knee-high puffs with every step.

‘Yanbel?’ Amberley stood aside, holding her luminator to give the young tech-priest a good view of the locking mechanism.

A smile spread over his face. ‘Haven’t seen one of those in a long time,’ he said, poking at the panel with a mechadendrite that suddenly snaked out from beneath his robe, ‘and that was in a museum. Piece of... Ach, you wee scunner.’ A brief shower of sparks illuminated the corridor for a moment. ‘Whoever consecrated that was a complete rustwit.’ He banged the panel irritably with the butt of his laspistol, and Amberley flinched, but, fortunately, it seemed the safety was still on.

‘Can you get...?’ Zemelda began, but before she could complete the question Yanbel stood back with a satisfied grin. With a loud clunk, the retaining bolts slammed back and the entire hatch fell clear of the wall, crashing to the deck in an explosion of sound which reverberated around the confined space, leaving Amberley’s ears ringing with the overlapping echoes.

‘So much for sneaking up on them,’ Pelton said, and dived through the gap, his laspistol blazing. He wasn’t likely to hit anything, moving so fast and with no target in view, but then he didn’t have to; the smugglers would probably be too busy ducking for cover and wondering what in the warp was happening to retaliate.

Or maybe not. As Amberley followed her acolyte through the open hatch, a bellowing ogryn charged straight at Pelton’s oblivious back, shouldering out of the way a free-standing storage rack that looked solid enough to dent a Rhino as he came. One fist, larger than the gauntlets of a Space Marine’s power armour, was gripping a massive crowbar, already swinging down in a bid to pulp the former Arbitrator’s skull. Seeing the motion out of the corner of his eye, Pelton began twisting aside, far too slowly to evade it.

But Amberley’s reflexes were even sharper. Before the lethal club could make contact, her bolt pistol barked and the ogryn’s skull fragmented in a shrapnel

spray of armour-hard bone.

‘Brisk shot, ma’am,’ Zemelda said, popping through the hatch behind her, and opening up vindictively at a smuggler half-visible behind a crate in the corner. The man yelped and disappeared, but whether that was because he’d taken a hit or was just too sensible to remain in the sightline of a purple-haired Valkyrie blazing away in his general direction, Amberley couldn’t tell.

‘I was aiming for his arm,’ Amberley said with a twinge of regret, although killing the ogryn wouldn’t have lost them that much information – the abhumans were too robust to interrogate easily, and too stupid to notice or understand much of what went on around them in any case. The humans, on the other hand, would tell them plenty. Quickly, if they had any sense, but eventually if they didn’t. She held up her hand, letting the electoo in her palm flash into visibility, and raised her voice. ‘Surrender now, in the name of the Inquisition!’

The bump and clatter of weapons hitting the floor echoed briefly round the storage bay. These ones were sensible, at least in the short term. No doubt some of them would later regret not fighting to the death while they had the chance.

‘We wasn’t expecting the Holy Inquisition,’ a faintly accusing voice said, its owner sidling out from behind the crate Zemelda had been peppering with las burns. A handful of others followed his lead, emerging from whatever bolt holes they’d found for themselves, blinking like rodents emerging from hibernation to find the predators already in residence. Dockyard dregs to a man or woman – in a couple of cases it was hard to be sure.

‘No one ever does,’ Pelton said, eyeing the fellow who’d spoken with evident distaste. Cheap robe, cut in imitation of more expensive styles, too much jewellery and cologne. Trying a little too hard to look prosperous, and thereby clearly labelling himself as an unsuccessful hustler. ‘What’s in the crates?’

‘Cargo,’ the man said. He waved an expansive hand at the boxes and bundles surrounding them. ‘All perfectly legitimate, swear on the aquila. Got some paperwork somewhere...’

‘Legitimate like Horus,’ Zemelda said, kicking the crate she’d already shot halfway to splinters. The wood shattered, spilling the pulverised remnants of a ceramic dinner service, and a couple of thin rectangles of slick, white plastic which had evidently been concealed inside a soup tureen. ‘That’s tau heretech.’

‘Strictly proscribed,’ a dry, reedy voice added, ‘by seven hundred and seventy-eight thousand, six hundred and two separate Imperial ordinances—’

‘Thank you, Mott,’ Amberley said hastily, before the savant could begin quoting them verbatim, and gestured to the rest of the party to join them. She

turned to the squirming merchant. 'I'll need names. Where you got these, who your customers are.' He said nothing, clearly trying to come up with some spurious excuse, and she raised her bolt pistol. 'Now would be good. Unless you think you can manage without kneecaps.'

'Happy to help.' The man nodded earnestly, spraying gobbets of sweat as he did so, clearly in no mood to see if she was bluffing. 'Got 'em off Bran Largo, shipmaster of the *Eternal Faith*.' Zemelda stifled a snort. 'Does the Gravalax run, brings back the odd curio. Never knew he was handling stuff like this, swear on the aq—'

'Of course you didn't,' Amberley said, weighting her voice with just the right amount of scepticism to leave the little ratbag thinking he might still be able to wriggle off the hook if he cooperated. 'But we'll need to see what else he's left you holding.'

'Help yourselves. I'll need a re—' He shook his head, scattering more droplets of sickly-scented sweat, having suddenly thought better of it. 'Just do what you like.'

'We always do,' Pelton said. 'Comes with the job.'

Amberley watched her team disperse, carrying out a quick and meticulous search, while Zemelda held the thoroughly demoralised smugglers at gunpoint. None of them seemed inclined to make a break for it; the corpse of the ogryn was right in their sight line, and the young woman could hardly miss at that range. Pelton broke open crate after crate, discovering almost a dozen pieces of heretech concealed among more innocuous goods, while Yanbel and Mott conferred in undertones, cataloguing every fresh discovery. Only Rakel seemed distracted, although that was nothing new, wandering around the storage unit with her eyes unfocused, muttering continually under her breath. After a few moments Amberley realised the psyker was moving in a definite pattern, looping back and forth around one of the storage racks like a comet drawn in by gravitation only to be flung out again by the angle of its approach.

'Flicker,' she said quietly.

Pelton glanced up, saw what she was looking at and nodded. A few strides took him across the room, to the bank of shelving. Lost in her own universe, perceiving Emperor knew what, Rakel never even noticed his approach, bumping into him and moving on without acknowledgement.

'What's over here?' he asked.

'Nothing,' the sweating man assured him, a little too quickly. 'Old stuff, on the way out. Nothing Largo brought in, swear on the—'

‘Aquila, right.’ Pelton glanced at the manifest stapled to the wood, then across to Amberley, raising an eyebrow in an exaggerated expression of surprise. ‘He’s telling the truth. Routed outsystem.’ He waited just long enough for the flicker of relief to appear in the smuggler’s eyes, and added the kicker. ‘On the *Eternal Faith*.’

‘Really.’ Amberley raised a quizzical eyebrow too. ‘More curios?’

‘That’s right.’ The merchant nodded, painfully eager to be seen to cooperate. ‘Local goods, don’t know what he does with ’em. Market for everything, right?’

‘Right,’ Pelton agreed, having a strong suspicion about the contents of the boxes. About a third of the manufactories on the planet below made armaments of one sort or another, feeding the insatiable maw of the Munitorum, and as surely as water flowed downhill, a small proportion of their output would be diverted to the local underworld. He pried one open, and tried to mask his surprise. ‘This is just junk!’

‘No part of the Ommissiah’s bounty is just junk,’ Yanbel reproved, strolling over to take a look. He glanced inside the crate, frowned, then looked at Amberley. ‘Although this is doing a pretty good imitation.’ He began to sort through the pieces of corroded metalwork. ‘Most of it’s ancient.’

‘Archeotech?’ Amberley asked, and Yanbel shook his head.

‘Old enough to be, but it’s all common enough. Nothing rare or out of the ordinary.’

Which made sense, Amberley thought. The tau were intensely curious about Imperial technology, or what they regarded as its lack, and would quite readily trade for unusual or antiquated pieces. ‘Where does it come from?’ she asked the sweating merchant.

‘Downhive, somewhere,’ he told her. ‘Arlen, that’s Arlen Sprigg, does a lot of trade with the lower levels.’

‘And the spire?’ Amberley asked, already knowing the answer. Tau technosorcery was expensive, far too much so for the ordinary citizen, and held a dangerous fascination for the young aristocracy of Ironfound.

‘Believe so, yes,’ the smuggler confirmed, sprinkling his immediate surroundings again with the vigour of his nod. ‘Very well connected is Arlen.’

‘Then I think we’re done,’ Amberley said, feeling the faint tremor through the soles of her shoes which indicated the arrival at the pad overhead of the plain, unremarkable shuttle she’d ordered. All that was left to be done was herd the survivors of the gang aboard, and they’d disappear forever, along with every trace of the contraband. The dead ogryn would have to be moved, of course,

probably with the aid of a cargo servitor, unless she just left the cadaver there to sow a bit of paranoia among the local law enforcers...

‘Ommissiah’s circuits!’ Yanbel said, hauling something from the depths of the box he’d been rummaging in. He held it gingerly, at the farthest extent of his mechadendrite, fascinated and repulsed. The object glowed softly, in gentle rippling patterns, which struck highlights from the metallic parts of his face.

‘*Tears of Isha*,’ Amberley said, the eldar phrase falling unbidden from her lips.

‘It’s calling,’ Rakel said, staring at the refulgent stone as if hypnotised. ‘But they can’t hear it.’

‘Who can’t?’ Zemelda asked.

‘The eldar.’ It took a lot to surprise an Inquisitor, but, for some reason, Amberley found her voice sounded huskier than usual. ‘It’s one of their spirit stones.’

‘Eldar, you say?’ Arlen Sprigg shrugged, and pushed the spirit stone back across his polished wooden desk: an item which, on a world that had seen its last tree millennia ago, spoke volumes about his wealth and influence. A faint, phantom stone followed it, reflected in the gleaming wood. ‘I had no idea.’

‘Clearly,’ Amberley said, suppressing the urge to extend the hand she put out to pick it up a little further and jab him somewhere non-fatal but agonising. Instead, she nodded politely, as though the conversation was really as civilised as they were both pretending it to be. ‘Or you’d never have traded it so cheaply.’

‘Quite so,’ Sprigg agreed, leaning back in his overstuffed leather chair, another thumbed nose to Ironfound’s ravaged ecosystem. His office and adjoining apartments were high on the prime spire, almost level with the tops of the lesser ones surrounding it; only the governor’s court and a handful of favoured noble families held estates further up. Beyond the wide windows, pressurised against air too thin to breathe at this altitude, the horizon curved, forever shrouded in the diarrhoea-coloured clouds which hid most of the surface of Ironfound from view. Close at hand, the vast outcrops of the main hive could be glimpsed through the wind-stirred murk, and an occasional luminator gleamed, but for the most part they could have been marooned on a dead world.

‘Treason clearly pays well,’ Amberley said, not wanting the man to get too comfortable. At the moment he was wary, but still arrogant enough to believe he could deal his way out of this, that his court and social connections could somehow protect him from the displeasure of the Inquisition. A mistake far more powerful people than him had made before now, only to be equally disappointed.

‘Hardly treason,’ Sprigg said, smiling in a manner he no doubt thought was disarming. He looked about forty, with just enough grey around the temples to suggest maturity of judgement, although Amberley was familiar enough with the frequently juvenated to estimate his true age as at least three times that. Good. Anyone that determined to cling to life would be mortally afraid to lose it.

‘Rank treason,’ Amberley said, allowing the steel to enter her voice. ‘Consorting with xenos for profit. Polluting the Imperium with their unhallowed devices. Many of my colleagues would have executed you out of hand the minute they walked through the door.’

‘But you didn’t,’ Sprigg said, the first hint of nervousness entering his tone.

‘I didn’t,’ Amberley agreed, ‘because even cheese-mould like you can still be useful.’ The insult was carefully timed, and she waited for his reaction: sudden anger, swiftly damped down, flickering in the back of his eyes. Good. He wasn’t nearly as sure of himself as he was trying to pretend.

‘I’m not without influence,’ Sprigg said, trying to salvage his dignity, and imply a threat at the same time.

Amberley waved a dismissive hand. ‘We’ll get on to your fellow conspirators after you’ve given us your contacts. Up to you how much screaming’s involved in that. But right now, you have another choice to make.’

‘A choice,’ Sprigg repeated, as though the words were in an unfamiliar language he was hoping to decode.

‘About how you’re going to be useful.’ Amberley paused, letting her words sink in. ‘You’ve got two options that I can see. Informant. Or servitor, if there’s enough left to make one after the interrogators have finished.’

‘You’re bluffing,’ Sprigg said, in the flat tone of someone trying desperately to convince himself, and pressed a button on the underside of the desk that he’d clearly, fondly imagined was concealed.

‘I’ll take that as a vote for servitor, then,’ Amberley said, drawing her bolt pistol.

Pelton appeared at the door and grinned in a manner far from reassuring. ‘If you’re waiting for your guards,’ he told Sprigg conversationally, ‘they’re a bit dead at the moment.’

The colour drained from Sprigg’s face, and he sagged back into the embrace of the overstuffed chair. ‘I can assure you of my full cooperation,’ he said woodenly.

‘Good.’ Amberley stood, re-holstering her sidearm, and walked around the desk, perching comfortably on the edge of it. As she leaned forward, Sprigg

leaned back. ‘That wasn’t so hard, was it?’ The truth was, she’d never had the slightest intention of executing him; a man as well-connected as Sprigg would be far more useful as a long-term informant. But so long as he believed his life hung by a thread unless he cooperated, she saw no reason to mention the fact. ‘Now, the spirit stone. Where did you get your greasy hands on it?’

The journey downhive had been swift at first, thanks to the funicular which connected the mid-hive to the spire. Now, however, they’d reached the most populous levels, and the palanquin Amberley had hired was moving so slowly through the crowd-choked streets that they probably would be making better time on foot. On the other hand, the liveried servitors carrying the thing fitted her cover, and were a constant reminder to Sprigg of the consequences of failing to deliver on his promises of cooperation.

‘If you’re lying to me,’ Amberley remarked casually, twisting the knife, ‘I’ll see to it that they don’t wipe your mind completely when they rebuild you into a sewer scrubber.’ The space beyond the palanquin’s curtains throbbed with sound, the ceaseless chatter of millions of voices and the never-ending rumble of the manufactories below.

‘This is the dealer I got it from,’ Sprigg assured her, his face a good deal greyer than when their journey started. ‘I do a lot of business with him.’

‘Legal business?’ Amberley asked, and Sprigg hesitated for a moment, his silence more eloquent than words.

‘Weapons,’ Pelton said bluntly. On the lower levels of the hive there were no peacekeepers, and what little law there was belonged to whoever could hire a bounty hunter, or control a strong enough gang to carve out a defensible territory.

‘Mostly,’ Sprigg admitted, ‘but there are other things. Food, medical supplies...’

‘Buzz, ’slaught, clinker...’ Amberley suggested, and Sprigg nodded again. All proscribed drugs, all fatal in the long term, all highly profitable.

Amberley twitched one of the draperies aside, and looked out at the teeming market which occupied a vast hall illuminated by innumerable glow strips some ten metres overhead; a fair proportion of them were dark, others flickering in a manner she found vaguely ominous. Unbidden, the image of what this place would be like if the lights failed altogether sprang into her mind and she shuddered; thousands would undoubtedly die in the ensuing panic.

‘That looks like it,’ Pelton said, and indicated a large pavilion, decorated with

garishly coloured bunting. ‘But I still think the stone came from off-world.’ He glared mistrustfully at Sprigg.

‘Which is why the others are checking out the starport,’ Amberley reminded him, although privately she shared his doubts. How an eldar artefact could end up on Ironfound in the first place, let alone find its way this deep into its principal hive, she had no idea.

‘I got it from Jeffon,’ Sprigg insisted. ‘He’ll tell you.’

With a sudden jerk, the palanquin stopped moving, and the tech-smuggler scrambled out with almost indecent haste, averting his eyes from the servitors carrying it. A large, florid man, with an extravagant beard laced and plaited in the latest styles, hurried from the pavilion to greet him.

‘Arlen, you old rascal, it’s been far too long!’ Sprigg staggered under a slap on the back delivered with all the subtlety of an ork. ‘And you’ve brought a lady friend!’ He held out a large, be-ringed hand, to help Amberley descend.

‘Ah, yes.’ Remembering his part, Sprigg waved introductions, while Pelton jumped down and took up his expected station at Amberley’s shoulder. ‘Jeffon, this is Milady Vail.’

‘Clearly a lady of taste and discernment.’ The bearded merchant waved a hand in the direction of his pavilion. ‘I take it you’re a collector of curios from the underhive?’

‘Something like that,’ Amberley said, following him inside while Pelton took up station next to the entrance flap. Better that her conversation with the Guildsman went unheard by other customers. Sprigg took a hesitant step after them, then thought better of it, feigning interest in a display of carved finger bones on a rickety table outside.

‘I have an excellent selection of scrimshaw,’ Jeffon said, directing Amberley’s attention to a rack of similar pieces of better quality just inside the curtain. Most of the merchandise on offer appeared to have been handmade by skilled artisans making the best use of limited materials. A bright carpet of intricate weave covered the floor and several others were rolled up, awaiting inspection. ‘Or, if your interest is more in the fruits of the Omnissiah, I’ll warrant you won’t often have seen finer specimens of classical workmanship than these.’ He pointed to a shelf of ancient ironmongery, most of it so corroded as to be beyond identification. ‘And, of course, we’re famed for our hand-woven textiles, made with the finest spider hairs...’

‘I was hoping you could tell me where you found this,’ Amberley said, pulling the spirit stone from a leather pouch she’d placed it in, wary of its polychromatic

glow attracting attention in the crowded streets. ‘Arlen said he’d bought it from you.’

Jeffon nodded. ‘I remember that. Picked it up as part of a job lot from a scavvy gang at a deep level trading post. Not the sort of thing I usually carry, to be honest, but shinies always do well, so I thought I might take a chance on it.’

‘So you’ve no idea what it might be?’ Amberley asked, loading her voice with just the right amount of ingenuous curiosity.

Jeffon shook his head. ‘You get all sorts of odd crystals down in the sump,’ he said. ‘Hardly surprising, when you consider what ends up there, reacting away in the pits. Don’t deal in them myself, but I can recommend a few gem cutters. All reliable, won’t palm you off with anything toxic.’

‘I’ll pay them a visit, then,’ Amberley said, conscious that the woman she was pretending to be would never contemplate venturing further downhive than this. ‘I don’t suppose you remember who the scavvies were, do you?’ she added. ‘In case one of the dealers has a contact who can ask if they found any more?’

‘The Dog Eaters,’ Jeffon said promptly, ‘from Ebon Flow. Widely connected. Lot of the middlemen know them.’

‘I’m sure,’ Amberley said, in the right tone of polite disinterest, while she absorbed this latest surprise. It seemed the stone really had come from the lowest levels of the hive, possibly even the sump. And the scavvies who’d found it must be a force to be reckoned with, if they really were able to eat dog frequently enough for the delicacy to become associated with them.

She lingered a short while longer, buying a spider hair carpet that she thought would go well on the floor of her study aboard the *Externus Exterminatus*, before pushing her way out through the flap. As she re-entered the bustle of the market, she nodded to the hovering Sprigg, who took a couple of paces closer with the air of a gretchin running an errand for a large and hungry ork.

‘Will he be useful?’ she asked, reminding him again of the obligation he was now under. ‘For the network you’ll be running for me?’

‘Jeffon? Of course.’ Sprigg looked as though the ork had just licked its lips. ‘He’s got contacts all through the hive.’

‘Fine.’ She glanced at Pelton. ‘Let him live for now,’ she instructed for Sprigg’s benefit, and returned her attention to the merchant, wondering if he could possibly turn any greyer. ‘I’ll expect something useful from the pair of you when I get back.’

‘That means we’re going deeper, doesn’t it?’ Pelton said, reading her expression with the ease of long practice, and Amberley nodded.

‘All the way to the bottom,’ she confirmed.

Ebon Flow was a typical underhive community, perching just above the sump on the lip of a chasm too deep for sight to penetrate by the feeble illumination of the speckling of lights across the vast cavern roof, each glimmer marking the location of a hamlet or hivestead.

The journey to reach it had been no more eventful than Amberley had anticipated, which was to say that since entering the underhive they’d only been attacked three times by gangers, once by wandering redemptionists, and on a handful of occasions by specimens of the local wildlife hungry or stupid enough to pounce on armed humans. She supposed the trip would have been easier if they’d joined a caravan and left the fighting to the guards, but news travelled fast in the underhive and the presence of strangers would be noted far in advance of their arrival. In the end she’d judged it best to make their own way, confident of her associates’ ability to defend themselves.

An ability she was hoping wouldn’t be called for now, as flickers of movement in the pervading shadows danced in her peripheral vision.

‘I make it eight of them following us,’ Pelton remarked quietly.

‘Ten,’ Yanbel corrected, his augmetic eyes glittering with reflections from the scattered camp fires and flickering lamps around and within the hovels. Most of them clung to the sides of a steep, broken slope, which rose up from the wide, clear ledge bordering the precipice. Beyond, the glossy black wastefall which gave the place its name thundered into the depths. The tech-priest uttered a squeal of binary, communing with Amberley’s data-slate, and icons appeared on the screen, pinpointing the positions of their stalkers.

‘Thank you.’ For a moment she regretted leaving her suit of power armour behind, missing its sophisticated tactical display and array of sensory augmentations, but it would have been impossibly cumbersome in some of the confined spaces they’d had to squeeze through. Not to mention pretty much guaranteeing that everyone they met would flee in terror before she had a chance to converse with them. ‘Can you tell if they’re armed?’

‘I think we can safely assume that they are,’ Mott interjected, ‘given that the chances of survival of anyone without a weapon in an environment this hostile would be on the order of three per cent in any given year.’

‘That high?’ Zemelda asked sarcastically, and Amberley waved her to silence.

‘This looks like their leader.’

‘Fear walks behind her,’ Rakel put in, apropos of nothing that Amberley could

see. The woman facing her was of indeterminate age, swathed in an intricately patterned blanket which looked so similar to the ones in Jeffon's pavilion that it had almost certainly come from the same loom. She wore a helmet of beaten metal; after a moment, Amberley identified the lumps and ridges protruding from it as the limbs and body of a stylised spider, skilfully wrought in the same material. The decoration was scratched and dented in several places, mostly where a skilled opponent would strike in an attempt to stun or kill the helmet's wearer. The woman carried a crossbow, loaded and drawn, but kept it pointing down and away from the approaching Inquisitorial retinue.

'If you reach for a weapon, you die,' the woman said, and Amberley believed it; or, at least, believed that the woman believed it. Quite a lot of people, and not a few things, had tried to kill Amberley Vail over the last few decades, and all had found the job a good deal harder than it looked.

'We're peaceful,' Amberley assured her, keeping her hand well clear of the bolt pistol at her waist. If necessary, she could take the spokeswoman down with the digital needler in the ring she habitually wore, and achieve total surprise. No doubt the lurkers surrounding them already had the group in their sights, but would be too stunned after such an unexpected reversal to react quickly enough to avoid becoming targets themselves.

The woman's mouth twitched, in what might have been a smile. 'You won't last long down here, then,' she said. 'What brings you to Ebon Flow?'

'Glowing stones,' Amberley said. She reached slowly into her pack, and held up a standard Munitorum ration bar. 'We'll be happy to trade for information.'

'You'll need to be happier than that,' the woman said, relaxing almost imperceptibly. 'About five times happier.'

'Three,' Amberley said, taking out another two bars, 'and four more if we find what we're looking for.'

'Fair enough,' the woman said, taking the food, and sniffing suspiciously at it. Satisfied, she threw the three bars into the shadows, where they were snatched out of the air by scurrying children. 'Dog Eaters are the ones you want. But they went over, two, three days ago.'

'Went over where?' Pelton asked, then followed the direction of her gaze to the brink of the precipice. 'Oh.'

The woman shrugged. 'You can wait, see if they come back this way.'

'Kind as your offer is,' Amberley said, 'we'll go after them.' The scavvies could climb back out of the sump in a score of places, and likely as not would head for the nearest trading post to dispose of whatever they found rather than

return straight here anyway.

‘There’s a hole,’ Rakel said suddenly, shivering violently. ‘A hole in everything.’

‘We’d noticed,’ Zemelda told her, kicking a loose pebble over the lip of the drop. It must have hit bottom somewhere, but the never-ending roar of the wastefall swallowed any echoes it might have made.

‘I would advise caution,’ Mott said, following Amberley along the narrowing ledge. ‘Judging by the topography, I would estimate the sump floor to be at least a kilometre beneath this position.’

‘Let’s hope there’s a ladder then,’ Amberley said, trying to sound as though she was joking.

There wasn’t a ladder, of course, but to Amberley’s relief a well-worn trail began at the end of the ledge, descending into the depths in a series of outcrops which formed a rough, irregular staircase. At this depth it was hard to tell if they were bedrock or unimaginably ancient rockcrete; in either case, they were surfaced with loose grit that slipped a little under every footfall, a sensation Amberley found faintly alarming until she grew used to it. Fortunately the route seemed sufficiently well established for someone to have riveted additional hand and footholds to the stone or rockcrete, and even Rakel found the going reasonably easy.

‘Undoubtedly the reason for the settlement,’ Mott said when she remarked on it. ‘Ebon Flow would have begun as a waystation on the path to the sump, and prospered as scavengers passed through it in both directions. Eventually some, such as the Dog Eaters, would have made their homes there—’

‘Which way?’ Pelton interrupted, as the route forked. The main path was clear, continuing to descend ahead of them, while a narrow, crumbling ledge, barely wide enough to stand on, meandered away into the darkness, more or less on the same level.

‘I vote down,’ Zemelda said. ‘That’s not even a path.’

‘I concur,’ Mott agreed, ‘merely a topographical anomaly creating the illusion of an alternative route.’

‘Wait a moment.’ Amberley shone her luminator along it. ‘There are scuff marks. Someone could have gone that way.’

‘There are footprints on the path too,’ Pelton pointed out. ‘Whole ones, not scratches which could just as easily have been made by falling rocks.’

‘Good point,’ Amberley conceded. Every moment they hesitated, the Dog

Eaters would be moving further ahead.

She shone her luminator down into the depths, hoping to see some further sign of the scavvies' presence. A pale reflection glimmered, the light striking back from a miasmatic swamp of toxic sludge, while deep shadows mottled the cliff face, shifting eerily in the beam's penumbra. She swept it outward, following a trail of stepping stones across the mire until they disappeared beyond its range. 'We'll need to watch our step. That looks deep enough to drown in.'

'Indubitably,' Mott agreed. 'Given the rate of flow, probable evaporation and most likely extent, I would estimate an average depth of between ten and twelve metres...'

Amberley stopped listening; if the savant had anything really germane to add, he would have said it first. She turned, resolved to continue the descent, and brought the luminator beam up the side of the cliff face, checking the downward route one last time. A huge area of the vertical wall seemed to be rippling, and she flinched, anticipating the rumble of a landslide – then the true reason occurred to her, and she drew her bolt pistol.

'Run!' She was taking her own advice even before she finished speaking. The shadows she'd noticed before were moving, scuttling up the cliff face almost impossibly fast. She nailed one with the luminator, confirming her worst suspicions. 'Spiders!'

A whole swarm of the deadly sump-dwelling creatures, each as big as a cyber-mastiff, was skittering towards them, attracted by the presence of prey. Far too many to fight off in the open.

'Suddenly this looks like the safer option,' Yanbel said, hurrying along the narrow ledge behind her. The vanguard of the swarm was beginning to appear over the cliff edge behind them, and Amberley sent a shot hissing through the intervening air in their general direction. Though it had been unaimed, her instincts were good, and the leading spider popped like an offal-filled balloon. A few stopped to take advantage of the unexpected meal but the rest scuttled on, like an approaching tidal bore of snapping mandibles.

'Depends on your definition of safe,' Amberley said, recovering her balance in the nick of time as the lip of the ledge crumbled beneath her foot. It was narrowing by the moment, already forcing her to move along it sideways, and she began to wonder if she'd just herded them into a trap.

'Secure, harmless, a vault...' Mott began automatically, hurrying as best he could under the circumstances, which wasn't much; as well as keeping his footing, he was attempting to support Rakel, who trotted ahead of him with her

usual unfocused expression. Zemelda and Pelton brought up the rear, sniping with their laspistols, but for every spider they downed another four poured up and over the cliff edge.

‘They’re beneath us!’ Pelton called, but Amberley had already seen the danger. As sure-footed on a vertical surface as on the level, the bulk of the swarm were spreading out beneath them like blood from a severed artery, flowing ahead to cut off whatever lay at the end of the ledge. The first arachnoid to straddle the narrow path turned to face them, its mandibles clacking like the teeth of a man in a snowstorm, and Amberley gunned it down, gaining a second or two of grace.

‘We’re cut off,’ Amberley told everyone, glancing back, but there was no returning the way they’d come either. The spiders were above and below the path now, as well as blocking it entirely. None of the weapons they had with them could hope to make much of an impression on a swarm of that size.

‘Keep going,’ Rakel said calmly, her lucidity all the more startling for being dropped into the frenzy of combat. ‘Look for the crack in the world.’ Which, if hardly less cryptic than most of her utterances, at least sounded purposeful. And it was for these moments of insight that Amberley kept her around.

‘Right.’ Amberley cleared the ledge and its immediate surroundings with a volley of rapid fire. The clip of bolts in her pistol was now empty, but under the circumstances there was no point trying to conserve ammunition. She hurried forward, snapping a fresh load in as she moved, her heels slipping for a heart-stopping moment in the spilled spider blood. Then the breath caught in her throat. A few metres away, light was spilling from a cleft in the rock, dim and flickering.

Without stopping to think, she ducked her head and wriggled through.

For a moment Amberley wondered if she’d simply swapped one form of death for another, slithering head first down a narrow, steeply-inclined cleft in the rock to a hard and messy landing. She couldn’t see much with her arms raised to protect her head, but the glow seemed to be brighter at the far end, and she flinched, anticipating a plunge into some chemically-fluorescent pool of effluent. Someone was whooping behind her, probably Zemelda, but the echoes in the confined space made it hard to tell if it was from exhilaration or fear. Probably both, knowing her most recent recruit...

Abruptly the cleft spat her out, and Amberley found herself falling heavily onto a thick mat of foul-smelling moss, which at least broke her fall without breaking anything else. She rolled aside, just in time to be missed by Yanbel’s

boots, and the ensuing cascade of her entourage.

‘Rank,’ Zemelda said, grimacing at the residue of mush the relatively soft landing had left on her jacket.

‘You’d rather have landed on the rocks?’ Pelton asked, and the young woman shrugged.

‘No chance. I was right behind you.’

‘Concentrate!’ Amberley said, recalling everyone to business. A small amount of banter was inevitable in the first rush of relief at not being dead after all, and she intended to make sure they all stayed that way. ‘Mott, Yanbel, best guesses. Where the frak are we?’

‘A forgotten cavern,’ Yanbel said, taking in their surroundings properly for the first time. The dim, diffuse light made it hard to be sure, but Amberley estimated the far wall to be at least a couple of kilometres away. ‘Cut off by a hivequake, maybe.’

‘Entirely plausible,’ Mott agreed. ‘Or perhaps opened up by one. It would have been considerably below the original surface of Ironfound, and probably escaped the notice of the original colonists entirely.’

‘If it’s not a stupid question,’ Zemelda asked, ‘how come we can see?’

‘Not stupid at all,’ Amberley said, turning back to the tech-priest and the savant. ‘Any ideas?’

‘Bioluminescence of some kind,’ Yanbel said. He gestured towards a cluster of softly-glowing columns in the distance, which looked to Amberley like the boles of tall, elegant trees. All appeared to be bare of leaves, or even branches, but it was hard to be entirely sure, as their lower halves were thickly entwined with sickly vegetation.

‘A creditable hypothesis,’ Mott agreed, ‘but not the only one. Those columns appear more regularly spaced than seems entirely consistent with random growth.’

‘You mean somebody planted them?’ Amberley said, trying to ignore a prickle of apprehension on the back of her neck.

‘Or constructed them,’ Mott added. ‘Until we examine them, we cannot be certain that they’re organisms at all.’

‘The hole’s still open,’ Rakel said suddenly, staring off into the distance.

‘She’s right,’ Pelton said, glancing up at the cleft in the rock through which they’d so precipitously descended, some three or four metres above their heads. ‘And someone’s been using it.’

A rope ladder was dangling from the lip, still swaying gently from the

turbulence of their passage, and Amberley breathed a sigh of relief as she realised how close they must all have come to the iron staple from which it hung. At the speed they'd descended, it would have cracked an impacting skull like an overripe plon.

'The Dog Eaters?' Zemelda asked, reaching the obvious conclusion an instant after the Inquisitor herself.

'I'm afraid so,' Amberley said, with a rising sense of foreboding. 'Far more likely they found the *Tears of Isha* here than in the main hive.'

This raised a whole raft of further uncomfortable questions. The only place the Dog Eaters could have taken a soul stone from was a dead eldar, though what the enigmatic xenos might be doing in the depths of an Imperial hive was anybody's guess. Let alone what might have killed them.

Well, there'd be time enough to worry about that if they found some. In the meantime her duty was clear. She gestured at the cleft in the rock. 'We need to seal that when we leave. I don't want any more xenos artefacts getting into the hive before the Deathwatch can cleanse the place properly.' Though how they were going to close the tunnel was a problem. 'If we had some explosives...'

'I've got some fyceline charges,' Yanbel said, pulling a bulky package from a pocket of his robe, 'and a couple of timers.' He watched, puzzled, as his companions edged away a little.

'And you carry those around all the time?' Amberley asked, trying to keep her voice casual.

'Never know when they might come in handy,' the tech-priest explained, and the inquisitor bit down on the impulse to ask what else he might keep tucked away on that basis. Some questions were better left unanswered.

'Good.' She indicated the swaying ladder. 'Shin up there and set the charges. We'll blow them as soon as we're back through.' Climbing the narrow shaft would be uncomfortable, but no more than that; if the Dog Eaters came here frequently enough to have installed a ladder, the route couldn't be that difficult. Which rather begged the question of what else they'd found down here, to make the effort of repeated visits worthwhile.

There was no time to consider the matter any further, however, as the unmistakable sound of gunfire suddenly echoed between the eerily glowing columns.

For a moment Amberley hesitated. The protection of Ironfound and its billions of inhabitants had to be their highest priority. But you can't fight your enemies until you know who they are. She turned to Pelton. 'Flicker, with me.' Her gaze

swept across the rest of the party. 'Everyone else stay put, and get those charges set.'

'I'm on it, ma'am,' Zemelda assured her, checking the charge in her laspistol.

'Good.' More shots rang out, and Amberley ran towards them, Pelton at her side.

They lost sight of the cleft through which they'd come within moments, weaving through the forest of glowing columns and their overlay of parasitic vegetation at a rapid, energy-conserving jog. The moss still felt springy beneath Amberley's bootsoles, but was thinner here, with patches of bare rock appearing sporadically through it.

She slowed a little as they skirted one of the columns, less overgrown than most, and tried to take in as much detail as she could; whatever it was made of was smooth, like alabaster, a gentle radiance emanating from deep within its heart. Faint patterns seemed to be visible on its surface, and she hesitated, on the brink of stopping to investigate, only to pick up her pace again as soon as another fusillade of shots echoed from somewhere up ahead.

'Those plants have been eaten,' Pelton said, raising his laspistol as he ran, and scanning the shrubs between the glowing columns with even greater caution than before. Amberley nodded. Where there were herbivores, carnivores usually followed, a point almost immediately underlined by a sudden thrashing and squealing in the undergrowth, abruptly cut off.

The going underfoot seemed to be getting easier, and after a moment Amberley realised why: they were following a pathway between the columns, an occasional patch of brightly-coloured tiling appearing through the encroaching moss. Another unpleasant surprise; paths tended to lead somewhere, and she couldn't shake the feeling that in this case it was directly to trouble. The scavvies would probably have followed it on their first visit and found at least one dead eldar at the other end, or even, judging by the sounds of combat, a live one, and gunned down the original possessor of the soul stone they'd taken back to the underhive.

'Emperor's blood!' Amberley swore under her breath, as she considered the implications of that. Live eldar infesting the roots of Ironfound was a prospect almost too terrible to contemplate. Why they would be there, and how they'd arrived, were still beyond her, although a dark and terrible suspicion was beginning to nag at the corners of her mind.

'Looks like buildings up ahead,' Pelton warned, and Amberley checked the

action of her bolt pistol. The all-pervasive glow was growing brighter, with more of the substance the columns were made of rearing up into strange, smooth-sided outcrops, spreading out in both directions. Pelton could well be right, she thought – the openings in their sides looked remarkably like windows and doors, while rib-like buttresses fluted out from the largest structures.

Acting instantly on the thought, Amberley stepped off the path, squirming between the shrubs. If she'd been fortifying the ruins she'd have posted a sharpshooter to watch the most obvious entry point, and, in her experience, walking across the gun sights of an ambusher seldom ended well.

'Are you sure about this?' Pelton asked quietly, floundering in her wake. There were rustlings in the undergrowth around them, and sudden flickers of movement.

'No.' Something broke cover and darted away, and she caught sight of a small, quadrupedal saurian barrelling through the brush. Thick armour plates covered its back, and its tail ended in a spike-encrusted club any ork would be proud to own. 'I'm just making it up as I go along.'

Pelton shrugged. 'That's always worked till now,' he said, thumbing his palm.

Amberley pretended not to have seen the good luck gesture. 'Come on. We can get through here.'

They broke through the screening vegetation, and found themselves surrounded by softly glowing walls, ribbed and mounded like a vast coral reef. Brushing against one, Amberley was surprised to find it cool to the touch, the light flaring momentarily where her skin touched the smooth surface. The effect was almost hypnotic – so much so that she almost missed the flicker of movement in the vegetation behind her.

Almost, but not quite. With a guttural roar, a bipedal saurian half as tall as she was erupted from the bushes, toothed mouth agape, talons extended to eviscerate its prey. A charred crater suddenly appeared, seared deep into the hide of its powerful shoulder muscles, as Pelton snapped off a shot, but the creature barely slowed. Pelton's intervention did buy her enough time to pivot out of the path of the creature's initial rush, though, and she fired her bolt pistol as it turned to snap at her. The explosive bolt detonated inside the saurian's mouth, reducing brain and skull to puree, but the huge lizard took almost a minute to realise it was dead, running almost a hundred metres past the two humans before crashing to the ground.

'No point trying to be stealthy after that,' Amberley said, and followed it out into the open.

She found herself in a wide, oval plaza, surrounded by the strange, glowing buildings; in the centre of it a decorative archway stood, of plain stone, incised with the elegant flowing lines of eldar script. The moss was less widespread here, revealing more of the intricate design worked into the paving, which the Inquisitor was far from surprised to find appearing as a labyrinth of quite stunning complexity.

The silence was abruptly broken by a fusillade of shots, and the sound of running feet; a scavvy appeared from between the buildings, firing wildly behind him, a panicked attempt at suppression rather than a concerted attempt to hit something. Seeing Amberley and Pelton, he changed direction towards them, gesturing frantically. 'Get back!' he yelled. They're right behind—'

Then his head exploded into mist, and he collapsed, the cadaver sliding a few metres under its own momentum. Needing no further urging, Amberley and Pelton melted back into the shadows.

No sooner had they reached concealment than an eldar appeared, his flickering outline blurred by a cameleonic cape, his long-barrelled weapon still pointing at the fallen scavvy. Apparently satisfied with the kill, he strolled over to it, and began searching the body with a fluid economy of motion no human could have matched. A moment later a second warrior joined him, and stood, watching expectantly; the first raised his head and addressed her in the liquid cadences of their own tongue.

*'The mon'keigh does not possess it.'*

*'One of its companions, then.'*

*'All are slain. Kallander's soul remains lost.'*

The second eldar seemed to consider the matter.

*'Then it has passed into the dwellings of the mon'keigh. We will follow.'*

'Not a good idea,' Amberley interjected, walking out into the open. She held up the leather pouch. *'I have come far to return this. It seems I have found its true place.'*

'You find death,' the first eldar said, raising his rifle again with inhuman speed and dexterity. Amberley dived aside as he pulled the trigger, knowing as she did so that it was far too late. The spinning monomolecular discs hissed through the air towards her, seconds away from shredding her torso.

Then, with a crack of imploding air, her displacer field cut in, and she found herself falling to the ground a hundred metres away, tucking instinctively into a roll which brought her back to her feet. The eldar who'd fired at her was still looking round in bemusement when Pelton shot him, two laspistol bolts

slamming into his back in the approved Arbitrator's double tap. As he fell, coughing blood, his companion raised her own weapon, returning fire just as Pelton ducked back into cover.

*'Only fools and orks fight without cause,'* Amberley said, shooting her in the leg and running forward. The limb exploded in blood and offal as the miniature bolt detonated, and the eldar fell, crying out in pain and surprise. Her rifle fell to the ground, and Amberley kicked it out of reach in the nick of time. *'I would ask which you are, but your face isn't green.'*

*'Mock while you can, mon'keigh girl,'* the eldar snarled. *'Death walks at your heels from this day on.'*

Pelton hurried across to join her, glancing down at the stricken eldar. 'I'm guessing whatever they're saying, it isn't thank you,' he said.

'You guess right,' Amberley told him. She took the spirit stone from the pouch, and dropped it in the lap of the eldar Pelton had shot. Both xenos stared at the flickering jewel in astonishment. *'If you recover, choose your enemies more carefully,'* she counselled.

*'This world is ours,'* the female replied, glaring hate as she patched her wounded leg. *'We nurtured it and prepared it, and we have seen what you have made of it. We will return, and take our revenge.'*

*'Then you leave me no choice,'* Amberley said, with a trace of regret, and raised her bolt pistol again, preparing to execute the pair of them. The billions of oblivious Ironfounders above their heads would never be safe if these two succeeded in summoning their brethren. But before she could fire, another eldar ghosted into the plaza, raising its rifle as it came. She switched aim, and fired, sending it diving for cover, then took advantage of the momentary respite to do the same thing herself. As soon as she was out of the xenos' sightline, she sprinted for the bushes.

'Is that it, then?' Pelton asked, picking up his pace to match hers. One of the first things an Inquisitorial acolyte learned is that when the inquisitor starts running, it's best to keep up.

'Far from it,' Amberley said.

She raised her bolt pistol, and snapped off a shot at a blur of motion between the trees. Nothing showed clearly, but the cameoline cloaks of the eldar rangers would render them almost invisible in the dense brush, only the faintest flicker of movement revealing their presence. The bolt exploded harmlessly in a blizzard of wood chippings, but the whisper of movement stilled, in a rustle of branches. She must have come close enough to at least alarm the lurking eldar.

On the other hand, if one of them was completely still, carefully sighting its sniper rifle, the only indication they'd have of its presence would be a hail of deadly razor-sharp discs. The displacer had saved her once, but the device was too erratic to rely on entirely, and could easily fail to react in time; while Pelton had nothing to protect him at all.

'Two o'clock,' the ex-arbitrator said, snapping off a shot of his own. It had no discernible effect, but the leaves had rustled there a little too loudly to have been moved entirely by the air currents. 'Have I mentioned I hate cameoline lately?'

'Not since the last time we ran into assassins wearing it,' Amberley said, aiming her bolt pistol down the path they'd travelled before. The sound of running feet was echoing between the glowing columns, and although their timbre was familiar, this was no time to be taking chances.

'You found the eldar, then,' Yanbel said, coming into view just ahead of the panting Mott and the blank-faced Rakel.

'What was your first clue?' she asked, with rather more asperity than she'd intended. Ciaphas was good at that, a confidence-boosting quip in the face of danger, but getting the tone right was harder than it seemed.

'That would have been the first shot you fired,' Mott said, 'the timbre of a bolt pistol being quite distinctive, and noticeably different from the crude firearms of the scavvy gang.'

'I appreciate the thought,' Amberley said, puzzled, 'but I told you to stay put.' It wasn't like any of them to ignore orders, and charge to the rescue like pict-drama heroes. They had too much tactical sense for that.

'Easier said than done,' Yanbel replied, turning to send a laspistol bolt down the pathway between the columns. It impacted on a fast-moving target, one she remembered all too well, throwing it back – but there were many more behind it. 'The spiders followed us through.'

'In too great a volume to effectively neutralise,' Mott added, 'overwhelming our available firepower on a ratio of approximately—'

'Shut up and run,' Pelton suggested, suiting the action to the word. Before he could say any more, another of the bloated bodies exploded, shredded by a hail of eldar shuriken, and Amberley flinched.

'Stay down!' she ordered, scanning the tangled vegetation. The blurred outlines of three eldar were dimly visible, their rifles raised; only the hand of the Emperor, nudging one of the scuttling arachnoids into the line of fire just as the ranger pulled the trigger, had saved Mott from evisceration. 'Keep the bugs between you and the eldar!'

‘Unless you’d rather be shot than eaten,’ Pelton added. Amberley hoped he was joking, but the truth was, there were few other choices available. More of the deadly discs were hissing through the air, and spiders were falling all around them, whittling away their cover. It wouldn’t take the eldar long to find the mark, and fell their human prey.

‘Can you detonate the charges by vox pulse?’ she asked, returning fire, alternating between the eldar and any spiders which came too close. A group of arachnoids were attempting to swarm another of the predatory saurians, and paid a heavy price, half a dozen soft bodies ripped apart by talon and teeth before the sheer weight of numbers finally prevailed.

‘No problem,’ Yanbel assured her, and paused. ‘Would you like me to?’

‘Now would be good,’ Amberley agreed, biting back some rather less helpful comments, and wondering why tech-priests had to be so literal. The young magos made no outward sign of carrying out her order, but the ground shook briefly beneath her bootsoles, followed a moment later by the muffled *whump* of detonation.

‘I hate to point out the obvious,’ Pelton said, ‘but that was our only way out of here.’

‘Maybe,’ Amberley replied. ‘But if it was, the hive’s safe. At least for a while.’ If the Eldar returned with an invading army, it wouldn’t take them long to dig their way through to Ebon Flow, but that was a problem for later.

‘The hole’s still open,’ Rakel said, and Amberley nodded.

‘That’s what I’m counting on.’ Abruptly they burst from the end of the path into the piazza, and she glanced around, orientating herself. The dead saurian was over there, the headless scavvy off to its right, already being eaten by one of the first spiders to arrive, but the wounded eldar were nowhere to be seen. Only a trail of blood, which led straight to the archway, before ending abruptly in front of it. Rakel stared.

‘The hole in the world,’ she said, in tones of awe.

‘A webway portal,’ Amberley confirmed. It was the only explanation which made sense. The eldar had claimed this world long before humanity were even aware of its existence, preparing it for their own use, only to be usurped in the interim. Not the kind of thing they’d be inclined to forgive. ‘And our only way out.’

‘You have to be joking,’ Pelton said. ‘If we go through it we’re dead!’

‘Quite the contrary,’ Mott cut in. ‘We’ll be alive, but somewhere else. Albeit where something will almost certainly attempt to kill us as soon as we arrive.’

‘We haven’t got time to debate this!’ Amberley downed a spider which charged at her, mandibles clacking. More of the razor-edged eldar ammunition hissed through the air, missing her by millimetres, and shredding an arachnoid which had been about to jump on her unprotected back. Grabbing Raket by the arm, she shoved the unresisting psyker through the archway; the woman vanished, evanescing into thin air. Amberley turned, returning the eldar fire, while Pelton and Zemelda added their own lasbolts to the barrage.

‘Any idea where this leads?’ Yanbel asked, scurrying across the churned-up moss to join her.

‘None whatsoever,’ Amberley said, shoving him through, and sending Mott after him a heartbeat later.

‘Got to be better than here,’ Zemelda said, taking a dive through the portal and vanishing before she hit the ground.

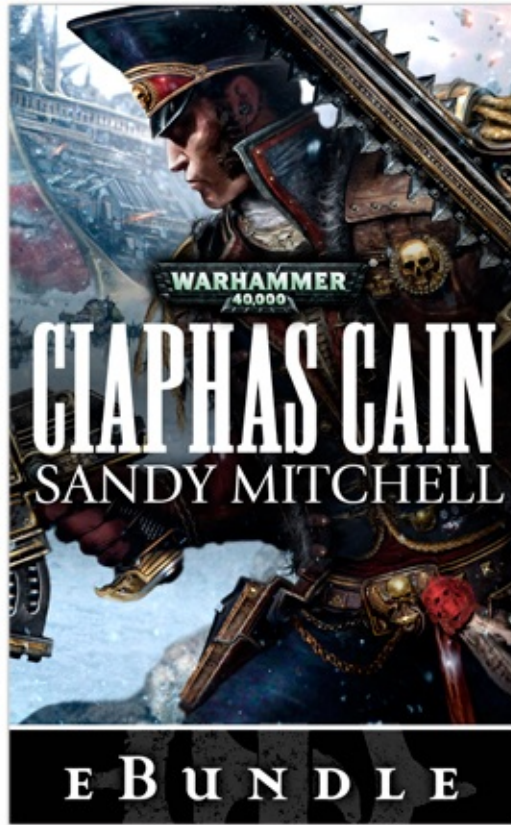
‘There’s a hostage to fortune,’ Pelton said, hesitating on the brink. He sent a final lasbolt into the undergrowth. ‘The surviving eldar will come after us, you know.’

‘And we’ll be ready,’ Amberley assured him, taking a last look round the clearing, and shoving him through. The incoming fire had lessened in the last few seconds as the spiders sensed fresh prey in their midst, and moved towards the eldar, who redirected their fire to meet the new threat.

With a tingle of anticipation, she stepped into the unknown.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANDY MITCHELL is the author of a long-running series of Warhammer 40,000 novels about the hero of the Imperium, Commissar Ciaphas Cain. The most recent book in that series is *The Greater Good*, and there is also the audio drama *Dead In The Water*. He has also written a plethora of short stories, including 'The Last Man' in the Sabbat Worlds anthology, along with several novels set in the Warhammer World. He lives and works in Cambridge.



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