



Agent of the Throne: Ashes and Oaths

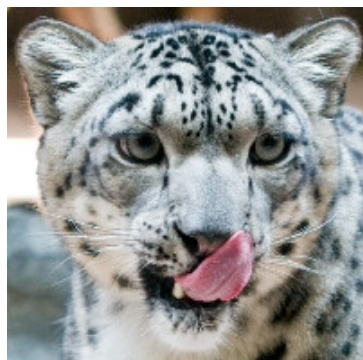
An Inquisition Audio Drama (2019)

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List of characters:

* Inquisitorial agent, Lieutenant lanthe Krisas;

* lanthe's assistant, former truth broker Elias Cull;

* lanthe's assistant, Mechanicum Artabanus;

* Munitorum official Amistree Zand;

* Dustscorn's grey cardinal Novak Kree;

* Psyker Askara;

* Ariss Tarcker

Cull (over vox): "Target vehicle is leaving the bunker complex".

Artabanus (over vox): "Aerial servo-skulls are initiating tracking protocol. I have a complete visual feed".

lanthe (over vox): "How many escort vehicles?"

Artabanus (over vox): "Two escort vehicles. I can discern a heavy baneful mounted weapon on each of them".

Cull (over vox): "That's a lot of firepower".

lanthe (over vox): "You mean what we anticipated".

Cull (over vox): "You anticipated bullets hurt less".

Artabanus (over vox): "The target vehicle is entering street alpha two. They are accelerating".

lanthe (over vox): "Stand by! Let's hope your friends in the dust gangs are on time, Cull".

Cull (over vox): "They will be. They are now well paid to be on time for their own execution".

Artabanus (over vox): "I observe because on the streets heat signatures and silhouettes consistent with local armed gangs. They are going to block the convoy".

lanthe (over vox): "I have the target in sight. Arming missile".

Artabanus (over vox): "Convoy is slowing".

Cull (over vox): "Engaging engines, standing by".

Artabanus (over vox): "The target vehicle is entering the optimal sight".

Cull (over vox): "Here it comes".

lanthe (over vox): “Firing”.

(vehicle explodes, armed gangs open fire)

* * *

(lanthe takes a seat with a glass of alcohol with ice)

We are supposed to become the better versions of ourselves. But it never quite seems to work out like that.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

Time does not make us better. It just makes us more... ourselves. Whatever thing lurks down in the core of our soul, that thing is what we become.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

Time wears away the layers we wrap around us until it's just us, bloody and raw, standing in the front of the universe.

(lanthe pours some more drink in her glass)

The truth of our soul? (smiling) Hm, that's what a priest might say. They might be right too.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

You don't need a revelation to see it either, just wait and time will do it for you. (sniffing) I am a soldier. What is that, you ask? Someone who can kill, who can fight, who can endure war? Yes, but in reality it's someone who can do one thing above all – take orders. Not the kind of orders that send people to die for stupidity but the kind of orders that mean something. Win this battle, defeat that enemy, hold this line.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

Inquisitor Covenant rarely gave me orders. He dealt in problems, this cult, this psyker, this conspiracy. Kill, persuade, unravel, unmask or destroy. The solution was up to me so long as the problem was dealt with.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

So when he did give a direct order, it was something that stood out, changed the balance of things. They never meant anything good, but after all I was a soldier. So I took my orders and did what I had to do. I got... the job... done”.

* * *

Ianthe (over vox): “Now, Cull, go!”

(mining wagon breaks squeal as Cull tries to make an emergency stop)

Cull (over vox): “Throne on Terra!”

(mining wagon rams into another vehicle)

Ianthe (running and unleashing fire): “Moving for target!”

Cull (running along): “With you”.

Ariss Tarcker. That was the name of the target we were after. Renegade savant, former prefect majoris in the part of the Administratum that dealt with old records. She had left all of that stability in service for a life in the shadows as an information broker. She coveted and collected data and records cording it away with the maize of the gold. If you wanted to know something, a prescribed truth, the less likeable habits of an admiral, a secret long buried and half-forgotten Ariss Tarcker could supply you. For a price, of course, and Covenant wanted something from her. He did not tell me what. He just gave me the order. Get Ariss Tarcker.

We found her on Dustscorn, a blighted world half-destroyed by war and never put back together properly. We had tried a friendly approach, even offered to pay her exorbitant things. She refused to even meet us. At the time I thought she had got wind of who we were and wanted to keep away from the Inquisition. Later, a lot later, I had other suspicions. But at the time there was no room to pause. Ariss Tarcker might vanish again. So we ended up ramming her transport in a ruined street and doing with explosives and guns what we couldn't do with words and mind.

Artabanus (over vox): “Mistress, you have a hostile forty degrees to your left, twenty one meters, at the rear of the remaining escort vehicle”.

(Ianthe kills another screaming guardsman)

Ianthe (breathing hard): “Eliminated”.

I was down at street level now. The buildings to either side were half-ruined. The vehicle carrying Ariss Tarcker and the mining wagon that Cull had crashed into it were tangled across the middle of the road. Flames and smoke billowed from the wreck of the vehicle I had taken out with a missile, its twin still functioning though. The pintal-mounted cannon on the escort vehicle opened up again. The trooper manning it was shielded by a square of armor. I put a grenade into it through my

underslung launcher and he vanished. I ran across the road and lodged¹¹ down beside the target vehicle panning my sight around, gun up and ready. Cull crouched beside me. He already had the breaching charge out and clamped to the vehicle's rear door. It was an old APC¹², track-driven, clad in enough armor to take a tank shell, but we weren't playing around.

(beeping sound)

Cull: "Charge armed!"

Ianthe: "Detonate!"

(explosion)

The breaching charge was made to rip into bunkers. It was overkill but as I said we were not playing around. It tore the door of the vehicle as though it was pathor in child's fists. Three gunmen came out of the vehicle, half-burned but still looking for someone to shoot. I put clusters of rounds into all of them. They went down and I had passed the dead gunmen into the smoke-filled cabin looking for Ariss Tarcker.

(Ianthe entering the vehicle)

Artabanus (over vox): "Mistress Ianthe, there are six vehicles converging on your location at speed. They are carrying a considerable amount of armament. I am trying to ascertain if they are hostile".

Cull: "Of course they are!"

I did not move. The vehicle was empty, no Ariss Tarcker. Nothing! An empty shell that I had started a small war to crack open.

Artabanus (over vox): "Our local gang allies are fleeing".

Cull: "Boss, we need to move. Boss!"

Ianthe: "She is not here".

Cull (surprised): "What? My source was clear. Ariss Tarcker..."

Ianthe (interrupting): "She is not here".

I have seen people become ash in front of me, seen things that would break people by just knowing about them. But that empty APC on a ruined street, still smoking from the hole we had blown in its skin, to me then it was like been staked to the ground. It meant that for the first time in my service to Inquisitor Covenant I had failed.

Artabanus (over vox): “Mistress, something is jamming the vox link. I cannot...”

(vox goes off)

Cull: “Boss! Boss, we need to leave now”.

(several vehicle approach lanthe and Cull surrounding them)

I unfroze, turned and moved out of the vehicle as a trio of armored buggy sped over the rubble. Weapon mouths turned to aim at us. I ducked back into cover, a fresh grenade for my launcher already in my hand.

Zand (slowly approaching): “No need for that, Lieutenant Krisas!”

The voice cut across the street. A woman in a blue coat with crimson silk at the wrists and grey fur at the collar was walking across the smoking ground, a silver topped cane tapping out her stride. She stopped ten paces away and smiled.

Zand: “Much better to talk than to shoot, don’t you think?”

* * *

Amistree Zand, official in a way it is difficult to pin down. Always smiling, always so assured. (smiling) And why wouldn’t she be? She knew absolutely what she was and what she was doing and if she ever had any doubts, they never found any perches in her soul. Pure smiling certainty. That was her. I had encountered her a couple of years before we ended up in Dustscorn. She had been an official involved with the Munitorum prison where a rogue psyker had got loose.

(lanthe pours some more drink in her glass)

A prison where everything was a long way from what it should have been.

(lanthe takes a sip)

We cut a deal at the time. She helped us find the psyker and we... and we did our jobs.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

I tried to find out who and what she was afterwards, but she had said that we would find nothing and as ever she was exactly right. I had not seen her since, not until she came walking across that street in Dustscorn.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

Why didn't I just shoot her then and there? Hm... I thought about it. She clearly had something to do with the fact that Ariss Tarcker was missing and was clearly not there for my good or the good of all. She was something shadowy and dangerous and working to Emperor only knew what agenda. All the reasons in the world for me to line up the gunsight and squeeze the trigger. But I didn't. Why? Hm, now that's a question.

* * *

Cull: "Boss, what is she doing in here?"

lanthe: "I don't know".

Zand: "Elias, a pleasure to see you. You look well, a little worn down since we last met, but well all the same".

lanthe: "Where is Ariss Tarcker?"

Zand: "This is really quite the mess. And for a world like this that is something like overachievement. You made enough of the wreck at them to ensure someone is going to notice and come looking to see if there is anything left. Best not to be here when the carrion eaters has come. Shall we talk somewhere less exposed and more comfortable?"

She half-turned and gestured with her cane to the end of the street where a battered troop hauler sat chugging exhaust fumes into the air.

Cull: "Boss, we shouldn't..."

Zand: "Come, Lieutenant Krisas! Even if you don't like what I have to say, isn't it your duty to at least hear me out?"

lanthe (thinking proposal over): "Fine".

(Cull and lanthe follow Zand into the hauler)

The inside of the armored carriage jolted and hummed. The cabin was meant to carry a unit of ten fully equipped soldiers, but still felt cramped with just myself, Cull and Zand. Yellow light diluted the gloom and hazy images blinked across a cracked auspex screen bolted to the wall. Zand sat on the pressed metal bench opposite us, straight-backed. Her smile a shadow in the dim light.

Cull: "So come on, make you pitch".

Zand: "You are so direct now, Elias. I thought you were always open to a deal. No truth passes from lips without a coin passing between hands. Isn't that what your old guild on Mithras used to say?"

lanthe: "You have Ariss Tarcker".

Zand: "Have is a very definitive statement. I don't have her in my pocket. But I know where Ariss Tarcker is and she is not going anywhere without my permitting it. So..."

lanthe (interrupting): "This is the Inquisitorial matter. You need to hand her over to us now".

Zand: "That is not going to happen".

Cull: "And why not?"

Zand: "Because I want something in return".

Cull: "Of course".

We rolled on in silence. Zand just sat there and waited. The smile never shifted from her face.

lanthe (finally giving up): "What do you want?"

Zand: "I just want you to do what you are good at, Lieutenant Krisas. I want you to kill someone".

* * *

Novak Kree was a man that was not hard to wish dead. He moved in the same shadow world as Ariss Tarcker. A carrion lord he specialized in people, weaponry and riches looted from places ruined by war. In a world like Dustscorn he would move in and spread into the dark hole left by the passing of war.

(lanthe takes a sip)

He took over criminal organizations, suborned the vestiges of authority and began to systematically leech the remaining life from places already reduced to ruins and ash.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

He trafficked in resources, arms, food, anything and everything that was of value. People would go to him because there was no choice and barter the last of their wealth, their secrets, even their lives for what he could provide. He had grown powerful enough that he had started provoking conflicts and prolonging them to create fertile ground for his activities. Rebellions, brushfire wars, armed disputes, he fed them until they burst and then feasted on the corpses.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

War is the heartbeat of the Imperium. It lives because it fights. War and its consequences are constant. It is as ugly as it is necessary and inevitable. But Novak Kree was like a parasite that sucked the last breath from the dying. The Arbitrators had hunted him seeking him across the sector but he had evaded or killed everyone who came after him. As I said, he was an easy man to wish dead. But even if I had known he was on Dustscorn, I wouldn't have gone after him. Agents of the Throne don't just go after every enemy in sight. And after all I had my orders.

* * *

Cull: "We can't do it, boss".

Ilanthe: "We have to".

Cull: "Kree is alpha-class psyker sewage, but this..."

Ilanthe (sarcastically): "Do you have an alternative? Because if you do, spit it out, Cull. Go on! What is your plan to get Ariss Tarcker because you have one, right? (smiling) Didn't think so".

We'd ended up back in the ruined hab-block we'd set up as a base of operations. Zand had taken us there without asking where it was or where we wanted to go. As with everything else she was disturbingly well-informed.

Artabanus was waiting for us. The cyber-devotee had nested into the large room we had been using as our main control center. Blocks of buzzing machinery dotted the space and cables snaked across the ground like creepers in a jungle clearing. Gun mounted servo-skulls watched the doors and floated in the shadows. Artabanus himself stood at the center of a web of chrome cables that plugged into his skull. His habit of continually modifying and improving his augmetics had recently manifested as a halo of sparking charge capacitors and a change from graphite black to silver and white robes.

(Cull and Ilanthe approach Artabanus)

Artabanus: Mistress Ilanthe, I do not wish to intrude, but I have completed the review of the data supplied by lady Zand".

Cull: "Zand... It being her saying this out does not make you stop for just a moment".

Ilanthe: "We have our orders. We have a mission. Covenant needs Ariss Tarcker".

Cull: “The mission... The mission... Sometimes there’s got to be more than the damned mission. Zand just happens to be here in this hole that everyone has forgotten and she just happens to have the keys to the person we have to find. And she just happens to need you and only you to kill a man who spends his entire life staying alive in the worst places in the universe. None of that screams, this is something for you to run away from as fast as you can? Come on, you have to see it”.

lanthe: “The mission...”

Cull: “Oh, screw the mission! What in the sight of all that is holy are we doing? We’ll just go and murder someone so that we can buy information? I thought we were supposed to be on the side of salvation and light”.

lanthe: “We are...”

Cull: “Then why are you doing what Zand wants? I don’t know what side of what she’s on, but she is not on the side we should be on”.

lanthe: “Sometimes there are bigger reasons than we can see”.

Cull: “Then those bigger reasons can come down here and tell me this is just what the Emperor wanted his blessed Inquisition doing. (calming down and taking a deep breath) You said to me once, that no one gets forgiveness. And maybe that’s true but we choose if we want to be damned”.

lanthe: “Are you done?”

Cull: “Maybe. Maybe I am. Three years of chasing the worst of mankind through... places I didn’t want to see. Three years of... I don’t even know what this is, yeah. Maybe I am done”.

I looked at Cull. I could feel my face harden around my gaze. He didn’t blink, just stared straight back. His dust coat stirring in the wind over his mismatched combat gear. He had changed. There was a wariness that had crept into his eyes. I had not noticed it before.

Cull: “Come on, boss. We do dark things. Things that other people won’t do, but there’s got to be something that has a hold on us. A limit that makes us right”.

lanthe: “You can’t leave, not with what you’ve seen. We are agents of the Throne. We live as long as we serve”.

Cull: “Then who’s going to shoot me and stop me? You?”

lanthe: “Yes!”

Cull (smiling): “Hehe, you really would, wouldn’t you?”

(uneasy silence)

Artabanus: “Once again, may I extend apologies if I am intruding at an inopportune juncture but there are a number of crucial factors concerning the intelligence data on Novak Kree that you need to be aware of”.

lanthe: “What is it, Artabanus?”

A cone of blue holo-light grew out of Artabanus’s cupped hand. The lines of a building in the grand Imperial style formed and turned in the air.

Artabanus: “In summary I think you would say that it is a problem. If this data is accurate, then Novak Kree has taken over the old basilica of trade in the southern commerce district. It is substatal multity and it leads to subsurface layers, four floors kept by a roof and dome. Diameter...”

lanthe (interrupting): “Artabanus, summarize the summary”.

Artabanus: “Of course, mistress. It is a large building that has been made into a fortress filled with armed personnel and positioned in one of the most dangerous areas of this already hostile location. But that is context. The fact that I think it might be problematic is that Kree is only going to be at that location for a short length of time”.

lanthe: “How long?”

Artabanus: “Twelve hours thirteen minutes and decrementing as we speak”.

lanthe: “Where is he supposed to be going?”

Artabanus: “Unknown. The supplied data does not contain those details”.

Twelve hours to plan and execute a kill raid on a fortified headquarters in a hostile area of a ruined city on a world that had never shaken the touch of war. If it had been a true war we were fighting, I would have said the only way to do it would be a flight of fighter bombers and a payload of inferno rockets. But that was not on the list of options.

Cull: “It can’t be done. Not in that time. We would need at least forty hours of observation plus intelligence on the interior, security systems”.

Artabanus: “The plans of the basilica appear to be highly detailed and there are what I surmise to be reports from sources within the compound. Guard strengths, planned escape routes, patrol times and fields of fire from fixed weapons. It is...”

Cull (interrupting): “It’s everything you would need to do a job just like this one”.

I looked at Cull. His gaze was distant, his face hard.

Cull: “Zand already has everything but someone to pull the trigger. Why does she want it to be you?”

Ilanthe: “I need you for this, Cull. You can leave once it is done. I won’t stop you or come after you, but we do this first”.

Cull: “Is this a deal I can refuse?”

I shook my head.

Cull (smiling): “Didn’t think so. Alright, alright, let’s get to work”.

* * *

There are different kinds of oaths. Some matter, some don’t.

(Ilanthe takes a cigarette puff)

You can argue it, but an oath is just a promise you speak out loud. And promises get broken all the time. I promise I won’t tell them. I promise I will come back. I promise I will be there. (smiling) We leave promises broken on the ground as soon as we can speak. So why do we think an oath is worth more than any of the other little broken bits of trust we leave behind us?

(Ilanthe takes a cigarette puff)

Some people think that oaths have power, that something in the universe or maybe our soul listens to what we say and weighs our lives by the words we keep. Maybe that’s even true. But some oaths are broken as you speak them. I swear to do the will of the Emperor, to be his hand on the sword, to be his will and his righteousness. On my soul I commit that by no act shall I aid the heretic. That by no weakness shall I let the enemy have victory. That by no deed undone shall darkness prevail. (smiling) Broken even as the words fade.

The universe can’t let you keep a promise like that. But does an oath like that matter? It doesn’t matter that you break it, because there is no way for you to keep it. The oaths that do matter are the ones you never

speak. I would never do that. I am your friend. It will be alright. You never speak them. Never say the words before a priest or swear them on your soul but they matter more than anything. And just like all oaths you have to break them.

* * *

Cull: "I count four guards at the gate: two for show, two more in those sandbag nests to either side. Light arms, las carbines, couple of shot-cannons. Throne, but that body armor looks like it came straight from a Munitorum store".

Ilanthe: "It probably did".

Cull: "Those guards don't look amateur either. Kree must have scooped them from the deserters and troops left behind after the war".

Cull and I had found a broken cathedral spire that overlooked the basilica. High-powered mag-scopes let us watch the building as though we were standing next to it. Artabanus was back at our base of operations watching through the eyes of his servo-skulls. So far what we had seen had not been a cause for cheer.

The basilica was the last substantial structure still standing in a district of tangled rubble and half-buried roads. Smoke snaked up from some of the surrounding ruins. The normal background of low-level gunfire was distant. The warbands and kill gangs didn't seem to like to come close. We had wondered why until we saw bodies hanging from remaining lamp posts, headless and suspended by one foot. That was the price those who came too close to the basilica paid and so most kept well away.

Artabanus (over vox): "My surveillance skulls are in place. I have visual and multispectral oversight of the basilica. I must note that my units are positioned further out than would be optimal. There is a powerful auspex field focused outwards from the basilica. I can get no closer without detection".

Cull: "Almost like they know that someone like us might come knocking on the door. Still think this is a good idea?"

Ilanthe: "I see a quad-cannon on the roof, one hundred meters east of the dome. Confirm, Artabanus?"

Artabanus (over vox): "Confirmed. There is also a second cannon emplacement on the roof to the north".

Cull: "Any way of taking them out at the same time?"

Artabanus (over vox): "Both are machine spirit-controlled and shielded against remote interference. The only way of disabling them simultaneously would be by direct access to their controls or a strike by anti-material weaponry".

Cull: "That's a 'no' to go in by the roof then".

Artabanus (over vox): "That assessment would be correct and conforms to the data given to us".

Cull: "So that's it. We do it the way we've been set up for".

Artabanus (over vox): "The data supplied indicates that Novak Kree will be leaving the basilica at midnight plus one hour".

Cull: "How?"

Artabanus (over vox): "Not specified".

Cull: "Oh, couldn't we take out his transport as he leaves? Shoot it down if it's an aircraft or set an ambush if it's a ground vehicle?"

lanthe: "We don't know that he will be leaving by air or ground. There were underground tunnelways linked to official buildings like this and they might not show up on Zand's intel. And if Kree is as paranoid as he seems, then it's unlikely that he is going to give us a clean shot. We can't rely on luck".

Cull: "So we are back to going in on foot".

lanthe: "How long to get a gang horde in place?"

Cull: "After what happened in the ambush they are going to need a lot more persuading and a lot more coin to get them to attack this place".

lanthe: "Get it done".

Cull: "Alright. But once those cannons open up I don't think the gangs will hang around. It's going to be time".

lanthe: "We don't need time. I just need to reach Kree".

Cull: "And if we walk straight into an ambush because they are waiting for us?"

lanthe (smiling): "I don't think that's going to happen".

Cull: "Neither do I".

Cull turned away from the view of the basilica. He was frowning.

Cull: “But something is going to happen. I can just feel it”.

Ilanthe: “Get everything ready as planned. We go at midnight”.

* * *

Everyone thinks human beings are a species of killers. It’s not true. We aren’t really killers.

(Ilanthe takes a cigarette puff)

Sure you get a few aberrations, some examples of who we might be if we were real predators. We are not that though. We are cowards. We are driven to kill by fear. Go back to the first human swinging a rock into their sibling’s head and I bet that you’d find fear buried down the root of the anger. Even if the fear is just that the other person will kill you if you don’t kill them or that they will take your land, your food, your pride. No matter what it’s about, the fear is always there.

(Ilanthe takes a cigarette puff)

We kill afraid and go to war afraid. It’s what makes us so vicious.

Ah, I am a soldier. I always have been, even if the battlefields change. Even if it don’t look like battlefields to anyone else, I am still fighting. Go through the smoke, see the enemy, squeeze the trigger. Just like basic, just like training. Just like you’ve done thousands of times before. Easy. And after a while that part really is easy. Where it gets harder is everything that comes after.

* * *

Cull: “I see movement. Hundred meters, right angle”.

Ilanthe (killing the aim): “Hostile down”.

Cull: “The access dock should be just inside this covert”.

Cull had paid and persuaded half a dozen drift gangs to start a war on the doorstep of the basilica. It was loud and bloody and doomed to do nothing but make a lot of noise and leave a few people dead. But that was the point. My way into the basilica was underground. Dustscorn was old and this was an old part of its city sprawl. Sewage and drain tunnels ran under its streets, weaving over each other and threading the foundations of the buildings above. They were as a death trap, but Zand had supplied a route that led to the external wall of the basilica’s basement’s levels. From there a crawlway led to a cellar chamber. Kree’s troopers kept their watch on the passages close to the basilica,

but they didn't know about the crawlway. At least that was what Zand's intelligence said. We just needed to reach it and then get in before anyone looked away from the full blown battle going on in the streets above.

Ilanthe: "Cull, left!"

(Kree's trooper's gunfire wounds Cull)

Cull (taking the trooper): "Oh, got him! Bastard shot wind me".

Ilanthe: "Are you going to be..."

Cull (interrupting): "I'll get the job done. Always have, haven't I?"

It was dark in the tunnels but even in the green tinted sight of my infra-goggles I could see the blood running from Cull's left arm as he staggered to the end of the tunnel. The opening to the crawlway was three meters away, a narrow hall half-buried in rubble leading to a twenty meter crawl through darkness.

Cull: "Get moving. I don't know how long the fireworks atop will keep the guards from noticing we just took their friends down here".

He didn't look at me but started unfastening grenades into preloaded auto-pistols from the pack on his back. Smooth and efficient even as he gritted his teeth against the pain of his wound. For a second he looked nothing like a fast-mouthed fixer from the streets of Mithras. For a second he looked like a soldier.

Ilanthe: "Remember, twenty minutes, then get out!"

Cull: "Trust me, twenty one and I am gone and I am not looking back. No go!"

(Ilanthe treads away into the crawlway)

* * *

Friends? You make friends like no others in the military.

(Ilanthe takes a cigarette puff)

That's what people say at the start. Shared suffering, endless lifetimes of having a Sergeant scream at you. That creates a bond. You end up knowing the people that go through that with you better than you know yourself. Best friends you'll ever make. And... that's true up to a point. There was this Cade that I joined up with. He was two places in front of me in the line of processing, this tall skinny thing. You could tell he was only just old enough to be there. He got into an argument with the

scribe servitor behind the desk. The scribe kept getting the kid's name wrong, kept on repeating back "Hatus" and pointing at where it had written that on the forms. The kid kept saying 'the scribe was wrong', that it was Jatus, but the scribe just kept clanking the same wrong phrase out. I just started laughing. It wasn't even funny but I just couldn't help it. Must have caught, because soon the whole line started up and the scribe servitor just sat there still saying the wrong name and pointing to the parchment. Hatus, Hatus, big little Hate... Never was there someone who was less suited to pass in through training.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

Agathus planetary forces are voluntary, you see. So they liked to pick and choose, to filter a trainee batch for those who couldn't cut it. Hatus was... well... He was just an idiot. He wouldn't get what he needed to do, would frown and ask questions when the Sergeant started shouting.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

He shouldn't have got through, but he did. He just wouldn't give up not at anything. He would fail a marksman test and be put on punishment, lugging ammo boxes up and downhill for hours. (smiling) They nearly killed him but he never gave up.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

I think in the end the Sergeant stopped trying to break him and just accepted that if they weren't going to shoot Hatus, that gangly idiot would be there at the end.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

After basic we were all split up, but Hate and I ended up in the same unit. I was pleased because that meant I had a friend. (smiling) An idiot, stubborn to the point of farce idiot, but a friend.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

He went around the corner first. His squad was just ahead of mine. Thread bomb, ankle height. No identifiable remains. Best friends you'll ever make up to a point.

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

So do I have friends? I don't know. I don't know if I know what that means.

* * *

It was quiet in the spaces under the basilica. The gunfire and explosions were muffled and distant, a low sea swell rumble on the edge of hearing. I dropped from the crawlway opening to the floor. I unslung my sub-carbine from the rest of my gear. It was a rare thing made a long-long way from this planet. Its casing and extending stock were near black ceramic, a flash and sound suppressor turned its muzzle into a blunt snout. It was no good at long range, but its shot was a whisper. I padded forwards the rockrete-lined passage painted in the green of dark vision. I was wearing a bodysuit laced with light-eating fibers. A set of vision goggles covered the upper half of my face and a sub-vocal microphone ran across my throat. I activated the first of three stommer disks around my left wrist. The circuitry in the exotic device pulled the sound from the air and fuzzed detection systems. At that moment even if someone standing at the other end of the passage had looked directly at me, they would have only seen a blur of night amongst the shadows.

I paused for a second. The passage I was in was narrow. Rockrete dust and drain slime marked the floor. It smelled of air sealed away too long. An octopede, its long body and probing legs ghost pale in my night vision stopped as it scuttled over the floor. Its penal waved for a second and then it sped on.

At the end of the corridor fifteen meters away I could see a scattering of dim light from around the corner. I triggered my sub-vocal microphone.

Ilanthe (over vox): "Artabanus?"

Artabanus (over vox): "I can hear you, mistress. The vox and data links are weak but functional. You may deploy the corvus skulls".

I reached into the small pack on my back and took out three small devices. They were made from crow skulls filled with rare technology and etched with machine runes. They were one of Artabanus's own creations, a delicate work of months of muttered prayers and microscopic mechanisms. A faint blue light lit in the eye sockets of the first skull and it rose from my hand with a murmur of anti-grav. The rose followed to hover in the trio in front of me.

Artabanus (over vox): "Visual and auditory senses active, I can see you, mistress".

One of the skulls twitched in the air as though cocking its head on a neck that was no longer there.

Artabanus (over vox): "Permission to proceed".

lanthe (over vox): "Go ahead".

Artabanus (over vox): "Compliance".

The skulls slid forwards spreading out into the deeper dark beneath the ceiling. They paused at the corner of the passage.

Artabanus (over vox): "You are clear for twenty meters beyond this turn. Then there is a sealed door metal. I detect low level vibration from beyond, consistent with two-three humanoids".

lanthe (over vox): "Confirmed, proceeding".

I moved around the corner and to the door. The skulls hovered above me as I tested the handle.

lanthe (over vox): "Locked, placing corrosion charge".

There are advantages to being an Inquisitor's agent in the shadows. One of which is that we can wage war with tools that most people don't know exist. The corrosion charge adhered to the door. When triggered it would send a jet of pressurized acid through the locking mechanism.

lanthe (over vox): "Activating charge. Door breached, proceeding".

(lanthe slowly opens the door)

I went through the door. There were two guards in the room beyond. Both were sat at the block of machinery hung with power cables that snaked to holes punched into the walls. Lights blinked on control consoles. Lasguns leaned on the console beside both of them.

(lanthe takes down both guards)

I sent a short burst of fire into them. Their heads exploded above their body armor. I checked the bodies. Fore the way and tear on their cape, that was high-grade stuff. Beyond what even an elite *Militarum* unit would get. They were military too or had been. One had the winged half-skull of the mortar grenadier on his forearm. The other had burned skulls on his hands that you only get from working with Luther-pattern plasma weaponry. I was about to move on when I looked at the console they had been working at.

lanthe (over vox): "Artabanus, are you seeing this?"

Artabanus (over vox): "I am observing".

lanthe (over vox): "That does not look like a standard vox unit".

Artabanus (over vox): “That is a trans-orbital signal message relay”.

Ianthe (over vox): “For signaling void ships?”

Artabanus (over vox): “Just so. Also while I cannot be certain without further investigation that we do not have time available for, there appear to be a number of non-standard cypher devices integrated into its workings”.

Ianthe (over vox): “Whoever Kree is signaling, he doesn’t need anyone listening in”.

Artabanus (over vox): “Mistress, the drift gang assault is failing. I estimate that it may only function as a diversion for another five minutes”.

Ianthe (over vox): “Understood, moving”.

(Ianthe runs further deep in the catacombs)

* * *

How do you travel into the future? One step at a time! Old joke. Not funny when you first hear it.

(Ianthe takes a cigarette puff)

But it’s true. One step and then another and then one day you find yourself turning around to look back at where you came from and there you are.

(Ianthe pours a drink in her glass)

A small person almost out of sight left in the past.

(Ianthe takes a sip)

And you realize, that person in the past is not you. They live in a different world, think different thoughts, know different things. You have become not them. You killed them and how did you do it? One step at a time.

* * *

(Ianthe runs fast across the basilica’s catacombs while breathing hard)

Artabanus (over vox): “Wait! The unit of three guards is crossing the landing above you”.

I froze in the shadows at the edge of a spiral stare. I was leveled with the second floor of the basilica. In kinder times the building had been a temple to the past plenty and future prosperity. Marble covered its floors

and painted scenes of local magnates scattering golden petals into the wind, spread across its plastered walls. Polished wood closed off doorways and bronze statues gazed down from niches.

Artabanus (over vox): "Wait! They are stopping".

Ilanthe (over vox): "There's no time".

(Ilanthe sets on a run)

Artabanus (over vox): "Mistress Ilanthe!"

I went up the stairs like smoke blown by the wind. The opening burst hit the first guard in the throat and punched out through the back of his skull. I kept moving, kept firing. The next burst skimmed the second guard shoulder. He twisted and fired. Shots burned three painted plaster above me. I was three strides from him. The third guard had a gun up tracking me for a shot. I kept running forwards towards the guard I had wind. He was trying to bring his gun up. The muzzle of my weapon crashed into his face. His head snapped back as I fired. His skull blew in half, shards burning. The third guard fired a fraction too late. My trio of shots hit her weapon and went through it. Ammunition exploded in the magazine and blasted her torso open.

Ilanthe (over vox, breathing hard): "Targets down".

I kept running, reloading the sub-carbine as I moved.

(alarm siren goes off)

A claxon began to wail through the building as I roared up the next flight of stairs.

Artabanus (over vox): "I believe they may have noticed that they have an intruder".

Ilanthe (running, over vox): "Time's running out anyway. What's on my path?"

Artabanus (over vox): "You are clear to the next landing. Kree's sanctum chamber is directly in front of you as you leave the stairs. I can only presume there will be resistance".

There was. I met a guard who took the stairs and shot before she could. There were two more guards by the doors opposite. I pulled and threw a photon grenade without breaking stride. A cluster of shots into each of them and I was three strides to the doors as a third figure came from

the right. My burst of las bolts pitched him back. I ran through the door rolling low and coming up, gun ready.

(lanthe halts looking around)

The room beyond was dark. It looked like it had been a gallery or a greeting chamber. Pillars rose from floor to ceiling. Gilded saints and cherubs looked down from a painted dome. Furniture had been piled haphazardly at the edge of the central space. Stacks of parchment and blocks of machinery dotted the floor. A fine layer of plaster dust covered everything.

Kree stood next to a huge stone table covered with rolls of parchment. He looked just like the few pict-captures I'd seen of him. Tall, shoulders hunched under a fur-colored coat of patchwork brown, pale eyes in a face that was a chewed lump of glossy burn scars. He turned to look at me utterly unconcerned. Gold glinted on his fingers as he put the scroll he had been reading down on the table.

I squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

Kree: "You want to stop now".

Frost was spreading over the gun and my trigger finger. Everything had gone quiet. Dead static hissed from the vox-bead in my ear. Kree tilted his head, eyes steady on me. I tried to fire again but my finger wouldn't even move.

Kree: "Understand? You want to stop now. Gun down, over there. You know the drill, I can tell".

My limbs began to move as though pulled by invisible strings. My gun slid from my fingers. I knelt trying to stop myself even as my hands interlaced behind my head.

lanthe: "Witch!"

Kree: "Only mildly, but I have help. Now step back. Yes, that's it. Not too far, but far enough. That's good. Very controlled. Ascara, can you give me a fast read on this one? There's not much time, but she smells serious. It is worth knowing where she crawled out from".

A shape shivered into sight. It had been standing in the space beside the pillars but I had not seen it. When it moved, it was like it had stepped out of a fold in my sight. It was thin and tall, draped in rustling black. Its face looked dead and dry, like a corpse left buried in hot sand.

Ascara: “No shadows lies this one. She is not real. She is a shadow. lanthe, lanthe.... That is the name of her soul. She is empty of truth, but... but... Oh... She is of the Throne”.

Kree: “You are certain? Is she a walker? Is she a bearer?”

Ascara: “No, there are thought fortresses within her. Yes, powerful beautiful walls of lies, but she does not bear the water or walk the labyrinth”.

Kree: “Who are you then, agent of the Throne? And why are you here?”

lanthe: “I am here to kill you”.

Kree (laughing): “Ahahahah, I got at that, but I meant why? What and how led you here?”

Ascara: “She does not know. Yes, she does not know. One of them sent her, but she does not know”.

lanthe: “I know who you are. You are a leech, a parasite living in the body of the Imperium. You sell sorrow and hold pain”.

Kree (laughing): “Ahahahah, oh that’s why you came here, to deliver judgment”.

lanthe: “I came here because you have to die”.

Kree: “But who you would be killing, lanthe? Who do you think you came here to end?”

And slowly Kree peeled off the glove on his left hand and raised it up palm open. A glowing tattoo lit on the skin, cypher signifiers span at its edges and visual code identifiers winked from its pattern. It was real. I had been trained to read the true signs of such symbols and this one was as real and terrifying as it comes. There on the hand of the man who was supposed to be a creature of the underworld was the glowing tribarred eye of the Inquisition.

Kree (revealing himself): “I am Inquisitor Gloud of the holy Ordos of the Emperor’s Inquisition”.

* * *

Few had been told about the Inquisition, that shadowy organization which defends mankind and the Emperor from the perils of heresy, possession, alien dominance and rebellion. You have been told that Inquisition is the ultimate defense against the phantoms of fear and terror which lurk in the darkness between the stars. You have been told,

the Inquisition are the bright saviors in an eclipse of evil, purest and most devoted warriors of the Emperor. You have been told the Inquisition is united in its cause to rid the galaxy of any threat from without or within. Everything you have been told is a lie.

* * *

Gloud: "So this puts everything into something of a different configuration. You had no idea, did you? (smiling) Hehe, you are very good, but I can see it without even asking Ascara to spoon it out of your head. You didn't know what you were doing here other than pulling a trigger".

Ilanthe: "But if you are part of the Inquisition..."

Gloud: "If? I am the left hand of the Emperor himself. You can see that, you know that. (smiling) But you are new to this, I can tell or at least new to this part of what it means to serve the Inquisition. You have the look of someone who just kicked on a door and found the room on the other side upside down but with people still walking around".

Ascara: "She is a puzzle box, but I can see the things just beneath the surface. Cutouts, blank spaces, I cannot hear her thoughts. She is dangerous".

Gloud: "Dangerous, but maybe not a threat. Maybe she is an opportunity".

Ascara: "Time, my master. The chariot and ship draw closer. We must be gone before the water bearers close the way".

He looked back to me and smiled, burn and scar tissue moving around the wound of his mouth.

Gloud: "Hm... (smiling) Hehe, don't worry! We have time, Ascara. Now, show her".

And the figure with the dead face raised its hand. And frost and a whirl of darkness poured into my mind. Darkness surrounded me and I felt myself rising and rising like a shooting star being dragged back into the sky.

Gloud: "As with all things the flaw begins within the humanity, with people".

Kree's voice came from the dark behind me as the sensation of soaring increased. Light kindled in the darkness, spread in lines and form and

shape. I saw faces outlined in shadow and edged in starlight. There were noble faces, cruel faces, fearful faces.

Gloud: "People with power and wealth and all the bounties that the Imperium can shower on them. We will call these people the 'Aquarians' because that is what they call themselves. They are generals, admirals, governors and all the other menagerie of the very but not totally powerful that the Imperium breeds".

I saw the faces and the stars grow old. Skin became skulls and then dust. And then water poured from above sweeping the dust away. The stars turned and glimmered like jewels on the bed of a river. More faces rose into sight, smiling and new.

Gloud: "And these people and the generations that came before squabble and arrange things to their advantage. Small things: a ship worth of people here, the rule of a colony there. They are insignificant in the scheme of things. Look, a parochial conspiracy. Then things start to change".

The light curdled. Crimson poured into the flow of images. The stars flared bright. A bleeding green opened across the spiral of the galaxy. The void was blood, froth and fire and the faces that I had seen before crawled with red light and shadow.

Gloud: "The storm has come. Wars bubble up. The light of Terra blinks. The old ordos begin to titter on the edge of night and the Aquarians sense both a threat and an opportunity. All that they have built their base of power on is uncertain. But where there is uncertainty and strife, there is the opportunity. Those with the will can take the power that slips from the aged fingers of old order. So Aquarians dream and then they begin to try to make their dream real".

Golden fire poured into my sight glimmering as it broke into countless coins and I knew that each disk was a world burning with pain and fear. And the cascade pulled me down tumbling me like a leaf caught in a waterfall. Around me walls of cold stone rose and the force of current dragged me past cave mouths and openings that yawned and vanished as I rushed onwards.

Gloud: "Purpose, purpose is an incredible thing. It gives strength where there was weakness, clarity where there was confusion. And now with new purpose the Aquarians have new strength. They spread in the shadows. They create strife and feed from it. And everything they do

brings them a step closer to their dream, a step through the labyrinth they must walk to their end. Nosos, they call it, the palace of secrets, the inevitable end. There they will sit and inherit dominion, a new rule to replace the old, the water bearers and the walkers of the labyrinth”.

The water was gone. Only the stone walls remained, doorways opening into blackness around me. A broken amphora sat on the floor at my feet. Around me stood figures robed and hooded in grey. I tried to move to look at their faces but they turned away as I moved.

Gloud: “I have been orbiting them for a decade, moving in the same currents of blood and conflict, learning, disrupting, finding a way into their operations. Kree is just the kind of creature they like, a master of suffering and child of war. (sighing) It nearly worked, but I made an error”.

One of the grey figures turned towards me and lowered his hood. The face beneath was young, handsome even. Then the image around me faded and the face was a mass of scar tissue. White mist formed in the air as I breathed. The witch Ascara swayed in place at the side of the room.

Artabanus (over vox): “Mistress...”

Artabanus’s voice crackled in my ear. I clamped down on my instinct to flinch.

Artabanus (over vox): “Mistress... Mistress lanthe... Mistress, I can see the witch. She is close. Be ready”.

Ascara turned towards me as though she had heard the voice in my ear too.

Ascara: “Master, she...”

Gloud (interrupting): “So here you are... A weapon that doesn’t even know to what end it is being used. But now you know. The Aquarians are interested in you. They must be. So you have a way in. If you tell them that you killed me here, a door into the labyrinth will open wider. You can do what I could not. I can guide you. There are things, great and terrible things that cannot be allowed to happen. You... We... can stop them”.

lanthe: “I have a master”.

Gloud (sighing): “Huh, and does that master know what you are doing now? Do you know the meaning of your missions? A bit of running

down loose ends... A little knife work that can be delegated to a subordinate... I have used agents like you for a long time. I have been just like you for even longer. You want to serve, to truly serve the Throne. But you don't see how. This is about that greater oath. You have just walked into the truth, lanthe. For people like us that does not happen often".

On the edge of my sight I saw something move in the shadows of the room, something small floating forwards with careful slowness. Ascara jerked around towards Kree.

Ascara: "No, master... She is..."

Ianthe (interrupting): "You are right... I do not know why my missions matter. I do not know if I am right, but I have my orders".

The Corvus skull shot out of the shadows. The witch was turning towards me, mouth opening. Ghost light shrieking from its eyes. The skull's beak punched into the witch's mouth and tore out of the back of her throat.

(Ascara screams in pain)

Kree's hand was moving, energy building around the rings on his fingers as digil lasers drew breath to fire. Quick, trained, honed by time, but not fast enough. I rolled, grabbed my gun and came up with Kree in my gunsight. His mouth was a circle of shock in his scarred meat of his face.

Gloud (scared): "No-no-no, please! You are making a huge mistake... AAAAAAAA".

(Ianthe slays the Inquisitor)

My shot hit him square and tore off the top of his head.

(Gloud's body collapses to the floor)

Ascara (screaming): "NOOOOOO!"

The psyker flew at me, blood pouring from the wound torn through her neck. Blue fire wreathed her hands and filled her eyes. I tried to turn and shoot. An invisible force yanked me from my feet and up into the air.

Ascara: "You have killed the master!"

(Ianthe moans in the psyker's grip)

Crushing force seized me. I felt my bones twist. I wanted to scream but my teeth crushed together. Blue fire bloomed around me. There was blood in my mouth. I could smell my skin beginning to cook.

The door burst inwards. Bullets slammed into the witch as she looked around and ripped her from her feet. I dropped to the floor in tangle of limbs. Pain exploded through me.

Cull: "Boss? Boss? Terra's tears, get up!"

The world was ringing. In my head all I could see was creased face beyond the barrel of my gun in the instant before I pulled the trigger.

Cull: "They are coming! Get up!"

(Cull helps lanthe up)

lanthe (moaning): "Kree..."

Cull: "You got him. He is gone, mission done. Oh, Throne, holy and sacred! Hey, lanthe, let's move".

I got up. Somehow I got up. Cull half-led, half-dragged me. Gunfire and shouts and the world turning. And somewhere far away and left behind the cry of someone left in the past as we ran into the future.

* * *

(lanthe puts her glass on the table)

Trust... In the end it all comes down to trust. Who trusts you? What you trust yourself to do? What secrets you trust to others? What secrets you trust yourself to keep?

(lanthe takes a cigarette puff)

People can talk about character all they like, about history, about pain and love. But the only thing that matters is who you trust.

* * *

(blowing wind)

Cull: "Here she comes".

Artabanus: "I detect only the single vehicle just as lady Zand specified".

Cull: "Ever wished that you hadn't left the rocket launcher at home?"

Artabanus: "I do not think we have a rocket launcher in current inventory. If you had advised me of this need earlier though, I think at this range a grenade launcher loaded with..."

Cull (interrupting): "It was a joke... It was a joke, Artabanus".

Artabanus: "Ah, I see".

(Zand vehicle arrives)

Artabanus: "At least I think I..."

Zand (getting out of the vehicle): "Lieutenant Krisas, Artabanus and Elias! So good to see you"

Amistree Zand stepped down from the door of the heavy cargo hauler that had stopped twenty paces away. The street was deserted. The first glow of dawn was smudging the sky beyond the broken roofs of the surrounding buildings. I had not said much to the other two since I got myself together enough to make the rendezvous.

lanthe: "It's done".

Zand: "I know... Very thorough if a little messier than your normal style, but as impressive as always".

lanthe: "Where is Ariss Tarcker?"

Zand: "Never let it be said I am slow to honor my agreement. As soon as I heard I went to the trouble of fetching mistress Ariss Tarcker myself".

Zand clicked her fingers and two troopers in mismatched combat gear pulled a hunched figure from the inside of the cargo hauler. Administratum ident-tattoos marked the woman's thick jowls and her bionic eyes rolled from each of us in turn. The chains securing her arms clinked as she and her guard stopped in the space between us and Zand.

Zand: "Ariss Tarcker, former prefect majoris of the Administratum, as promised".

Ariss Tarcker spat a thick word of yellow flam into the ground at our feet.

Cull: "Hm... Charming".

Zand smiled and turned back to the cargo hauler.

Zand: "A pleasure as always doing business, Lieutenant Krisas. I hope your master appreciates the efforts you go to on his behalf. I look forward to working with each other again. If the opportunity arises".

(Zand starts to tread away)

lanthe: "Kree... Kree was. He was..."

Zand paused as I spoke and turned eyebrows raised. She met my eyes smiling and then looked to Artabanus and Cull in turn, then back to me.

Zand (with feigned curiousness): "Yes? Is there something you wanted to ask about him?"

I held her gaze and shook my head.

lanthe: "No!"

Zand: "As you wish..."

We watched her get into the cargo hauler and it pull away.

(cargo hauler leaves the streets)

Cull: "Boss?"

lanthe: "Yes?"

Cull: "I... I was wrong. Look, Kree was a proper monster. That pet witch of his.... It might not have been the mission, but it's bare that a scum lord like that is gone. Small price to pay for the bigger goal, right? I don't trust Zand, but I trust you. Heh, and like you said you got the job done, problem solved and no problems made, right?"

He smiled, that old Elias's smile. It took me a second to nod in reply.

lanthe: "Right".

Cull: "So, that's alright by you, put everything down to past mistakes and move on".

lanthe: "Past mistakes?"

Cull: "Yeah. I'll get Ariss Tarcker secured, alright? And, boss?"

lanthe: "Yes?"

Cull: "Thank you".

He moved away. I stood for a second aching with the residual pain in my muscles and bones and feeling nothing.

Artabanus: "You did not tell him".

lanthe (voice trembling): "You saw, didn't you? In the basilica you saw and heard what Kree... what Gloud said".

Artabanus: "My observations of what transpired in the basilica were partial, but yes, I am aware that you killed a man who claimed to be an

Inquisitor. I did not observe what else he communicated to you by psychic means”.

lanthe (voice trembling): “If he was what he said, then I have done a terrible thing, an unforgiveable thing”.

Artabanus: “If he told the truth... And are not terrible things our stock in trade, mistress?”

lanthe (voice trembling): “And if I tell no one, not Inquisitor Covenant, not Cull, what will you do, Artabanus?”

Artabanus: “I serve you. I will do as you ask”.

lanthe (voice trembling): “That simple?”

Artabanus: “It is my observation that in this existence nothing is simple”.

lanthe (unsure): “Was I... Was I right?”

Artabanus: “On that I cannot extend an opinion”.

He began to move away, his flock of servo-skulls bobbing⁸⁰ in its wake. Beyond the ruined buildings the sun was rising.

Artabanus: “One thing I will observe though. Secrets even more than actions have consequences”.

High above carrion birds were beginning to circle against the blue dome of the sky.

lanthe: “We should be going. The day will soon be here”.