



Agent of the Throne: Blood and Lies

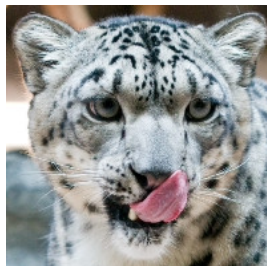
An Inquisition Audio Drama (2017)

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List of characters:

- * lanthe - Inquisitorial agent;
- * Artabanus – Inquisitorial agent (Mechanicum);
- * Elias Cull – truth broker
- * Dree – Enforcer, warden major;
- * Covenant - Inquisitor.

(battle raging around lanthe, laser beams and gunshots)

Artabanus: “Mistress lanthe! Mistress! The Enforcers are still closing”.

lanthe (moaning): “Where is my gun?”

Artabanus: “Your firearm took the main force of the impact. I am afraid that it is no longer serviceable. You have also sustained damage to your right low extremity”.

lanthe (moaning): “Give me your pistol... There’s a doorway, opposite side of the alley, left, ten meters”.

Artabanus: “I observe it”.

lanthe (breathing heavily): “On my command help me up and get us to that door”.

Artabanus: “I will comply. May I observe that the current progression of events is unlikely to aid you with the fulfillment of your stated objective?”

lanthe (breathing heavily): “Noted. Move!”

(lanthe and Artabanus running away)

* * *

(lanthe pours some water into the glass, puts the flask over the table, ignites a lho stick and inhales the smoke deeply)

You want to know about the first life I took? It was on Agatha, back home. Long time ago now. I must have been twenty, maybe twenty-one. We were in one of the scrap cities and then there was dust, lots of dust. The rust in it made every breath taste of iron. There were... You know, now I can’t remember. Twenty of us, perhaps. We were in temperate fatigues and combat gear. All as green as the grasslands in spring. Command hadn’t realized that arcade would make a standout like candles at midnight in the sun and dust. Either that or they didn’t care. I was basic combat qualified, basic unit command qualified, basic

and a lot of basic. A trooper in the squad just ahead of me went around a corner and... But they weren't stupid the screed fanatics. Insane maybe, but not stupid. They had a thread bomb slung across the gap. No one saw it, we didn't know to look. The explosion punched right up into the sky. The sound for a blast like that ringing in your ears for what seems like forever.

I got up. The screed fanatics started firing down into the gully. They couldn't see us through the dust but that didn't matter. Stab rounds make this noise when they get past you, buzz like something is spitting beetles at you. I went forward, kept moving. That is what you are supposed to do. It's in the basic. And there were these figures in front of me. They had glare goggles over their eyes and they had stapled screed tapers onto their flesh and gear. The parchment was stuck to them with dried blood and dust.

(lanthe taking a drink, distant thunder)

They brought their guns up to fire. I fired first.

* * *

(battle raging around lanthe, gunshots)

Artabanus: "The door is sealed. Material is plasteel, estimate two centimeters thick. Mechanical lock corroded..."

lanthe (interrupting): "Just get it open".

(several las shots)

Artabanus: "Lock mechanism is non-standard. Time to decipher: four minutes thirty-five seconds. Time for thermal incision: one minute fifty seconds".

One of the Enforcers (in the distance): "Defilers of the holy laws of the lords of Mithras, reveal yourselves and lay down your arms".

lanthe (crying): "Artabanus!"

Artabanus: "Calculating optimal angle of application".

One of the Enforcers (in the distance): "Judgment is upon you! Submit to the mercy of execution!"

Artabanus (opening the door): "There..."

lanthe (moaning from pain): "Inside... now!"

(lanthe enters the door while backfiring, the door closing behind them)

lanthe: “Fuse it shut”.

Artabanus (wielding the door): “Complying. May I ask if conflict with local Enforcers was your intent? (Enforcers slamming at the door from the other side) This door will hold only for less than thirty seconds. Mistress, what are you doing?”

lanthe: “Photon and choke-gas charges”.

Artabanus: “I am able to identify the remains you have wired to the door. I have just never seen them used as mining charges. Fascinating”.

lanthe: “Artabanus, be quiet and help me run”.

Artabanus: “Complying. I underestimated their determination. They will break through in...”

(door collapsing, Enforcers entering the structure and starting to cough)

lanthe (running away): “The gas won’t stop them for long. Move faster”.

Artabanus: “If I may inquire, this means you will be ending your operation on Mithras?”

lanthe (running away): “No, Artabanus. We’ve only just started”.

* * *

Mithras X was my first solo operation. Inquisitor Covenant, my then master, sent me to remove a himovorid cult that had begun to become a concern. Mithras X was an iron-strangled heap of excrement. It had a huge population mainly living in the factory sprawls. Time had stacked metal towers and slap buildings on top of each other so that the streets sat in sump canyons and ran with polluted rainwater. It rained almost without cease and the rain tasted of ash.

The cult called themselves the Children of Eternity. They had started out as one of the murder gangs that seemed to breed in places like the deep slums of Mithras X. They had been killing for at least a decade by the time I arrived. Artabanus, one of Covenant’s fringe agents, had reported them as persons of potential interest. Back then though the Children of Eternity were just another murder cult into abduction, self-mortification and syphoning off their victims’ blood. Nasty, but nasty is not enough to draw the eye of the Inquisition. For that you need to cross a line. The Children of Eternity crossed that line when they began to gather members far above the sump canyons. That and certain phrases

had begun to enter into the dialect of belief: Us’Kathul, Kareneth, Scrion. Words that hurt your tongue to say. Words that come from beyond, from the warp.

Covenant had decided that they had to be removed before they became something truly terrible. It was what the rest of Covenant’s cadre called a peripheral mission, too dangerous to leave to local forces but too low-grade for Covenant to deal with himself. So I went instead. By the time I arrived, the Mithras X conurbation was drowning in riots. The local Enforcers were dealing with it by going to war in the sump canyons and the whole place was coming apart at the seams. In the middle of all that I still had to find the Children of Eternity and eliminate them, all without calling in the heavy brigades. Life, it seems, hates simplicity.

Artabanus: “Stay still. This splinter is proving evasive”.

We had run into the Enforcers within hours and come off worse. They were in no mood to make fine distinctions of who they were shooting at. After evading them we had broken into a deserted storage tower. It smelled of mold and stagnant water but it had good lines of sight and limited routes of entry.

Once we were settled Artabanus had begun to pull shrapnel out of my leg.

Ianthe (moaning): “Ahhhh”.

(blood dripping on the floor)

Artabanus: “There... I will fuse the wounds. Technically you should not exert yourself for some time, but I surmise you will not be convalescing”.

Ianthe (moaning): “Thank you... Ahhhh”.

Artabanus: “This will ease the pain for a time”.

Ianthe (voice trembling): “You know a lot about battle wounds for...”

Artabanus (interrupting): “For a servant of the sacred machine... I am a disciple of the Seventh Transcendence. We believe in the progressive perfection of the body and mind through integrating the machine with the flesh. We live on that interface and stand as our bodies become machine. Our creed requires that we know about blood and bone”.

I sat with that replying. Artabanus was a strange creature. He was not a tech-priest or not in a sense most would think. He was a cyber-devotee.

A mane of cables framed a blank bronze face. A cloak of carbon fabric hung over metal limbs. Once we had reached the safety of the storage tower he had produced a floating chrome servo-skull which he had plugged into a socket where his right ear would have been. He had been humming strange droning tunes until I asked him to stop. Most of the time I was not sure if he expected me to respond to what he said. The rest of the time I wondered how much of a human mind existed behind the serene mask. Still I was glad that he was there.

Artabanus: "Mistress, other thing. May I inquire? Should we move location?"

lanthe (moaning): "That shooting is not for us, not yet anyway".

Artabanus: "My apologies. If I am honest, this mode of operating is not within my normal parameters of experience. It is unusual. May I inquire how you see matters progressing from this point?"

lanthe (moaning): "We need to find where this cult has gone".

Artabanus: "I was logging Enforcer signal traffic relating to them up until the civil unrest began, but there has been nothing since".

lanthe: "Suspicious, don't you think, the way this urban war begins just as the Children of Eternity go missing?"

Artabanus: "How so? The data does not exist to support a causal link".

lanthe (smiling): "Never mind. If the Children of Eternity aren't showing up in signal traffic, then we will have to start tapping in to less official sources. Someone somewhere will have seen something. Someone will know".

Artabanus: "Is that a hope or a belief?"

lanthe (smiling): "Ha, a little of both. We need someone who hears the whispers that don't get into official reports".

Artabanus: "I would add to your specification someone who is not involved in the enforcement of the local laws".

lanthe: "Do you know anyone like that?"

Artabanus: "Yes, but they might be... difficult".

lanthe: "Difficult? We can deal with".

* * *

Did I know what I was doing? No, not really. I had experience in combat, in killing things that are difficult to kill, but at the start I had no idea. None at all.

You know what? It was the most terrifying thing I'd ever done. Being out there alone with a weight of an oath to the Golden Throne pressing down so hard that I almost couldn't breathe. A lonely pressure of duty. A feeling that no one is coming, that it's only you. That takes some getting used to.

I was on a landing platform once when a blast from a Titan cut it from a hive. It was on Geldic, I think, the first time, before they burned the southern continent. I was standing there and the Titan stepped out of the smoke. Its head was level with the platform. It looked at us. The machine looked at us and then it fired. I think I started to run. The platform began to fall down the face of the hive. I could feel the world dropping away under my boots. The Titan just turned and walked away. Two platoons gone like flicking bugs off a wall. That moment is what I think about when I remember there was first missions for Covenant. That feeling of something powerful just pulling the world away under your feet and walking on. That was what he did when he sent me out for the first time. He ripped the world out from under my feet and hoped that I could run fast enough not to die.

* * *

Guard: "No one here".

Artabanus: "That is manifestly incorrect. The door you are guarding leads into a subservice cavern that can house at least..."

Ilanthe (interrupting): "We are bounty-sworn from offworld. We need an information broker and are willing to pay well".

The guard cocked his head as though listening to something only he could hear. He was head and shoulders taller than me, grafted muscle bulging under body armor. Lobo-chips studded his heavy brow and his left arm was a grafted rotor cannon that dripped with rain from its cluster of barrels. The doors behind him were two semi-circles of rusted steel hinged over the mouth of a pipe wide enough to swallow a cargo hauler. The rest of the wide street to either side were strewn with broken cogs and oil drums. Shadows pulled under the distant lights from higher up the sump canyons' walls.

Guard: "Still no one here".

Artabanus: “This is the so-called Guild of lies...”

Guard (interrupting): “Tell your metal friend ‘be quiet’. I said once again, no one here. These words are done or you are done. This...”

Artabanus looked like he was going to say something but I pulled him away. There was no point. We would have had to kill the guard to open the door and while that wouldn’t have been hard it would serve nothing. We did not need another enemy after us.

Ianthe: “We’ll be back”.

Guard: “Die now, die then. No difference”.

We walked away and cut down the first alley we came to. I drew a weapon. In places like that if you don’t have your finger on the trigger, you are a fool.

Artabanus: “Mistress, if the Guild of lies will not accommodate us, then we are left with no means of gathering the information you require”.

We were ten paces into the alley when the skin over the back of my skull went tight. The breath in my throat caught and blood began to tingle in my veins. It was an old response, developed long ago and carried with me like a shadow at my back. Sometimes it woke me at night sweating and ready to scream. Sometimes it saved my life.

Artabanus: “Mistress?”

Ianthe: “Keep moving”.

I saw the shadow folded against a flight of stairs leading up to a gantry walk above the alley.

Artabanus: “I...”

Ianthe (crying out): “Down! Now!”

I shoved him hard to one side. He fell into the shadow of a thick pipe which ran up the alley wall. I dropped and spun the opposite way. My gun arm snapped out and up. The gun was a Hecuter auto pistol loaded with soft quicksilver-filled rounds and fitted with a suppressor.

Elias Cull: “Don’t shoot!”

(three gunshots, body collapsing)

I put three rounds into the torso of the figure as he rose and called out. I ran towards him, gun aimed, my eyes sweeping across the alley walls. If there were more layers to the ambush, they would act now. Why was

I running towards the man I just shot? Simple, aggression wins fights and there was a chance that he was still alive and a threat. He had said not to shoot before I put him down. You might think that my shooting him was unfair or trigger-happy. It wasn't. It's what keeps you alive at the sharp end. Someone comes out of the dark and you don't shoot because they asked, then you have asked to become a corpse.

Elias Cull (moaning): "Holy teeth (tears?) of the Emperor..."

The man rolled over and cried out as I reached him. The low light showed a leaned face locked into a grimace between curtains of black hair. My gun was already aimed at his head. Three squeezes of the trigger and his skull would be jelly on the wall behind him.

Elias Cull (moaning): "You are fast... Throne, I think my ribs are broken".

I did not shoot. I should have.

lanthe: "Hands up and open".

He raised his hands and I got to clearer look at him. He was tall and lean. He had sharp features and there was a bright intelligence in his eyes. He wore a long synth-leather coat which flapped open as he moved. A reinforced armor vest sat over his chest. The ballistic fabric glittered where my soft-headed rounds had flattened to ragged coins of metal. I caught a glimpse of underarm and thigh holster rigs. His eyes met mine. His raised hands did not move.

Elias Cull (coughing): "I am not even thinking about it".

lanthe: "If you do, you get the next three rounds in the head, not the chest. Artabanus, he has two weapons visible. One under his left arm, one on his left thigh. Remove them and check for others".

Artabanus moved up and bent down over the man in a coat. Chrome-finished machine hands fished a hand cannon and compact auto pistol from the holsters, both the graphite black and looked well-maintained.

Artabanus: "Good quality, local manufacture. Forge stamps removed and... oh... what are these?"

He pulled three disks the size of large coins of black metal from the folds of the man's coat, lines of radial security glinted on their faces.

Artabanus: “Multi-spectrum stealth enablers, stunners in the lane pallets, capable of noise reduction and auspex baffling, light displacement. Rare and beautiful things”.

I held my gaze steady on the man.

Ilanthe: “What are you?”

Elias Cull: “More to the point, what are you, pilgrim? I heard you told the mostler at the door to the Guild hall back there. He could smell the lies you were telling, that’s why he didn’t let you in”.

He shrugged almost apologetically.

Elias Cull: “You are not bounty hunters, offworld or not”.

His words lit a cone of ice in my guts. I was going to have to kill him. This mission was falling apart in every turn. He must have read something in my eyes because he began to talk before I could pull the trigger.

Elias Cull: “Easy, easy. It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to know. I don’t even want to guess”.

Artabanus: “That is inconsistent with him covertly observing us”.

Elias Cull: “I just want to make you an offer. That’s all”.

Ilanthe: “An offer? You want to help two strangers that you say are not what they claim to be”.

Elias Cull: “Help? No, at least not for free. I was going to offer to work for you”.

The wheels of my mind which had been frozen by the spike of adrenaline turned over.

Ilanthe: “You are a member of the Guild of lies. You are an informer for hire”.

He smiled.

Elias Cull: “Former sins”.

The Guild of lies was a local peculiarity of Mithras X. Amongst the factionalized gangs, Enforcer divisions and labor population the Guild of lies brokered intelligence to any who could pay. Equally loathed and vital to the functioning of civil and criminal order they would sell out anyone to anyone. At least that’s what Artabanus had told me. We had come to them to help us try and find the Children of Eternity.

Artabanus: "Mistress, I am not comfortable with this development".

I held the gun level on the man's smile. In truth I was even less comfortable than Artabanus with this development. My brain was screaming to pull the pistol's trigger and walk away. But we were out of options and watching the chances of success vanish over the horizon.

Ilanthe: "What is your name?"

Elias Cull: "Elias Cull, at your service. Well, so long as you can pay".

I saw Cull's smile hook into a smirk.

Ilanthe: "I must be losing my mind".

I dropped my aim and shook my head. I was beginning to see that a battlefield had virtues I had not appreciated.

Ilanthe: "Get up! We need to get off the streets".

* * *

Memory is strange, don't you think? Some things you can remember so crisp and clean, they might have happened a second ago. Other bits of the past are all... gaps and cracks. I can remember my father's office: the little wooden boxes filled with binged notes and the tarnish on the brass plates on the front of each one. I can recall the smell at the sea docks when we visited the coast in summer. That reek of fish and salt spray, vile but I can't help but be happy when I smell anything like it.

After Covenant sent me out as his acolyte, one of the things that used to worry me was my memories. All those missions I'd done for the Inquisition before and then, they are just being scooped out like seeds out of soft fruit. I understood why, of course. Demons are creatures that can corrupt simply by you knowing about them.

(distant thunder)

Ordinary people, soldiers, even the Adeptus Astartes that come into contact with the creatures of the warp, face either the peace of execution or oblivion at the hands of a telepath. That I was allowed to face them in battle and live was an honor, even if it cost me my memories.

Funny, once you have something back you sometimes wish you don't. And sometimes you wonder if anything else has been taken.

* * *

Ilanthe (over vox): "She is two minutes late".

Elias Cull (over vox): "Patience, she will be".

Ilanthe (over vox): "One minute, Cull, and then we are pulling out".

Cull grinned to himself and lit another lho stick. The heat at the stick's tip glowed white in my night scope. The smoke drifted up towards the piped roof. He seemed utterly unconcerned that I had a high-powered longlas zeroed in on his back.

Artabanus (over vox): "Mistress, I am picking up air vibration consistent with the lhoing human walking towards Elias Cull's location".

Elias Cull (over vox): "Told you".

We were in a dry drainage outlet the size of a transit tunnel. It was near lightless except for the pale fluorescent glow from fronds of moss that hung from seams in the walls. It was everything I didn't like in the location. There were only two ways in and out and if someone wanted to flood it with explosives or troops, they would have us trapped. Cull had insisted that this was the only location his contact would meet him. Given the newness of our association and the fact that this meeting was also his idea I was waiting for the whole thing to prove a setup. That was why I was staged a kilometer back watching Cull through a high-power scope and ready to blast his skull into smoke.

(sounds of approaching footsteps)

Elias Cull (over vox): "Here she comes. For Throne's sake stay calm".

I watched as the Enforcer approached out of the dark. She wore dark fatigues under off white flack armor, reinforced plasteel plates sat on her shoulders and thighs. Twin red stripes ran down the left side of her breastplate marking her as a warden major. She had a heavy pistol stretched to her right thigh and an extendable shock maul hanging from her waist. Her face was hard and taut. She looked like she was short on patience balanced by an excess of violent intent. She stopped ten meters from Cull, took out a lho stick, put it in her mouth and struck an igniter to light it.

Elias Cull: "I heard that the rain is worse than it was last season".

Warden Major Dree: "Drop it, Cull. What do you want?"

Elias Cull: "Say the words, Dree. I can't be too careful these days".

Warden Major Dree: "Rain is the same as it was last season. Now start talking before I walk away".

Elias Cull: “The Children of Eternity. Nasty little cult, who like to pipe people’s blood into their veins and think it makes them live forever”.

The Enforcer took a long drag on her lho stick, then shook her head.

Warden Major Dree: “Can’t help you”.

She started to turn away.

Elias Cull: “They were around until a week ago and then they were nowhere. Where did they go? You came down on them hard. One of the gang clans decided they wanted them gone. You must know something. Someone must know something”.

Warden Major Dree: “I thought you truth brokers knew everything, guess not”.

Elias Cull: “You know something, not?”

I watched Dree smile through the scope, warm smoke breathing between her lips. She held the lho stick in her right hand, the left resting at her waist.

Warden Major Dree: “Who sent you after this, Cull?”

Elias Cull: “Can’t say, you know that”.

Warden Major Dree: “You are going to tell me who you are working for or no deal”.

Cull held her gaze for a second, than shook his head.

Elias Cull: “The price is the same as it’s always been, that I don’t go out to trade with all I have on you”.

The Enforcer took another pull of smoke. Her lizard smile was still in place.

Warden Major Dree (taking a deep breath): “Two offworlders went to your Guild, said they were bounty-hunters. We sent word out not to rum with them or we would break every truth broker we found. They got turned away. But you, Cull, you might find that kind of job interesting because someone says not to touch it. Tell me where they are and you get to leave here alive”.

Cull stiffened. The movement was almost imperceptible. I drew and held the breath. The slight tremble in the side view steadied. Cull grinned at the Enforcer.

Elias Cull: “Deal’s off then”.

The Enforcer was fast, fast and ready. Her right hand twitched down to the gun.

(laser shot)

Warden Major Dree (screaming in agony): “Aaaaahhhhhhh!”

My first shot hit the Enforcer in the throat and blew the back of her neck out. She jerked back, eyes wide, blood arching from the wound as she fell.

(two additional laser shots)

The next two went into her as she was going down.

Elias Cull (over vox): “What?”

Cull turned and shouted down the tunnel. He spun back staring down at the corpse of the Enforcer.

Elias Cull (over vox): “What have you done?”

Ianthe (over vox): “Saved your life. Artabanus, eyes and ears out for anything approaching from either end of the tunnel”.

Artabanus (over vox): “Affirmative”.

A thread of smoke was rising from the Enforcer’s corpse.

Elias Cull (over vox): “She was a warden major. It was just negotiation. Do you even know...”

Ianthe (over vox): “Whatever kind of ally you thought she was, she wasn’t. She was going to shoot you”.

He went still at that but kept glancing at the corpse.

Elias Cull (over vox): “That makes no sense. She’s been my best contact in the Enforcers for four years. Nasty and crooked, but steady”.

Ianthe (over vox): “She said that the Enforcers knew about us. She didn’t come here to give you information. She came here to find out if you knew anything about me. You didn’t tell me that the Enforcers had put a bounty on us. What else are you not telling me, Cull?”

Elias Cull (over vox): “All right. There is word out on you and the tech-cultist. It’s a kill or capture deal. The Guild stays out of things like that but agreed to pass on word to the Enforcers if you came looking for help”.

Ianthe (over vox): “So you brought us here to hand us over”.

Elias Cull (over vox): “Weren’t you listening? I was doing as we agreed”.

Ilanthe (over vox): “Why are you going against your Guild?”

Elias Cull (over vox): “I was curious. The whole conurbation is going insane. These riots have come from nowhere. One minute everything is normal and its flames and gunfire everywhere and no one knows why. The Enforcers were operating on shoot to kill. Lots of people are dying and in the middle of all this people worry about two offworlders that I’ve never heard of. So when I saw you I thought I could find out some answers”.

Ilanthe (over vox): “That kind of curiosity is not healthy”.

Elias Cull (over vox): “Do I look like the kind of person who thinks about that very often?”

Artabanus (over vox): “Mistress, my senses are reading a movement”.

I looked up from the scope. I’d let my awareness focus on Cull for too long and forgotten that in the pipe tunnel we were vulnerable.

Ilanthe (over vox): “What direction?”

Artabanus (over vox): “That is the strange thing, mistress. The movement is coming from close to master Elias Cull, from where you shot the Enforcer”.

I looked back through the scope. Cull was turning to look at where the dead Enforcer lay on the floor. Smoke was rising from the corpse threading into the dark. My finger went to the trigger.

Elias Cull (over vox): “What is...”

Ilanthe (crying over vox): “Cull! Get away from it”.

(Cull staggering back)

He did not argue. He was two strides into a sprint when the corpse of the Enforcer rose from the floor. Heat poured between blackening teeth as it breathed. It did not stand but levitated into the air as though pulled by a thread. Cords of blood fell from it. Heat shimmered around it burning cracks opened in its skin. Its head came up last, jaw hanging open. Its eyes were an inferno. Even at a distance I could taste burned sugar and ozone whenever I looked at burning figure. I fired.

(numerous laser shots)

The remainder of the longlas clip went into its torso. Chunks of charring flesh blasted from its chest. It shivered but not lay down. It twisted,

arching bones cracking, skull elongating. My hands pulled the clip free of my gun and slid a fresh one in place. I was fast. The movement entrained by decades of practice, but I was still too slow. The creature was growing faster. Heat turned the pipe tunnel around it cherry red.

Elias Cull (over vox): "Sacred foe..."

(numerous laser shots)

Bullets slammed into the creature. Cull came forwards, a pistol in each hand. He was screaming as he fired. A round slammed into its skull and twisted it around with a smack of sheering vertebrae. It trembled and for a second it seemed as though it was going to fall. Then it whipped around.

(demonic creature roaring)

It roared. Rows of eyes were growing out of the wound ripped in the Enforcer's face. It thrust a hand towards Cull. Its fingers grew into talons reaching for him as the last shreds of armor and flesh burned from its body.

(laser shot)

The las shot blew through its face and out of the back of its skull. Burned flesh sprayed out and I hosed the rest of the clip into it before it could move again. It fell to the floor. Its flesh collapsed smoking as it crumbled to white ash.

Elias Cull (over vox): "What in all is it supposed holy with that?"

I slung my longlas across my back and ran along the pipe towards Cull drawing my pistol. He looked pale, the smoking guns in his hands shaking slightly. He doubled over just before I could reach him and retched.

Elias Cull (throwing up): "Oh... Oh... God-Emperor... She was burning... What happened?"

I grabbed his arm. He tried to shrug free of my grip.

Ilanthe: "Move... Now..."

Elias Cull (starting to run): "You just... We just..."

Ilanthe (running, talking over vox): "Artabanus, any sign of hostiles?"

Artabanus (over vox): "Negative, mistress. You are clear until you reach me and there are no indications of impedance on our primary exit route".

We ran, Cull half staggering, glancing back to the heap of burned meat and bones we were leaving behind. My own mind was whirling. I had a feeling that I had just stepped into something much bigger than a cult that needed quietly purging.

Elias Cull (while running): “Who are you? What is this?”

Ianthe (while running): “You don’t want those answers”.

* * *

We don’t talk about them. Demons, I mean. That is one of the first lessons of fighting them. You don’t talk about them, you don’t name them.

They are real though. They wait just out of sight and just beyond touching. All they want is a way into the warm world of flesh and breath and light. And once they are here, they make our nightmares real. And to know of them, to see them, to name them - gives them their way in.

So we don’t talk about them.

* * *

Elias Cull (angrily): “I want to know. God-Emperor, I just helped murder an Enforcer warden major. I need to know what happened”.

Ianthe (calmly): “No, you don’t”.

Elias Cull (angrily): “Like hell... You people are... I don’t know what kind”.

Ianthe (calmly): “Cull?”

Elias Cull: “Yes?”

Ianthe: “Shut up!”

He went quiet. Cull had led us to a deserted machine shop once he had calmed down. He was still vibrating with adrenaline and fear. But he had progressed from shock to anger. He sagged with his hands thrust into the pockets of his coat. Face pale, eyes blood shocked. I had taken his guns, of course. He could have run but had not. That and the fact that he was more together than I expected, made the decision of when to kill him more difficult.

Artabanus: “I have prepared the signal as you specified, mistress, but getting it to an astropath, let alone authorizing the use of said astropath will be far from simple”.

lanthe: “Whatever you have to do, get it done and then get back here. One hour, Artabanus. If you can’t do it in that time – vanish”.

Artabanus: “As you will, mistress lanthe”.

Artabanus bowed before going out into rain-soaked dark. Cull watched the door close and then looked back to me. His eyes were wary but he seemed somehow calmer.

Elias Cull: “Need way of getting him out of the way? So how does his go? One of these quicksilver rounds in my skull or something less immediate?”

I held his gaze. He had figured it out or some of it at least. Clever, but that was Elias through and through. I shrugged.

lanthe: “I haven’t made up my mind yet”.

Elias Cull: “A bullet would be a more preferred choice. It’s friendlier”.

He frowned for a second and shook his head.

Elias Cull: “Astropath? That’s what Artabanus said. That’s offworld communication, all the way offworld. And you even didn’t twitch at the thought of what it would take to persuade someone to let him use an astropath. That makes you...”

lanthe: “I serve an Inquisitor. I am an agent of the Throne”.

Elias Cull (laughing): “You are joking, aren’t you?”

(lanthe not replying)

Elias Cull (seriously): “Tenfold saint’s tears. You are serious...”

I gave a small nod in reply. He closed his eyes and pressed the heel of his hand against his forehead.

lanthe: “I have a job to do. It’s already going to be near impossible, so I need help”.

Elias Cull: “Me? You need my help?”

lanthe: “It’s the only choice you have. You have seen... something that you should not know about, that no one should know about. There are creatures that exist as shadows weed the way. They do not live, but thirst for the souls of the living. What manifested in the flesh of your Enforcer contact was one of these creatures. I have confirmed your death sentence by telling you this”.

Elias Cull: “And if I help you, I get what? Forgiveness?”

lanthe: “No one gets that, but you get to live for a while longer”.

Elias Cull: “That doesn’t sound like an offer I can refuse”.

* * *

(heavy rain)

Artabanus (over vox): “If I may, this facility seems remarkably quiet given the disruption in the rest of the conurbation”.

Elias Cull: “There are a lot of the Enforcers around there pacifying the situation”.

lanthe (smiling): “Or this is the eye of the storm”.

The Enforcer precinct was a cluster of slab-sided structures lashed to the cliff wall of the largest sump canyon by cables and girders. We were looking down on it from the cliff edge above. A hundred and fifty meters of sheer rust streaked steel separated us from the precinct’s roof. Heat vents and antennae dotted its surface. Through my infragoggles I could see tripod-mounted guns, siren towers and searchlights. It would have been a difficult notch to crack with a platoon of troops.

Elias Cull: “Their patrol vehicles are lowered in cradles from the bottom. Detention and interrogation are in the lower core”.

lanthe: “You know that firsthand?”

Elias Cull: “Well, the kind of people who become truth-brokers tend to have had less than untroubled lives”.

lanthe: “Anything else?”

Elias Cull: “I would guess that there will be... eighty personnel inside minimum. Still think this is a good idea?”

I did not answer. Truth was I was far from sure that what we were doing was anything other than suicide. After the encounter with the Enforcer in the sump pipe two things were clear. The powers of the warp were active in Mithras X and the corruption was inside the Enforcers. I did not know how that connected to the cult I had come to purge, but I knew that by trying to find the Children of Eternity we had twice run into the Enforcers and a demon had possessed one of their officers. That was reason enough for me. You might think that rash. You might be right. But the Inquisition does not indulge caution if it leads to failure.

Artabanus (over vox): “Mistress, I am in position as you specified. I have deployed two servo-skulls to the canyon beneath the Enforcer

facility. Not ideal, but sensor coverage is adequate. The explosives are in place on the canyon wall. All the charges are slaved to my control as per your instruction”.

Ianthe (over vox): “Confirmed and understood, Artabanus”.

I looked at Cull. He still had his storm coat on, but had tied his long hair back out of his face. He grinned, the wide smile showing white in the heat vision of my goggles.

Elias Cull: “Never thought of doing this stupid before. For me that’s saying something”.

Ianthe: “Infragoggles on. Weapons check”.

Elias Cull: “Yes and yes”.

Ianthe: “Grav-chutes active”.

Elias Cull: “And which is the switch? Oh... (turning on) Yes... Ready”.

Artabanus (over vox): “There are three Enforcers on the roof. No signs that they are aware of you”.

Ianthe: “Confirmed, Artabanus. Stand by”.

I braced myself from the edge of the cliff. Cull followed soot beside me. A gust of rain-filled wind buffeted us.

Elias Cull: “Oh, it’s a long way down”.

Ianthe: “Jump in three... two... one...”

(Ianthe and Cull making for a run and jumping)

Elias Cull (crying while falling down): “Ooohhhh.... Aaaahhhh... The Emperor, protect me...”

* * *

I was a drop trooper. Agathian Fifth, the elites. Nothing tougher wearing the uniform since the times of heroes and legends. A life of fast assaults and feeling the ground coming up to meet you while you prey it’s not your turn to find out what a chute failure feels like. Good times. Fine times.

Until they were not. Until the Agathian Fifth were... all but gone. One bad drop. One long fall into fire. And now...

(pause)

Funny thing. I hated heights, probably still do, come to that. But I love the fall.

* * *

We fell down the face of the canyon cliff, two shapes wrapped in darkness. Beneath us the roof of the Enforcer precinct raced up to meet us. Cull was behind me, arms spread to control his descent.

Artabanus (over vox): "One hundred meters".

The shapes of the guards on the roof were orange white in my infragoggles, plumes of warm air chugged from the stacks jutting from the roof beside them.

Artabanus (over vox): "Fifty meters".

I had not come to Mithras X empty-handed. I might have been sent alone, but I brought with me all the tools that I thought I might need and a few more besides.

Artabanus (over vox): "Ten meters, mistress. You are going to..."

I flipped the grav-chute to maximum. Force snapped through my limbs. I rolled out of my dive in midair and brought the gun in my hands up. An Enforcer standing by a heating vent looked up at the sound of the grav-chute cutting in. I fired before he could open his mouth to shout. The gun was an auto-carbine loaded with armor-piercing rounds. My first burst of the weapon stabbed through the Enforcer's chest armor in a path of blood.

(Enforcer crying and collapsing to the ground)

The body hit the metal roof just as I landed. A second Enforcer turned at the sound. My next burst caught his right shoulder. He staggered against the balustrade that ran around the roof. Another burst ripped his head to shreds. He flipped back over the low wall and fell down into the sump canyon beneath, blood and silence scattering in his wake.

Artabanus (over vox): "Mistress, one human still remains on the roof. Twenty meters, ninety degrees left".

Ilanthe (over vox): "Thank you".

I pivoted around a wide vent stack. The last Enforcer had clearly heard something because she was rising from her seat, a combat shotgun in her hands, her mouth opening to shout. She did not manage to finish whatever she was going to say.

(another dead Enforcer collapsing to the ground)

I turned as Cull dropped onto the roof. He straightened finding his balance as though he had just stepped from a boat onto dry land. His pistols were in his hands though steady in his grip.

Elias Cull (breathing hard): "I don't think I want to get used to that..."

Ianthe: "Get the charges on the signal arrays".

I waited for a wry aside, but none came. He just moved to the nearest thicket of aerials and unfastened a bandolier of crack-grenades from his waist.

Artabanus (over vox): "No sign that you have been detected, mistress. Your ingress point to the precinct interior is the vent ten meters to your right".

I moved towards the vent and checked the seals on my breathe mask.

Elias Cull: "Charges in place".

Artabanus (over vox): "Confirmed".

I nodded and clamped a crack grenade to the grate of the air vent. Its arming rune flickered from amber to green. I nodded to Cull and pulled a heavy gas cylinder from a pouch at the small of my back. We stepped to either side of the vent and crouched low, eyes closed, mouths open so that our ears did not burst from the pressure wave.

Elias Cull: "Ready".

Ianthe: "Detonate".

(explosion)

* * *

(Ianthe and Cull walking across the precinct, Enforcers coughing from choke gas)

We moved down through the precinct. Choke gas fogged the air. Most of the Enforcers we had found were gasping for breath.

(Ianthe finishing Enforcers with an auto carbine)

Their filter masks were out of immediate reach when I had dumped the gas cylinder down the air vent. I put a bullet in each of them. Cull had flinched the first time but said nothing. There had been some who had the presence of mind to get their masks on, but they were scattered.

Lone gunmen are dangerous but if they are on the defensive they are blind. That makes them easy to kill.

Elias Cull: "Threat, your left".

(several gunshots, killed Enforcer collapsing with a moan)

Ilanthe: "Reloading".

Elias Cull: "There should be more of them. Even if most of them are around the city there should be more here".

Ilanthe: "There is still the detention area".

Cull looked at me, face hidden by goggles and mask. His storm coat was buttoned to his neck and he held his hand cannon and auto pistol loose at his side. The grav-chute was still on his back.

Elias Cull: "This way".

We killed five more Enforcers before we reached the entrance to the detention area. It was a blast-grade door striped in black and yellow chevrons.

Elias Cull: "That's it".

Spots of rust blistered the paint of the door. My run slowed to stillness as I approached it. Cull stayed back staring. My skin prickled. Red brown moisture was sweating from the metal. I could taste blood and feel my hand tighten on the trigger of my gun.

Elias Cull: "I don't... It's... I feel... anger".

I could feel it too. A razor buzz running down my nerves.

Elias Cull: "It's..."

Ilanthe (interrupting): "Find the door controls! Fast!"

Cull looked at me, his head trembling as he turned. My finger tensed on the trigger of my carbine, then he nodded and moved through the tangle of pipes and cables beside the doors.

Elias Cull: "It should be secure. I am not sure we can get in without breach..."

(door opening, interrupting Cull)

The door released with a wet gasp of pneumatics. I dropped to one knee and raised my gun. Cull ducked back, his pistols rising as the teeth of a door was drawing wide. Heavy moist air breathed out of the gloom within. Every fiber of my body and soul was screaming to run.

But I had not come here to turn back. I stood slowly feeling the blood hammer through my veins and stepped through.

(lanthe entering the structure, distant heartbeat and low droning eerie sounds)

Elias Cull: "Can you hear that?"

A heavy heartbeat drummed through the air. I could hear breathing off in the dark around us, loud and slow. I took another step. My goggles clicked to dark vision. I blinked and then looked up and saw where the Children of Eternity had gone.

The Enforcers had not ignored the Children of Eternity. They had tried to deal with them. They had brought them in and locked them up. That had been a mistake. There is a reason the Inquisition and Inquisitors exist and there is a reason that people like me serve them. It is not because Inquisitors thirst for cruelty, death, blood and torment. They do what they must in the face of the universe that wishes us only ill. I serve them because I have shown that I can face that truth and still pull the trigger. I am the unkind necessity of survival.

A pillar of red slick flesh rose up from the central space of the detention area. Mouths dotted its surface slowly opening and closing. Needled teeth glinted. The pillar went up and up until it was lost in the dark. Beyond it I could see doors hanging open in cells that ran the circuit of the central space. Moisture glinted on dented metal, cords of flesh snaked from the pillar to the floor. I looked down. Human figures lay around on the ground, some in the Enforcer armor, some in gang rags, some in tattered scraps of cloth. The pulsing cords of flesh were clamped to their pale skin. A man in a worker's overhaul lay just at my feet. His eyes were open and as I looked at him, his lips began to move.

Worker (croaking): "Feed.... Feed..."

(lanthe killing the possessed worker)

The man's head exploded as a pistol round tore through it.

Elias Cull: "Get back!"

My awareness snapped sharp and suddenly I realized that I had stepped too far into the chamber, too close to the vile pillar. I jumped back but too late. A cord of flesh whipped out, a ring of teeth glinted at its tip.

(flesh pillar roaring)

Cull fired behind me. Bullets tore the cord of flesh from the air and smacked into the pillar. It shuddered, mouth puffing red mist. I fired. Armor-piercing bullets tore meat from the pillar. It shrank like a muscle squeezing tight.

(flesh pillar roaring)

It screamed. The sound battered into me. The cords of flesh pulsed as blood poured back into the people on the floor. Bodies rose into the air. Bullets punched into flesh but the floating bodies were already burning just like the Enforcer in the tunnel. Their skulls were elongating as their fingers grew into talons. I stopped firing.

Ilanthe: "Cull, we have what we came for".

I slammed my hand at Cull's shoulder. He whirled, hands rising to strike. I shoved him back.

(flesh pillar roaring)

Ilanthe: "Cull, run! Run now!"

(Ilanthe and Cull running away from the flesh pillar)

He ran. We both ran. Behind us the warp creatures stepped from the flesh of their hosts and charged after us, roaring, iron claws drawing sparks from the metal floor. I drew a grenade, pulled its pin and tossed it back behind us.

(explosion)

It barely slowed them down. I could hear their cries of hunger and rage in my head.

Elias Cull: "Where are we running to? There is no way out!"

Ilanthe: "You said, there are hoist gantries at the fore of the precinct".

Elias Cull: "Yeah, but it's a sheer drop".

I paused to fire behind us. The nearest creatures tumbled back as the bullet slammed into them. They were merely birthed into reality, malnourished and still weak. By such small blessings the Emperor protects us.

Ilanthe: "Go!"

Elias Cull: "I know, run!"

(Ilanthe and Cull running away from the flesh pillar)

We reached the stairs that led down to the vehicle hoists and leapt down them. The door at the base was heavy, but hinged wide as we slammed into it.

(lanthe and Cull collapsing into the door, slamming it open with a groan)

Cold night air slammed into us. A web of metal gantries and walkways led away from it. Beneath us the lights of the sump canyon's bottom glowed like scattered coals.

Elias Cull: "That door's not going to hold".

lanthe: "Activate your grav-chute".

My grav-chute burst to life on my back. I stepped to the edge of the nearest gantry. A kilometer drop looked back up at me.

(door behind opening)

The door behind us gave way in a shriek of sheering metal. Cull was beside me.

lanthe: "Jump!"

I twisted as I fell and activated the vox connection.

lanthe (screaming over vox): "Artabanus!"

Artabanus (over vox): "Yes, mistress. I gather from this connection that you are alive. How may I enact your will?"

lanthe: "Detonate the charges at the cliff".

Artabanus (over vox): "By your will".

(several explosions overhead)

A red ball of fire blew out from the cliff face above the precinct, then another, and another until fire ran along the canyon wall in a burning grin. For a second everything was still. Then a vast slab of stone and metal began to slide down the cliff face. The girders and cables holding the precinct in place tore away as a great fall of debris struck it and ripped it from its settings. It fell past us tumbling in a cloud of fire and dust. I watched it slowing my descent so I fell as though I was suspended above it. The wreckage struck the bottom of the sump canyon. Clouds of debris punched up into the air. A shockwave ran through the canyon leveling buildings and pulling more debris from the wounded cliff.

Elias Cull (over vox): "What is that?"

I jerked my head up from the devastation unfolding beneath me. Pale dawns brightened the horizon. The dark shapes of gunships were dropping from lightening sky. New flowers of fire opened above Mithras X chimneys and towers. The gunships dived lower and the roar of their engines echoed into the sump canyons. I saw the doors sliding open in their sides, figures in armor crouched within. Gunfire rattled up at them. Cannon mouths rotated and fired back roaring like mystical beasts of metal and war. I smiled as the air rushed past and the ground slid closer.

Elias Cull (over vox): "Who is that?"

Ianthe (over vox): "That is my master".

* * *

Covenant found me in the grey light of dawn. He came with a squad of shock troopers he had commandeered to cleanse the city. He had received the signal sent by Artabanus and come in person to see that the Enforcers were purged fully. He had not been systems away, but had set out for Mithras a little after me. He had arrived 48 hours earlier and had been waiting close by. He just hadn't told me.

I knelt as he jumped from his gunship and walked towards me. His grey storm coat whipped about him in the engine's downwash. The mind-linked psy-cannon on his shoulder pivoted to cover the surrounding buildings as he advanced, but his gaze stayed fixed on me. I have always heard people talk of Covenant as young and perhaps he was... for an Inquisitor at least. I had never thought that though. He was old in ways that aren't counted in years. You just needed to look in his eyes to know it. Behind me Artabanus folded into a bow. Elias Cull hesitated for a second and then knelt too.

Ianthe: "Lord Covenant".

Covenant: "Rise and report".

I stood. Covenant was looking at Cull and Artabanus still kneeling as the rain fell. The optical lens of his psy-cannon focused on me.

Ianthe: "There was a warp incursion, multiple entity manifestation. Local Enforcers are tainted. I believe the primary breach has been eliminated, but there might be human carrier hosts still at large".

Covenant: "You have information on where those targets might be found?"

I gestured back to where Cull knelt, rain running off his dark hair.

lanthe: "Lord, I would suggest using this man as a guide to secondary strike locations and targets. He is a local intelligence broker. His name is Elias Cull".

Covenant nodded once, his eyes now fixed on Cull alone. The truth broker glanced up and then quickly down.

Covenant: "He witnessed the malefic incursion?"

lanthe: "Yes, lord, but he is capable and strong of soul no matter what he looks like".

Covenant: "You feel you can judge such matters, lanthe?"

lanthe: "I think I could not have done this without him".

He did not move for a long moment and then turned away.

Covenant: "Once we are done, you will report in full".

lanthe: "Lord?"

He turned and looked back at me.

Covenant: "Yes".

lanthe: "You followed me here without telling me. You knew that this was more than a cult purge. This was a test".

Covenant: "It was a matter that needed to be dealt with".

I waited but he added nothing else.

lanthe: "What's going to happen to Cull and Artabanus?"

Covenant raised an eyebrow.

Covenant: "That's for you to decide and to live with the decision you make".

lanthe: "Then I'll take them with me. They are useful".

Covenant: "If that is your judgment".

And he walked back to the gunship without looking back. Cull and Artabanus rose and came towards me.

Elias Cull: "What happens now?"

lanthe: "We go back to work".