

WARHAMMER
40,000



THE GREATER EVIL

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CONTENTS

Cover

The Greater Evil – Peter Fehervari

About the Author

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THE GREATER EVIL

Peter Fehervari

'Evil grows from within, not without. It is a disharmony of the self, not the shadow of some elusive, predatory other.'

The Yasu'caor

– THE FIRST CIRCLE – OUTSIDE

No matter how often Voyle relives it, the end always begins the same way. A deep clang reverberates through the airlock as the Sable Star's boarding umbilical latches on to the derelict ship. Voyle checks the air tank strapped to the back of the trooper beside him, then turns so his comrade can return the gesture. The routine is mirrored by every member of the squad with practised swiftness. They have run through it twice already, yet nobody hesitates. Nobody complains. A Void Breacher's life hangs by the integrity of his tank as much as his weapons.

'Squad Indigo is bloodtight,' Voyle reports into his helmet vox when the ritual is complete. 'Repeat, bloodtight.'

'Bloodtight confirmed, Indigo,' Lieutenant Joliffe acknowledges from the bridge, unable to hide the tension in his voice. Captain Bester took his own life fourteen days ago. Nobody knows why, but they all sense Joliffe isn't ready to lead the company – not on this warp-cursed patrol. Voyle has considered seizing command. No one would stand in his way, least of all Joliffe, but then the burden of choice would be his to carry. No, it is better to live or die with clean hands.

'Commence breach,' Joliffe orders. 'Emperor walk with you, Indigo.'

With a hydraulic hiss the external hatch slides into its recess, revealing the metal tube of the umbilical. Most of the strip lumens running its length have failed and those that still work flicker fitfully. The company's five-month tour of the Damocles perimeter has taken a heavy toll on both supplies and men, including both its engineers. The Sable Star was just three days out from Kliet when it found the intruder, silent and powerless, yet perfectly intact. Its markings designate it as the Halvorsen, but though the massive derelict is evidently Imperial in origin, they can find no record of it. That is not unusual, for numberless ships ply the vast tracts of the Imperium and countless more have been lost over the millennia. Factoring in the contortions of the warp, the derelict might be decades or even centuries old. It is a cumbersome hulk devoid

of guns or advanced sensor arrays – probably a civilian cargo freighter and certainly no match for a warship like the Sable Star, but that is little reassurance for the men tasked with boarding it. With derelicts it is what lies within that matters, for the void crawls with phantoms seeking the solace of metal or flesh.

Let it rot, Voyle wants to say. Better yet, blast it back into the warp!

But instead he says what he always says: ‘Acknowledged, crossing commences.’ And enters the umbilical. He is a Void Breacher. This is what the Astra Militarum has trained him for.

They lied to us! Voyle yells at his former self, but it is a silent cry, for if the ghosts of the past are without eyes, so those of the future are without voice.

The Void Breachers’ magnetised boots clatter on the corrugated decking as they advance along the narrow tunnel one by one, their helmet lights slicing back and forth. The concertinaed tube creaks and shudders around them as it strains to keep the ships conjoined, the living to the dead. Despite their sealed carapace armour and therma-padding, the cold is gnawing at them within seconds and their movements grow sluggish before they are halfway across. The rasping exhalations from their helmets are like steam in the frigid air, forcing them to wipe their visors clean after each respiration, lest breath becomes blinding frost.

Voyle halts as his light finds the derelict’s access hatch. The metal is dark and pitted, contrasting starkly with the gleaming umbilical clamps that encircle it. One glance tells him the locking mechanism is hopelessly corroded.

‘Cut us a door, Hoenig,’ he orders, moving aside as the squad’s specialist steps forward. He watches as the trooper engraves a glowing oval around the hatch with a las-cutter. The tool’s power pack whines and Voyle wills it to fail, knowing it won’t. It never does. The nightmare won’t allow it.

‘Done, Breach Sergeant,’ Hoenig says, then shoves the hatch. With a screech of harrowed metal it crashes into the darkness beyond. As the reverberations subside, Voyle levels his meltagun and steps through.

His own shriek wrenched him back from the brink.

But I’ve already fallen, Voyle thought wildly as he surged to his feet. There’s no coming back...

The nightmare fractured and fell away in sluggish fragments, revealing a large windowless chamber. Its walls were tessellated with hexagonal panels that glowed softly, washing the space in subdued blue light. Voyle stood at its centre, his bare feet tangled in a silvery blanket. He tore himself free and spun around, trying to make sense of things.

Where—

He froze as he caught sight of something watching him from one of the walls.

Black eyes gleaming with a hunger colder than the void...

The sound that rose in his throat was somewhere between a scream, a snarl and a sigh, born of fear and loathing and... *longing?* Voyle stifled it as the predator dissolved into a human form. A woman. She was crouched in a recess in the opposite wall where a hexagonal panel had retracted, her eyes glinting in the gloom as she appraised him. Her face was tattooed with concentric rings, the first shearing through her forehead, cheeks and chin, the second encircling her eyes and mouth and the third set directly between her eyes. Voyle knew she bore a fourth and final ring, but its lines were invisible, for it embraced the mind.

‘Unity,’ Voyle breathed, naming the symbol... and remembering. The woman’s tattoos mirrored those on his own face. With that recollection the rest flooded back and he scanned the chamber quickly, but the other serenity cells were still sealed. Only the woman, who always slept with hers open, had been roused by his nightmare and she wouldn’t say anything to the others.

‘Forgive me, sister,’ Voyle said. ‘I was walking old roads.’

Her expression gave nothing away. Sometimes she seemed as inscrutable as their liberators. Though they had been comrades since Voyle’s emancipation from the Imperium almost five ago, they had exchanged few words. Other than her name – Erzul – he knew little about her save her loyalty to the cause and her talents as a pathfinder. But that was fine by Voyle. He wasn’t much inclined to talk about his own past either. Remembering was bad enough. Dreaming even worse...

Why now? he wondered, reluctantly considering the old nightmare. It hadn’t troubled him in years – not since he’d mastered the mantras of self-sublimation during his induction. He’d almost convinced himself it was a false memory, as his instructors had encouraged.

Almost.

Voyle rubbed the old scar under his chin. It was itching furiously, as if inflamed by the sting of the past. He wasn’t going to sleep again this cycle. Maybe the sour-sweet tranquillity wafers the liberators issued their auxiliaries were losing their potency.

I should report it, Voyle brooded, knowing he wouldn’t. He trusted the liberators of course, but his weakness shamed him. Void dammit, he should have taken a cell. At least that way he’d have kept his nightmares to himself. He was a big man, broad-shouldered and a head taller than anyone else in his squad, let

alone the liberators, but that wasn't why he shunned the serenity cells. If his commander had demanded it, he would have squeezed into one of the hexagonal coffins, but the Stormlight had not pressed the issue. That wasn't his way.

'It is your shadow to burn,' the xenos had said, identifying his subordinate's dread with an acuity that would have confounded the Imperial officers Voyle had served under. 'You alone can light the fire.'

But the ship was already five days into its voyage and that fire remained unlit. Every sleep cycle Voyle had bedded down at the centre of the chamber, ignoring the questioning looks of his squad as they clambered into their cells.

It doesn't matter, he thought as he pulled his boots on. His loathing of tight spaces was only a whisper of the shadow that stalked him.

'I'll be in the Fire Grounds,' he told Erzul as he stepped towards a wall. It split open at his approach, revealing a brightly lit corridor. Nothing could hide in that crisp, sane light.

Void black eyes.

Why now? Voyle asked again. A new life and purpose hadn't dispelled the shadow. It had simply lain dormant. Waiting for him to wake up.

The Seeker faced the maelstrom of swirling, prismatic mist with his back straight and his staff extended horizontally before him at eye level. Its lifeless metal was untarnished by the farrago of colours assaulting him so he kept his gaze locked upon it, using its truth to filter out the lies. He had diffused his breathing to a low susurrations, each exhalation extending across several minutes, yet encompassing no more than eleven heartbeats. His master had attained seven beats in the ritual of the *arhat'karra*, but Aun'el Kyuhai knew he would never match such serenity. Nor would he ever ascend beyond his current station in the Ethereal caste's hierarchy. That knowledge brought neither resentment nor sadness, for he had cast aside all desire save service to the Tau'va . All else was as illusory as the storm that raged around him.

And behind illusions prowled beasts...

They came for him together, springing from the mist in perfect synchronicity, one from behind, the other from his left, which they had identified as his weaker side. Traditionally their kind attacked in a cacophony of squawks and hoots, yet this pair came in silence, denying their prey any warning.

They are learning, Kyuhai approved. He spun to his left, thrusting his staff towards the dark shape flanking him, but it sprang away into the fog like a gangling acrobat. He felt a rush of air at his back as the other assailant's blade

hacked through the space he had occupied a moment earlier. The ferocity of the swing committed the attacker for a second too long, chaining it to the impotent arc as Kyuhai whirled his staff over his shoulder. It was a blind strike, but the displaced air had told him all he needed to know. When he entered the *arhat'karra*, every moment stretched into many and every whisper shouted.

'*Ka'vash!*' he pronounced as his staff brushed his opponent's throat. Had the weapon's blades been extended it would have been a killing blow. Before his foe could offer the ritual response, the second beast lunged from the fog, its cranial quills erect with rage. Beady, deep-set eyes glared at him from either side of a prognathous, serrated beak. The creature was naked save for a leather tabard and its sinewy form was riddled with tribal tattoos and piercings. This time it didn't attack in silence.

Rukh expects defeat, Kyuhai recognised as he swept his staff around to meet the avian warrior's scimitar. *When Zeljukh falls, Rukh always falls with her.*

The creature struck in a whirlwind frenzy that would have overwhelmed a lesser foe, yet none of its blows passed the gliding, almost languid parries of Kyuhai's staff. To the Seeker the onslaught was akin to an infant's tantrum, but he allowed it to run its course. Perhaps it would be instructive.

Once again anger blinds Rukh, Kyuhai gauged as he blocked. He was disappointed, but unsurprised, for they had played out this scene many times before.

It was Zeljukh who ended the hopeless duel, bringing her bonded mate to heel with a derisory tirade of hoots and clicks. With a squawk of frustration, Rukh threw his scimitar aside and proffered his neck.

'*Ka'vash*,' Kyuhai said, gently tapping the creature's throat. 'End simulation.'

The swirling fog vanished instantly, revealing the ochre coloured expanse of the Fire Grounds. The *Whispering Hand*'s training bay was divided into six sectors, some housing demi-sentient sparring machines, others devoted to low-tech challenges like climbing frames or ropes. Kyuhai and his opponents stood in the simulation arena, where a large saucer-like machine hovered overhead, its underside bristling with sensors and projectors that tracked their movements. This late in the ship's sleep cycle the bay was almost empty, yet Kyuhai and his companions were not quite alone. A human was training on the far side of the bay – the big man who led the expedition's second gue'vesa support team. Their paths had crossed here before while their fellow travellers slept, but they had never spoken.

'Reflect upon this defeat,' Kyuhai told the avian warriors. 'Leave me.'

The pair inscribed the symbol of Unity with their claws then loped towards the climbing arena, where they would continue training until he summoned them. Once they would have berated each other for their defeat, but they were past such foolishness. He had brought them that far at least.

'Your honour guard is formidable, exalted one,' the expedition's ranking Fire Warrior had observed when Kyuhai had come aboard the ship. *'The kroot are fierce allies.'*

'I am a Seeker, Shas'el Akuryo. I have no honour guard,' Kyuhai had replied. *'Rukh and Zeljukh are simply companions on my path.'*

Many of Kyuhai's fellow t'au were repelled by the avian auxiliaries, but he had detected only respect in the Fire Warrior's voice. Though Akuryo and he were of the same rank within their respective castes, the Ethereals were elevated above all others, creating a gulf of authority between them. Had the Seeker commanded it, Akuryo would have taken his own life without hesitation. Such blind faith had troubled Kyuhai when he had first stepped onto his path, but he had soon learnt that it was not blind at all, for his caste was the living embodiment of the *Tau'va*.

'We rule to serve,' he said, echoing the words of his former master.

The sounds of combat drew him from his reflection. While his mind had wandered, his body had followed its own path, carrying him to the arena where the big gue'la was duelling with a pair of drones. The saucer-like machines buzzed around the man, harassing him with low intensity lasers as he whirled about, blocking their beams with the mirror shields strapped to his wrists. His only method of retaliation was to reflect the lasers back at their source, but only a direct hit on an emitter would disable a drone, while three strikes to his torso would end the bout. Judging by their tenacity the machines had been set to maximum aggression – a challenge even for seasoned Fire Warriors. Though the man moved with a speed that belied his bulk, it was apparent that his ambition exceeded his ability.

Like Rukh, he fights in the expectation of defeat, Kyuhai judged.

He anticipated the gue'la would meet failure with a curse, but when it came he simply said, *'Start over.'*

'Hold,' Kyuhai interjected and the drones froze.

The gue'la turned, surprised, then bowed his head. *'I didn't mean to intrude...'* He faltered, evidently unsure of the correct form of address. *'Lord,'* he ventured. He spoke in a hoarse growl, as if his throat was damaged.

'Seeker,' Kyuhai corrected. His sharp eyes scanned the identity disc on the man's tunic. *'And the intrusion is mine, Gue'vesa'ui Voyle.'*

‘I am honoured, Seeker.’

Even by the standards of his species, with their jutting snouts and curled ears, Voyle was ugly. Like all the expedition’s gue’vesa, he was shaven-headed and his skin was stained blue to mirror his liberators’ complexion, but such contrivances couldn’t soften the brutish cast of his features. His eyes were set deep in a craggy, scar-crossed wasteland that terminated in a slab-like jaw. It was a strange canvass to bear the concentric rings of Unity, yet also an eloquent one, for if such a damaged being could be redeemed then surely there was hope for the rest of its species. To the Seeker’s mind the gue’la were infinitely more dangerous than honest savages like the kroot, but equally their *potential* was far greater.

‘They are an ancient race, crooked with the malignancies of age,’ Kyuhai’s master had taught, ‘and yet the aeons have not diminished their passion. In time they will either become our most ardent allies or our most dire foes.’

‘You fought with skill, but chose your battle without wisdom,’ Kyuhai said. ‘To overextend oneself is to welcome defeat.’

‘I stand corrected, Seeker. My thoughts were clouded.’

‘Sleep evades you?’

‘I don’t like what it brings. Or where it takes me.’ The man rubbed at his neck and Kyuhai spotted a pale scar under his jaw. It was circular, almost like another ring of Unity. ‘There are things... things I thought I was done with.’

‘Are you having doubts, gue’vesa’ui?’

‘Doubts?’ Voyle looked up sharply, evidently surprised. ‘No, no doubts... I want to see the Imperium burn, Seeker.’

‘That may not serve the Greater Good. Our mission here in the Damocles Gulf is peaceful. We may yet find common cause with the people of your Imperium.’

‘It’s not *my* Imperium, Seeker,’ Voyle said, his expression hardening. ‘It never was.’

There it is, Kyuhai saw, the potential for terrible light and darkness.

‘That is why awakened minds like yours must strive to reclaim it for the Greater Good,’ he said.

Voyle didn’t answer, but the denial in his eyes was apparent.

He is correct, Kyuhai reflected. His species yearns for strife. There will be no accord with their Imperium. And yet we must attempt it, even if it only delays the inevitable. This is an inopportune time for war. When it comes it must be of our choosing, not the enemy’s.

A melodious sequence of chimes reverberated through the bay, announcing the

dawn cycle.

‘We will talk again, Gue’vesa’ui Voyle,’ Kyuhai said, studying the man’s face. ‘Think upon my words.’

As the Seeker turned and strode towards the door he felt the man’s shadow-wracked eyes following him.

‘Review transmission Fai’sahl-359,’ Por’el Adibh commanded.

The data drone embedded in the glassy table before her burbled and its dome erupted with a corona of pixels, illuminating the dimly lit conclave chamber where the embassy’s leaders had gathered at her request. The iridescent particles flickered then resolved into a diminutive figure floating above the drone in a rigid lotus position. The hololithic avatar’s fine features and high-collared robes identified him as a member of the t’au Water caste, like Adibh herself.

‘I bear greetings in the name of the Greater Good,’ the avatar announced in a mellifluous baritone. ‘I am Por’vre Dalyth Fai’sahl, first emissary of the eighth branch of the Whispertide Concordance, entrusted with the enlightenment of the nineteenth parallel of the Damocles Gulf, designated the Yuxa system.

‘Please forgive the excessive interval since my last communication, but my expedition has been beset by grievous travails and many of my associates have passed into the Deep Silence. Yuxa is a troubled region where the dominion of the gue’la Imperium has grown profoundly frayed. Such disorder is fertile soil for anarchy and violence, yet also for opportunity, for as the storm spawns ruin so ruination foreshadows fresh hope. And in hope there is Unity.’

You were never one for succinctness, Fai’sahl, Adibh reflected. Her colleague had always leaned towards the flamboyant, and not only in his rhetoric. It was why she had rejected his many proposals for a pairing, despite his comeliness – and also, she suspected, why she had advanced beyond him in their caste’s hierarchy. Yet despite Fai’sahl’s limitations his disappearance had saddened her. How like him to confound her assumptions and reappear, seemingly alive and well.

‘Know that our sacrifice has not been without purpose,’ Fai’sahl’s image was saying, his nasal slits dilated with pride. *‘Under my auspices, Yuxa’s dominant gue’la faction, the Illumismatic Order of the Ever-Turning Cog, has embraced the Greater Good with formidable conviction! Though I have dedicated my life to the dissemination of the Tau’va among the ignorant, I have never witnessed an ideological metamorphosis to rival the one that blossoms here. Indeed, I believe the key to the spiritual redemption of this vexatious species – perhaps*

even the unravelling of its barbaric Imperium – may lie here in the Yuxa system!

‘Regrettably, however, this efflorescence of reason is imperilled by recidivist elements and technological impediments beyond my capacity to salve. My gue’la associates have prepared a report of our predicament that I have appended to this transmission for your elucidation. Esteemed colleagues, I urge you to despatch a relief mission to Yuxa without delay. It would be a betrayal of our exalted commission if this promising light were extinguished in its infancy.

‘Spatial coordinates and supporting specifications follow.’

The hololith flickered out and the lights rose, revealing the others seated around the conclave table. Adibh and Fio’vre Daukh, the expedition’s senior engineer, had already seen the recording, but for the pair of Fire Warriors it was the first time. The older one’s weathered face wore its customary disapproval for all non-military matters. Even by the standards of her caste, Shas’vre Bhoral was a dour creature, but doubtless she hadn’t been chosen for her intellect. She was a tightly focussed weapon, nothing more. It was the officer sitting beside her who mattered to Adibh.

‘The recording is genuine?’ Shas’el Akuryo asked.

‘It was encoded with gue’la equipment, but the identity ciphers are correct,’ Adibh replied. ‘Moreover, Por’vre Fai’sahl and I are former colleagues. It is certainly him.’

‘His manner is... singular.’ Akuryo’s brow furrowed slightly to indicate *the-irony-that-anticipates-derision*. For a Fire Warrior he was unusually expressive, Adibh thought, even handsome in a coarse way. More importantly he was perceptive. His gue’vesa troops, to whom he was nothing less than a hero, had named him Stormlight for his stalwart guidance in both war and peace.

‘How long has this emissary been missing?’ Akuryo asked.

‘Prior to this transmission our last contact with Fai’sahl’s embassy was almost three spatial years ago,’ Adibh said. ‘They were presumed lost and the Yuxa system was designated non-viable.’

‘The matter was not investigated?’

‘As you are aware, the Whispertide Concordance is only an exploratory venture into the Damocles Gulf – a bridgehead to the gue’la. Our resources are limited.’

‘His sudden reappearance troubles me,’ Akuryo said, cutting to the crux of the matter.

‘Naturally. That is why you are here, shas’el.’

‘Then why have I been allowed only Bhoral and two gue’vesa support teams to protect you, por’el?’

‘It was the High Ambassador’s decree.’ Adibh extended her hands, palms upward. ‘We walk the path of the Open Hand. An excessive military presence might be misconstrued and opportunities of the kind Fai’sahl describes cannot be squandered.’

‘Then you believe his story?’

‘That is for our revered Seeker to determine,’ Adibh said. ‘My purpose is to facilitate a fruitful discourse.’

‘As yours is to watch over us, Stormlight,’ a quiet voice said behind her. ‘I have no doubt you will both perform your duties admirably.’

Adibh turned and saw the Seeker standing in the entrance of the conclave chamber, his arms crossed in a posture of tranquil authority. He was attired in plain grey robes cinched at the waist by a black sash. As always, a deep cowl pooled his features in shadow, obscuring his eyes. His honour staff was clipped to a simple harness on his back.

How long has he been there? Adibh wondered as a thrill of devotion surged through her. It was rumoured that Seekers could pass unseen among the other castes and Kyuhai had done nothing to dispel that notion. Formally known as *yasu’aun* – ‘the-finders-of-the-truth-that-hides’ – Seekers were solitary mystics who wandered the T’au Empire, following paths only the Ethereal caste could comprehend. Sometimes they would attach themselves to an expedition, appearing unexpectedly, but always welcome, for their presence was a great honour. Though Adibh was officially still the mission’s leader the *reality* of that had changed the moment Kyuhai had joined them, yet she felt no acrimony towards him. In her most introspective moments that equanimity sometimes troubled her, but the unease would never crystallise.

‘We shall not fail you, Seeker,’ Akuryo vowed, clearly as awed by the mystic as Adibh.

‘Nor I you, Stormlight,’ Kyuhai replied. He turned to Adibh. ‘Por’el, when we reach Yuxa you will conduct our negotiations.’

‘Under your auspices of course, Seeker.’

‘You misunderstand, por’el. You will lead the embassy alone. I will observe, unobserved. The unseen eye sees further.’

‘Then you suspect a trap, Seeker?’ Akuryo asked intently.

‘That is my path.’

When the next sleep cycle came round Voyle climbed into a serenity cell. The last thing he saw as the hatch slid shut was Erzul watching him from the cubicle

in the opposite wall. Fighting down his nausea, Voyle extinguished the light.

‘It’s nothing,’ he whispered.

But it didn’t *feel* like nothing. Not at all. His heart was pounding as the memories surged up with almost physical force. Darkness and the stench of stale promethium...

Then he is inside the other coffin again – the empty fuel silo he has crawled into and welded shut with Hoenig’s las-cutter. His ear is pressed against the slick metal, listening for the abominations that have slaughtered the boarding party. Hoenig is slumped against him in the tight space, his breath coming in ragged, bubbling gasps as he bleeds out. The specialist trooper’s left arm has been torn off at the shoulder, along with most of his face, yet oblivion eludes him. His surviving eye roves about, as if seeking answers to questions he can’t understand, let alone ask. Voyle knows he should give his comrade mercy, but then he will be the last of them and he isn’t ready for that yet.

‘I can’t,’ he says.

Hoenig’s questing eye fixes upon him, mutely condemning, then darkens to black.

‘Face your fear or it will consume you.’

Voyle recoils and slips further into the nightmare, back to the moment when it truly begins.

‘Proceed,’ Kyuhai commanded.

‘Subject: Voyle, Ulver. Species: Gue’la, male,’ the data drone answered in its sexless, perfectly modulated voice. ‘Age: thirty-six biological years. Height...’

‘Omit somatic data,’ Kyuhai interrupted. ‘Proceed to biographic.’

‘Yes, Seeker,’ the drone replied. ‘Former Astra Militarum trooper, Eleventh Exordio Void Breachers...’

Alone in the conclave chamber, Kyuhai listened as the drone related Voyle’s history. He didn’t know what he was looking for, but he was certain he would *recognise* it when he found it. In time that recognition would blossom into understanding, but it was an ambiguous process, driven by intuition rather than intellect. A Seeker perceived connections and anomalous elements – be they events, objects or individuals – as an artist of the Water caste perceived the rhythm of colours, words or melodies. Like that artist, Kyuhai’s calling was to create harmony, but his canvass was spiritual rather than aesthetic.

‘Subject Voyle was subsequently promoted to the rank of Breach Sergeant and assigned to patrol duties along the perimeter of the Damocles Gulf,’ the data

drone was saying. 'His first tour...'

His eyes closed and arms folded, Kyuhai let the story wash over him. Thus far nothing in Voyle's service record had struck the discordant note he was waiting for. The man's career was competent, but unexceptional. Grey. Yet *something* had drawn him to Voyle, just as it had drawn him to this mission when so many others had vied for his attention.

Who are you, Ulver Voyle? Kyuhai mused. Why do you matter?

Though Voyle has fallen only minutes further into his nightmare's past it is enough to resurrect his comrades and the delusion of order. The squad has travelled far in search of the dead ship's bridge, for if there are any answers to be found they will surely be there. Unexpectedly the derelict is still pressurised, though its atmosphere is stale and none of the troopers have opened their visors. They don't trust this place enough to taste its air.

'How much further, Hoenig?' Voyle hears himself ask.

Whole again, the specialist trooper consults his scanner. The glowing map on its readout is only an approximation of the hulk's layout derived from similar vessels, but Hoenig has a talent for navigating on the fly.

'Another deck up, Breach Sergeant,' he replies. 'Should be an access ladder three or four junctions ahead.'

But Voyle, both past and present, isn't listening anymore. Did something move in the intersecting corridor he just passed? He steps back and illuminates the passageway. Its length is choked with a snarl of pipes and corroded machinery that spin strange shadows from his light. That constricted abattoir of junk isn't somewhere he wants to go, but he has to be certain, so he steps into its maw.

'Don't!' Voyle present yells silently into his past.

With a wet hiss a pile of debris uncoils before him, extending long arms that end in hook-like talons. A moment later a second pair unfurls beneath the first, but these taper into long-fingered hands that look almost delicate. The creature's gangling form is sheathed in chitinous blue plates that bulge into a carapace of bones over its chest and shoulders. Though its posture is hunched its bestial head is level with Voyle's own – so close he can see its mauve flesh pulsating.

It was waiting for me, he understands.

Voyle's meltagun is trained on the thing's ribcage, but his trigger finger has turned to stone, along with his legs and throat, all held rigid by its gaze. Its eyes are a lustreless black, yet the hunger in them is unmistakable. Unassailable... even beautiful in its purity...

Now one of Voyle's hands moves, rising to the seal of his visor. He gasps as the derelict's freezing air hits him, but it is not enough to snap him free of those mesmerising eyes.

'Breach Sergeant?' someone calls behind him as the creature's jaws distend and a rigid tongue extrudes, dripping viscous ichor. The organ is thorn-tipped and pregnant with promise.

'Burn it!' Voyle bellows at himself as he raises his head and offers his throat.

Perhaps his warning rends time, space and logic to stir his former self to action. Perhaps it is nothing more than a shock reflex. Either way, when the beast's tongue pierces his flesh he squeezes the trigger. As cold corruption courses into his bloodstream a blast of purifying heat incinerates the thing's torso. Its tongue is wrenched free as it falls, but Voyle feels no pain through the numbness in his neck. He snaps his visor shut as gunfire erupts in the corridor behind him.

'Xenos!' somebody shouts.

In the pandemonium that follows the first attack Voyle can't tell how many of the abominations there are, but within seconds his squad is fighting for its life as the things assail it from all sides. Soon three troopers are lost and the fight has become flight. Reaching the sanctuary of the Sable Star is their only hope, but the rout has transformed the corridors into a maze and Hoenig's scanner has been lost along with the arm that carried it. Voyle wields his heavy gun one-handed as he supports the wounded man. They are both drenched in the blood pumping from the raw stump of Hoenig's shoulder; yet the specialist is still conscious – still their best chance of finding a way out.

The seven survivors become six then five then only four as claws yank troopers into dark recesses or the pipes above.

'Sable Star!' Voyle shouts into his helmet vox, but the only reply is a hiss of static. The squad left a string of comms relays in its wake to maintain contact with the ship, but the rout has carried them far from that path.

'Take... right,' Hoenig gasps as they reach another junction.

Abruptly the vox crackles into life: '–status, Squad Indigo? I repeat...'

'Lieutenant!' Voyle interrupts. 'We're under attack. Taking heavy casualties.'

'Confirmed,' the acting commander replies. 'What are you up against, Breach Sergeant?'

'Unknown xenos... Don't know how many. We need a support team now!'

There is a long pause: 'I am disengaging the umbilical.'

'Wait...'

'I can't allow the Sable Star to be compromised.' Lieutenant Joliffe's voice is walking a knife-edge of panic now.

'Listen to me, we're...'

'Emperor protect you, Breach Sergeant.' The vox goes dead.

Voyle curses him as the trooper ahead is pulled through the floor by something unseen. He sends an incinerating blast into the torn ground as he steps past, virtually dragging Hoenig now. Moments later a plangent metallic scraping echoes through the corridor. Every Void Breacher knows that sound.

'That was the umbilical!' Thorsten yells from somewhere behind.

We were almost there, Voyle realises bitterly. 'Keep moving,' he orders as he staggers on, going nowhere now, but too angry to stop.

Soon Thorsten is also gone and only Voyle and the wounded specialist remain. Hoenig has passed out, but he's still breathing and Voyle won't leave him behind even if it makes no difference anymore. As he wanders the labyrinth he senses the black-eyed xenos watching him from the shadows, inexplicably reticent now his comrades are dead. Are they toying with him? No... Voyle is strangely certain that cruelty isn't in their nature. Stranger still, he can't bring himself to hate them. Whatever else they are, the creatures are honest in their desires. The beauty he glimpsed in his first encounter wasn't entirely false. Besides, he has no hatred left to spare for them.

'We were so close,' he rasps, thinking of Joliffe. Dimly he recalls Breacher protocol – even recognises that the lieutenant was right – but rage drowns such reasonable nonsense. 'So... damn... close.'

The corridors reverberate with a deep, distant pounding and Voyle realises the Sable Star has opened fire on the dead ship. He doubts its depleted weapons can destroy the colossal vessel, but the outer sections will certainly be depressurised. Even if the ship survives he might not.

'I'm dead anyway,' Voyle hisses. But his body denies it. And suddenly – fiercely – he realises he wants to keep it that way. His fury demands it. That and something colder.

Shortly afterwards he finds the fuel silos.

'Five spatial years ago subject Voyle was recovered from an abandoned vessel found in the ninth Damocles parallel,' the data drone said. 'The report specifies he had been adrift for three months following an encounter with hostile life forms of an unknown nature. No trace of these aggressors was found, however evidence...'

Kyuhai was listening intently now. According to the report Voyle had displayed remarkable resilience, both physical and mental, in the face of his ordeal.

‘On site examination concluded that...’

‘Hold,’ Kyuhai said sharply. ‘Repeat previous segment.’

Voyle clawed his way out of the nightmare like a panicked corpse from its grave, but the taste of rotten flesh in his mouth wasn’t his own. He had finally remembered the last, worst part of the horror – the part his liberators had suppressed during his induction. Only they weren’t liberators at all. Not for him. How could they be when he was knee-deep in damnation?

Gut-deep.

‘It was evident that the subject had sustained himself by cannibalising a dead comrade,’ the drone repeated.

Cannibalism? Kyuhai thought. The practice was not unknown among some species – indeed it was revered by the kroot – but among the gue’la it was regarded as extremely deviant behaviour.

‘The matter was not noted as a cause for concern?’ he asked.

‘The presiding Ethereal, Aun’vre Kto’kovo, deemed it within acceptable parameters of gue’la degeneracy.’

‘Proceed,’ Kyuhai said, suppressing a rare flicker of irritation. Even among his own caste there were too many who dismissed the gue’la as primitives.

‘Following screening and remedial therapy, the subject was inducted into the Kir’qath auxiliary academy on Sa’cea sept, where he demonstrated exceptional aptitude aligned with a robust commitment to the Tau’va. His initial posting...’

Five years of faultless service to the Greater Good followed, with Voyle fighting on various battlegrounds at the fringes of the empire. The Seeker listened to it all, though he was certain he had already found the key to Voyle’s anomaly. Now he had to make sense of it – and decide whether Ulver Voyle was an asset or a liability.

‘No,’ Voyle rasped, over and over, but no matter how often he repeated it, the truth would not be denied. As the days of his confinement had stretched into untold weeks, his soul had narrowed towards nothingness. Starved of hope for retribution, even his rage had dimmed, yet his body had fought on. Somewhere blood deep – much deeper than he could see – it had been unwilling to die. When his suit’s rations were exhausted he’d scavenged from the corpse beside him in the silo, and then when its supplies were also gone...

Voyle retched and slammed a fist against his sleeping cell.

‘What am I?’ he snarled into the darkness within.

And for the first time the darkness answered, but its voice came from without.

– THE SECOND CIRCLE – THRESHOLD

The Yuxa system had eleven planets, but only two harboured life – Phaedra, a fungus infested water world, and Scitalyss, a bloated gas giant whose outer layers swarmed with phantasmal aeriform vermin. It was to the second of these that the *Whispering Hand* was bound, though its destination was not the planet itself, but the lesser leviathan suspended in its anaemic exosphere.

From a distance the structure appeared to be a dark blemish against Scitalyss' ochre and russet swirl, but as the vessel drew closer the mote grew spiny and misshapen, like a tumour in metastasis. Closer still it resolved into a sprawl of interconnected metal modules of varying size and shape. A monolithic spindle rose from the centre of the tangle, towering over the other structures and trailing titanic extraction pipes into the world below. The spindle's cog-like tiers shimmered with lights as they revolved, but further from the centre the expanse grew dark and the domes of its component modules were cracked open to the void, as though they had been wracked by some terrible violence.

Though the sprawl was artificial it was still a cancer, for its growth had long ago become rampant and perverse, twisted out of any semblance of order by the countless masters who had presided over it. Most had begun their stewardship in sobriety, but few had ended that way, for despite the intent of its architects, discord ran deep in this place. Whether it was the influence of the baleful giant it leached upon or the consequence of some intrinsic flaw, the skyhive was *tainted*, its history saturated in strife. And yet it had endured across millennia, grudgingly paying its tithes to the Imperium and never quite embracing a heresy that would have invited retaliation. There were myriad such cancers growing in the cracks of the Imperium, but few as furtive.

The place had acquired many names, some truer than others. Its formal designation was Scitalyss-Altus, but its current masters had ennobled it as the Unfolding Nexus, however to the millions who eked out a living in its corroded

avenues it was simply the Rat's Cradle.

I do not like it, Por'el Adibh decided, *not at all*.

The skyhive rotated slowly above the conclave table, its tangled lineaments reproduced in perfect holographic fidelity. Its presence felt like a taint upon the room. Upon *her*...

Taint? Adibh dismissed the notion. Such irrationality had corroded the collective psyche of the gue'la. It had no place in the thinking of a t'au.

'Your thoughts, shas'el?' she asked.

'It is dangerous,' Akuryo replied. He stood on the opposite side of the table, his form distorted by the hologram.

'I concur,' Adibh said, 'yet we must proceed with the mission.'

They were alone in the conclave chamber. Her first impressions of the Fire Warrior had proved correct and over the passing days she had come to value his counsel, even to regard him as a friend. After the artifice of the Whispertide Congress his directness was bracing.

'Why?' Akuryo asked. 'Why are we taking this risk, por'el? *The true reason.*'

'Because the High Ambassador has decreed it,' she replied. 'The Yuxa system interests him.' She raised a hand to stem his next question. 'I do not know why. Por'o Seishin keeps his own counsel, but we must trust his judgement.'

'He is young,' Akuryo said flatly.

'He is *gifted*,' Adibh corrected, thinking of her idealistic, driven superior. 'Exceptionally so... The empire recognises and rewards talent.'

Akuryo was silent for a moment, brooding. 'It is fortunate that a Seeker walks beside us on this path,' he said finally. 'We are due to dock in nine hours. I must go, por'el.'

'Why Bhoral?' Adibh asked as he turned to go.

'I do not understand?'

'Why did you choose Shas'vre Bhoral as your aide?' The question had nagged at her for some time. At first she had assumed the warriors were old comrades, perhaps even Ta'lissera bonded, but she had seen no warmth between them. Indeed, Akuryo seemed closer to his gue'vesa than to his fellow Fire Warrior.

'I did *not* choose her,' he said stiffly. 'She was assigned to me for the mission.'

Do you trust her? Adibh wanted to ask, but that was absurd. 'Thank you, shas'el,' she said instead. 'See to your troops.'

When he was gone she returned her attention to the hologram. She wasn't sure why she had asked the question or why Akuryo's answer troubled her. In fact,

the closer they drew to their objective the less certain she was of anything.

Alone in the darkness of his serenity cell, Ulver Voyle listened to the Voice. It had grown stronger over the past few days, swelling from a subliminal murmur to an evanescent whispering, yet its *words* still eluded him.

‘What are you trying to tell me?’ he hissed.

– THE THIRD CIRCLE – INSIDE

Por’el Adibh’s nostril slits dilated with disgust as she stepped onto the ship’s disembarkation ramp and the acid stench of the skyhive hit her. She imagined a broken machine leaking the black sludge that powered so much of the Imperium’s technology. Quelling her nausea, she studied the immense expanse of the hanger bay as she descended, her data drone hovering above her head like a domed halo. The walls of the cavernous chamber were corroded and slick with filth, its floor knotted with trailing pipes and discarded tools. Dozens of sub-human labourers toiled among the labyrinth of machinery, their bodies crudely fused to metal limbs, their eyes as vacant as their minds. It had always puzzled Adibh that the Imperium embraced such atrocities while condemning the elegant drones of the T’au Empire.

So much of their suffering is self-inflicted, she mused.

‘Noteworthy,’ Fio’vre Daukh declared beside her. Adibh didn’t know whether the stocky engineer was referring to the odour or some obscure detail only he could see, but she had learnt not enquire after such remarks; Daukh’s concept of *noteworthy* rarely converged with anyone else’s. He had found much of note during their approach to the hive, while Adibh had seen only decrepitude. Why had Fai’sahl led them to this floating sewer city?

Akuryo and another armoured figure were waiting for her at the foot of the ramp. They had donned their helmets so their faces were hidden behind flat, sensor-studded visors that gave them an impassive machine-like aspect. Akuryo’s mottled crimson armour bore a five-armed sunburst on its breastplate – personal colours and heraldry granted to him when he’d earned his rank. In contrast, his companion’s uniform was the stark, unadorned white of the Whispertide Concordance.

‘Your gue’vesa understand there is to be no violence, shas’el?’ Adibh asked, indicating the human soldiers lined up on either side of the ramp. Both the

support teams were present, the troops' rifles slung over their shoulders as they crouched in the stance of watchful-repose. They wore lighter variants of the Fire Warriors' armour, retaining the breastplates and shoulder pads, but lacking the contoured plates that sheathed their superiors' limbs. Their helmets were fitted with tinted lenses that covered their eyes, but left their faces bare.

'The Stormlit know their duty,' Akuryo replied, referring to his troops as an extension of himself. It was a great honour and several of the gue'vesa puffed out their chests at his words.

'I have faith in *your* faith,' Adibh acknowledged, then appraised the warrior beside Akuryo. The deception was flawless. Despite the armour and helmet, she had expected to *feel* something, but all she sensed was what her eyes told her: this was just another Fire Warrior. It was as if the Seeker had somehow constricted his spirit when he had donned the armour.

He has become what he seems to be, she thought.

There was a pneumatic hiss as the hanger's hatch split down the centre and retracted to either side, spilling bright light into the chamber.

'And so we begin,' Adibh murmured as a robed figure entered.

His vision enhanced by the sensors of his borrowed helmet, Kyuhai studied the newcomer as it approached. Though it was swathed in a hooded purple mantle there were subtle qualities of posture and gait that spoke volumes to his refined sensibilities.

'Por'vere Fai'sahl,' Adibh declared when the stranger stopped before them.

She saw it too, Kyuhai realised, impressed. Few outside the Ethereal caste were so perceptive.

'You know me too well, old friend,' the newcomer said, pushing back its hood to reveal the familiar face of the missing emissary. He smiled and stretched out his arms to encompass the others. 'On behalf of the Order of the Ever-Turning Cog, I offer you welcome to the Unfolding Nexus, a new born engine of reason among the benighted gue'la!'

Kyuhai was perplexed. On the hololith Fai'sahl had appeared pompous – superficial even – but in person he was almost *electric*, as though an avid vitality burned within him.

'It has been too many years since we last conversed, Por'vere Adibh,' the emissary continued warmly, turning back to Adibh.

'Por'el,' she corrected. 'I was elevated shortly after your disappearance.'

'My apologies, *por'el*.' Fai'sahl bowed his head. 'It pleases me that your talents

have been recognised.’ Smoothly, he reached out and grasped her hands. It was a brazen gesture that breached all etiquette and Adibh stiffened visibly.

‘I have so much to share with you,’ Fai’sahl said, his eyes bright. ‘This gue’la relic harbours many wonders that may advance the Greater Good.’

‘You came alone, emissary?’ Akuryo asked bluntly.

Fai’sahl turned to the Fire Warrior, his smile unwavering. ‘No, but we thought it best that you were greeted by one who is known to you.’

‘But I do *not* know you.’ Akuryo indicated the iron talisman hanging from the emissary’s neck – a four-toothed cog embossed with the double-loop of infinity. ‘Nor do I recognise the sept you now speak for.’

‘I bear the Cog Eternal as a mark of *respect*,’ Fai’sahl said. His smile remained, but the warmth had slipped from his eyes.

‘Your message indicated urgency, por’vre,’ Adibh interjected, extricating her hands. ‘I would like to meet these remarkable gue’la you have uncovered.’

‘Of course, por’el...’ Fai’sahl’s gaze swept over the party. ‘Your embassy was not accompanied by an exalted one?’

‘Unfortunately they are few and the needs of the empire many,’ Adibh replied.

Kyuhai studied Fai’sahl’s face, expecting relief or disappointment, but there was nothing.

I cannot read him, he realised. How can that be?

On impulse he glanced at the gue’vesa troops, searching for Voyle. The big man stood at the front of his team, his expression distant, as if his attention was elsewhere. Though they had talked occasionally during the remainder of the voyage Kyuhai was no closer to deciphering the man’s significance. And yet he did not doubt it.

‘Chance is a myth perpetuated by those who only see what seems to be,’ Kyuhai’s master had taught. *‘A Seeker looks beneath the lies and finds the lines that bind. And where they have become twisted or frayed, he follows, for his path is to mend when he can or excise when he cannot.’*

It was the first axiom of the *Yasu’caor*, the philosophy by which a Seeker served the Greater Good.

My path has led me true, Kyuhai judged, returning his attention to Fai’sahl’s smiling, empty face. *Nothing is what it seems here.*

‘Support Team One, the ship is under your watch. Be vigilant!’ Akuryo commanded as he strode towards the hanger doors. ‘Team Two, with me!’

Voyle shook his head, trying to break free of the Voice that haunted – *or*

hunted? – him.

‘Gue’vesa’ui?’ someone said behind him. He turned and stared at the expectant faces of... *Who were they?*

‘Voyle, the shas’el calls us!’ a hatchet-faced woman snapped.

Erzul, he remembered and the rest followed.

‘Move out,’ he ordered. ‘Go!’

Am I losing my mind? Voyle wondered as he followed his squad. Somehow the prospect troubled him less than any of the alternatives he could imagine.

Three vehicles waited outside the spaceport. Two were open-topped trucks, the third a massive armoured car emblazoned with the sigil of the Ever-Turning Cog. A group of robed figures watched over them, their long-barrelled rifles levelled at the surrounding buildings. More were stationed along the segmented wall that encircled the spaceport like a metal serpent. Floodlights illuminated the perimeter, but beyond their reach everything was swathed in gloom. Voyle looked up and counted less than a dozen lights in the iron sky of the dome. He knew each was a vast, burning globe, but it would take *hundreds* to illuminate a city-sized territory like this one.

This whole region is dying, he guessed, remembering the many dark modules he’d seen from space.

As the party approached the vehicles Voyle saw the guards’ purple robes were embroidered with the concentric rings of Unity, but the bronze masks they wore under their hoods were less reassuring, for they were fashioned to resemble something more insect than man, with jutting compound jaws and bulbous, multi-faceted lenses.

‘Watchmen of the Second Rotation,’ the t’au emissary explained. ‘They are here for your protection.’

‘Protection from what?’ the Stormlight demanded.

‘Regrettably the Order’s enlightenment is not entirely unopposed. A few dissident factions remain active in the outer districts, but they are as inchoate as they are ignorant,’ Fai’sahl said dismissively. ‘The spaceport is under the Order’s jurisdiction, but to reach the Alpha Axis we must traverse a... troubled... region.’

‘I advise against proceeding, por’el,’ the Stormlight warned Adibh. ‘Let their leaders meet us here.’

With a whirl of gyros one of the guards marched towards them, its footsteps reverberating under its weight. It was taller and more powerfully built than its fellows, its chest encased in a slab-like breastplate. In place of a hood it wore a

backswept helmet with a vertically slit visor that pulsed with blue light. An augmetic arm extended from its right shoulder, dwarfing the limb below and terminating in a three-fingered claw. Alongside that monstrous appendage the watchman's ornate rifle looked almost delicate.

'My designation is Aiode-Alpha, Warden Prime,' the warrior said in a pristine, but lifeless female voice. 'Your security is my primary directive. Please board the transports.' It rapped a gauntlet against its breastplate. 'For the Greatest Good.'

'There is no cause for concern,' Fai'sahl urged. 'The Warden is the Order's preeminent guardian.'

'Be advised that I have made provisions for our safety,' Adibh warned him. 'My ship expects to receive a coded data-burst from my drone every hour. Any breach of this will be construed as a hostile act.'

'I am familiar with first contact protocol,' Fai'sahl said gently, 'but this is *not* a first contact. I assure you, the Order's offer of friendship is sincere.'

'As is the Empire's,' Adibh parried, 'but the Open Hand must be firm of grip. You will respect my precautions, por'vere.'

'Naturally, por'el.' Fai'sahl bowed.

Adibh turned to Akuryo. 'We will proceed.'

The gue'vesa climbed into the back of a truck while Fai'sahl ushered the t'au into the armoured car. The watchmen boarded the second truck, lining up along its sides in regimented ranks with the Warden at their centre. Voyle gripped the guardrail as his vehicle surged forward and took its place at the rear of the convoy, with the other truck leading and the car shielded between them. Once they were underway his troops began to talk, eager to weigh up their strange hosts, but he silenced them.

'Stay sharp,' he ordered, unslinging his pulse rifle. 'Trust nothing.'

'How far?' Akuryo asked. He hadn't removed his helmet and its sensors glowed in the dingy cabin of the armoured car. Adibh suspected he would have preferred to travel with his troops, but was unwilling to leave her side.

'The Axis is five zones distant. A journey of many hours,' Fai'sahl answered from the seat opposite them. 'Regrettably our only functioning port is on the hive's outskirts. That is one of the limitations we hope to rectify with your aid.'

'Fio'vere Daukh will make a full assessment of your requirements,' Adibh said, keeping her tone neutral.

'My team stands ready to assist you,' Daukh concurred earnestly, though his

eyes didn't leave the car's window slit. Doubtless he saw much of note outside. 'I predict there is considerable work ahead of us.'

'The Order's resources will be placed at your disposal, honoured fio'vre,' Fai'sahl promised. 'Together we shall achieve great things.'

'Assuming we reach an accord,' Adibh cautioned, sounding querulous even to herself. In the cramped cabin Fai'sahl's presence was almost overpowering.

'We shall, por'el. When we reach the Axis you will understand everything.' Fai'sahl smiled and Adibh felt a rush of unwelcome affection for him. No, it was simpler than that – more primal.

How he has changed, she mused. He looks younger than he–

Bright light flashed into her face, breaking the fascination. Abruptly Fai'sahl was gone and a hollowed out, predatory *thing* sat in his place, appraising her with hungry eyes.

'Forgive me, por'el,' the Seeker said from the seat beside the apparition. He extinguished his helmet light – and with it the horror. 'I fear my helm has developed an error.'

'See that you correct it, Fire Warrior,' Adibh replied, surprised that her terror hadn't reached her voice. Perhaps it was because *shame* eclipsed the fear. The Seeker had seen her desire...

No! The desire was not mine, she thought angrily, willing Kyuhai to see that.

'Are you well, my friend?' Fai'sahl asked, his face furrowing with concern.

'Perfectly well,' Adibh said. It was the most profound lie she had ever told.

The twilight district passed in a blur of crooked tenements, their growth stunted by the confines of the iron sky. Some had been reduced to scorched husks, while others had collapsed into rubble. Citizens haunted the squalor like flesh-bound ghosts, either alone or in small groups, often huddled around open fires. All were emaciated and grey, their bodies as wasted as their world. Most ignored the convoy, but a few watched it pass with empty eyes. Sometimes squads of purple robed watchmen moved among them, their weapons swivelling about as they patrolled. Once the vehicles swerved around a towering bipedal automaton with a warrior sitting astride it. The machine stomped through the streets, rocking back-and-forth to its own graceless rhythm as its searchlight scoured the hovels.

This is a warzone, Voyle judged, or the tail end of one. Occupied territory.

They had been travelling for almost an hour when the road narrowed and carried them into a stretch of gutted manufactories. The vehicles slowed to a halt and Voyle heard a clamour from somewhere up ahead – presumably the

watchmen disembarking.

‘Erzul, take a look,’ he ordered. The pathfinder nodded and clambered onto the truck’s cabin.

‘Something on the road ahead,’ she said. ‘Looks like another truck, but—’ She threw herself flat as a barrage of gunfire erupted from the ruins to their right. One of the gue’vesa snapped backwards and fell as a bullet punched into his face. Another ricocheted off Voyle’s helmet.

‘Stay low and return fire!’ Voyle shouted, ducking as bullets battered the vehicle’s sides. There was a chorus of electronic chimes as his troops activated their pulse rifles, followed by the sibilant whine of plasma bolts when they opened fire.

Voyle raised his head and scanned the ruins through his rifle’s scope, weaving about until he locked onto a figure lurking behind a broken window. His weapon pinged as he increased the magnification and drew his target into sharper focus. It was a man in ragged grey fatigues, his head protected by a rusty iron helmet painted with a stylized ‘M’. An archaic rebreather mask covered his mouth, its tubes snaking over his shoulders into a bulky backpack. Above the mask his eyes were bloodshot wounds in a pallid face riddled with scars and sores. He appeared to be in the terminal stages of some flesh-eating pestilence, yet he stood straight, unbowed by his bulky stubber gun.

This lot look worse than ours, Voyle decided sourly, lining up on the attacker’s face.

Before he could fire there was a voltaic crackle and a streak of light flayed his mark like an electric whip. The man convulsed as current played about him, igniting his clothes and charring his flesh. Voyle turned and saw the Warden marching across the building’s rubble-strewn courtyard with her watchmen following in a wide arc. Venting an electronic ululation, she seized a chunk of debris with her claw and hurled it at a crouching enemy. Simultaneously her rifle’s glassy barrel glowed blue and spat another jagged bolt into the ruins. Without slowing their stride, her troops fired a volley of explosive rounds in perfect synchronicity, every bullet finding a different foe.

‘They’re fighting as one,’ Voyle murmured, studying their lethal combat symmetry. He felt calm now, as if the skirmish had elevated him above his private damnation. The Voice was still there, oozing around the battlefield like an auricular spirit of war, but it almost made sense now.

Can they hear it too? Voyle wondered hazily as he slipped into harmony with the Order’s enforcers, becoming another cog in a precision killing machine,

aiming and firing and executing the raiders without hesitation.

Bullets exploded around the advancing watchmen, frequently tearing through their robes and ricocheting off the armour beneath. The Warden appeared impervious, but occasionally one of her cohorts would jerk or stumble as a bullet penetrated its armour. One fell to its knees with a shattered leg, but continued to fire as its comrades marched on. Another took a round in the throat and toppled over.

‘They don’t lack courage!’ one of the gue’vesa yelled.

Maybe, Voyle thought, stirring from his combat reverie. Or maybe they just don’t know any better.

‘No heroics,’ he cautioned. ‘This isn’t our fight.’

And they don’t need us anyway, he gauged. The ambush was already faltering under the Warden’s counterattack. Whoever the raiders – or rebels? – were, they were woefully outclassed by the Order’s troops, but they were fighting to the bitter end.

This wasn’t a chance attack. The poor bastards threw everything they had at it. Why?

As the Warden reached the building a raider threw a grenade from the window above. She seared him with lightning and lashed out with her claw, snatching the grenade from the air and hurling it back, but it detonated a few metres above her. She staggered under the concussion, her augmetic arm whipping about as she fought for balance.

What...?

Voyle’s rifle pinged repeatedly as he zoomed in on her whirling limb. The explosion had torn away a patch of its armour, revealing not raw machinery but what looked like more plating, though it was rounded and dark blue in colour. Almost organic...

Like insect chitin.

Voyle froze, staring down his scope as the Warden recovered and stomped into the building, leaving him zoomed in on nothing but memories.

Void black eyes, holding him transfixed as the predator uncoils to embrace him...

‘Status report, Two?’ his helmet’s communicator hissed. The Stormlight.

‘One gue’vesa dead, one lightly wounded,’ Voyle answered automatically. ‘Situation under control, shas’el.’

‘Acknowledged, Two. Hold your position.’

As the last of the watchmen entered the building Voyle made up his mind.

‘Cover me,’ he ordered his squad and vaulted from the truck. Keeping his eyes on the injured watchman who’d been left behind, he sprinted to its fallen comrade. The warrior lay flat on its face, motionless.

What do you expect to find? Voyle asked himself as he knelt by the body.

A cold and thirsty poison awakening in his blood and watching the world through his eyes...

He heaved the warrior onto its back and a *third* arm slid free from its robes. Like the Warden’s ‘augmetic’, it was encased in segmented iron plates, but it ended in a scythe-like blade that was unmistakably *bone*.

‘Mutants,’ Voyle spat, feeling his gorge rise.

He appraised the gaping wound in the warrior’s throat. A large calibre round had torn right through it, almost decapitating the creature. Nothing human could have survived such trauma, but did that mean anything here? As he reached for its mask the subterranean swirl of the Voice surged into sudden clarity: ‘**No...**’

Voyle froze. That denial was the first meaningful word it had said to him – perhaps even the first time it had been truly *aware* of him.

‘You were never talking to me, were you?’ Voyle whispered, following a tenebrous intuition. ‘I was only ever listening in.’

‘**No.**’ The prohibition was more forceful now, yet it held no sway over him.

‘What don’t you want me to see?’ Voyle challenged. ‘Why–’

A bullet drilled into the ground by his feet. He turned and saw the kneeling watchman had levelled its rifle at him.

‘They’re yours, aren’t they?’ Voyle said to the Voice. ‘All of them.’

‘**Go... now...**’ it breathed. Now it had the key to his head it was learning fast. Did that mean it would start pulling *his* strings soon?

‘No,’ Voyle snarled back and activated his helmet’s transmitter. ‘Erzul, wounded watchman to my right. Take it out.’

A bright bolt lanced across the courtyard and erased the warrior’s head in a burst of plasma.

She didn’t hesitate, Voyle thought with grim satisfaction. *I might be losing my mind, but my squad still trusts me.*

Ignoring the Voice, he pulled the dead watchman’s mask aside. And froze.

Watching and waiting for the moment when he can claim another to feed the hunger that can never be sated...

Voyle switched his transmitter to the squad-wide channel. ‘Seize the vehicles,’ he ordered. ‘The watchmen are hostile. Take them down.’

He looked up and saw the Warden emerging from the building, doubtless

summoned by her unseen master. Her helmet swung about, its visor slit pulsing with blue light as she scanned the battleground.

What's under there? Voyle wondered, glancing back at the corpse. Its face was a travesty of humanity, with deeply recessed eyes and rubbery, mauve-hued skin. A chitinous ridge ran from its forehead to the bridge of its nose, beneath which its face erupted into a nest of pink tendrils. Many of them were still twitching, as if animated by a life of their own.

The Voice was gnawing at Voyle's mind now, but he shut it out, sensing that every word it spoke would sink another root into his soul, like one of the corpse's undying tendrils.

'I'm not yours,' he rasped as the gue'vesa opened fire on the watchmen.

'Seize the vehicles,' Voyle's voice hissed inside Kyuhai's helmet.

The Seeker acted without conscious thought, moving before the command had even concluded. The tone of Voyle's *first word* was enough to tell him that the wheel of possibilities had turned, carrying them from diplomacy into conflict. The cause and consequences could be assessed later. For now only action mattered.

'Do not be alarmed,' Fai'sahl was saying beside him, responding to the muffled sounds of battle. 'The watchmen will—'

Kyuhai's armoured elbow slammed into the side of his head. As the emissary slumped over, the Seeker leapt up and surged towards the driver. The man turned and Kyuhai's fist hammered between his eyes, throwing him against the wheel with stunning force. Fai'sahl had called the pale, hairless creature a timekeeper of the Fourth Rotation. Had he been one of the armoured warriors Kyuhai wouldn't have risked holding back, but for now killing was best avoided.

'The watchmen are hostile,' Voyle's warning continued as Kyuhai hauled the unconscious driver from his seat and took his place. *'Take them down.'*

'What is happening, Seeker?' Adibh asked, shocked by the sudden violence.

'We are betrayed,' Akuryo answered flatly, activating his pulse rifle. He had also heard the message, but his reaction had inevitably trailed behind Kyuhai's.

'See to your men, Stormlight,' the Seeker commanded, assessing the controls. The car appeared to be standard gue'la technology – rudimentary, but robust. 'We must return to the ship immediately.'

'Understood.' Akuryo opened the hatch and leapt out, slamming it closed behind him.

'How may I serve?' Adibh asked. Once again Kyuhai was impressed with her.

She had adjusted quickly.

‘Search the emissary for weapons then alert the ship, por’el,’ he said. ‘The status code is *mal’caor*. Fio’vre, see to the driver.’

‘Yes, aun’el,’ they chorused.

What have you done, Voyle? Kyuhai wondered as he gunned the engine into life.

Voyle raced for the vehicles, weaving between piles of rubble as plasma bolts swept overhead and solid rounds exploded around him. Sometimes a whiplash of electricity crackled past, but he sensed that the Warden was only trying to slow him.

‘You want me alive,’ Voyle muttered between breaths, addressing the Voice. ‘You want to know... how I work... or why I don’t.’

Up ahead both the armoured car and the rearmost truck had begun to reverse along the road. Erzul and two other gue’vesa crouched in the truck’s back, exchanging fire with the watchmen. Unlike the raiders’ antiquated guns their pulse rifles punched through the mutants’ armour with ease, forcing them to stay in cover or die. Even the tank-like Warden had retreated behind a wall. Suddenly Voyle felt a ferocious pride in his xenos liberators. In a galaxy drowning in corruption they were surely the best – perhaps the only – hope.

‘Gue’vesa’ui, be swift!’ the Stormlight transmitted.

Voyle saw Akuryo leading the rest of his team against the lead truck. The Warden had left a pair of watchmen behind and they had taken cover behind the driver’s cabin, one on either side, where they held his comrades back with alternating volleys. Two gue’vesa were already down and Voyle cursed as another was blasted from her feet as she tried to flank the mutants.

‘Unity!’ he growled and swerved towards them, sighting down his rifle as he charged. It was a precision weapon, ill-suited to such assaults, but he knew its rhythms better than his own mind and his third shot brushed the nearest watchman’s hood, setting it alight. The fourth bored a molten crater into its chest as it turned, throwing it backwards. An obscene hissing bubbled from behind its flame-wreathed mask as it tried to level its rifle at him. With a roar of loathing, Voyle barrelled into it, sending it crashing into its comrade. The impact threw him to the ground, but he kept firing, riddling the entangled watchmen with plasma bolts. He didn’t stop, not even when they fell – then fell still. His hatred was too deep. Too hungry...

And the hunger gazes back at him from the void it has carved out in his soul.

And then it speaks, for it has a Voice: ‘Voyle...’

‘Voyle!’ someone shouted, hauling him up. He stifled a snarl as he recognised the Stormlight.

‘We must go!’ his commander snapped.

‘The truck...’

‘No time! More enemies come.’ The Fire Warrior jabbed his rifle at the road ahead. A bipedal walker was striding through the wreckage of the vehicle that had blocked the convoy’s path. It was similar to the one Voyle had spotted earlier, but its saddle was fitted with a massive cannon. The gun’s spinning barrel was still smoking from the destruction it had just wreaked on the obstruction.

‘Move, Voyle!’

They sprinted after the retreating vehicles, following the surviving soldier who had accompanied Akuryo. Both the captured vehicles had picked up speed now, but they were still hobbled by their inability to turn on the narrow road. As the fleeing trio drew level with the car a bolt of electricity struck the gue’vesa, throwing him against the vehicle. Voyle leapt over the charred corpse that rebounded into his path and glanced over his shoulder. The Warden was marching across the rubble in pursuit, flanked by her surviving watchmen. Worse still, the strider was bearing down on the car with frightening speed, its cannon spinning up to fire. Moments later a storm of high-velocity rounds rained down on its prey.

We’re done, Voyle realised, ducking as ricochets whistled past him.

Suddenly the car thrust forward, its engine roaring as it accelerated towards its hunter. The strider lurched off the road, but the vehicle veered after it, its iron-shod tires clattering over the debris. There was a thunderous crash as it rammed the automaton. The strider’s legs buckled and its saddle plunged forward, sliding along the car’s roof and ploughing a deep fissure in its wake. Voyle and Akuryo dived aside as the wreckage hurtled past them, still bearing its stiff-backed rider and cannon. The gun detonated when it hit the road, vomiting a fireball into the dark sky.

‘Sacred Throne,’ Voyle growled, dredging up the old Imperial curse as the car whirled out of control and overturned. It spun about on its roof, shedding armour as it screeched along the ground. Caught in its path, the Warden was swept up and ground down, along with the watchmen flanking her. Finally the car’s momentum gave out, leaving it wedged halfway up a mound of rubble.

‘The Seeker!’ Akuryo yelled over the transmitter. He was already on his feet

and racing towards the wreckage.

‘Rouse yourself, por’el,’ the Seeker commanded, his calm voice cutting through the cacophony that lingered in Adibh’s ears. Ignoring the protests of her battered body, she uncurled from the foetal huddle she’d adopted and rolled to her knees. Kyuhai’s sensor-studded faceplate loomed into view, appraising her.

‘You are fortunate,’ the Seeker pronounced. ‘Did you send the signal?’

‘I... yes...’ Adibh said, struggling for focus. ‘Just before... before...’

‘Then come, we cannot linger here.’ Kyuhai turned away, ducking under the seats that hung from the inverted roof like stalactites. Through the smoke-filled gloom Adibh saw that the others had been much less fortunate. Fai’sahl lay beside her, a spar of metal jutting from his chest. Daukh was on the cabin’s far side, slumped against the hatch, the top of his head mashed into a ragged crown of blood and bone. The timekeeper was sprawled brokenly across the drive panel, his robes smouldering.

‘Tread carefully,’ Kyuhai cautioned as he stepped over the gaping fissure running through the floor. Choking on the smoke, Adibh moved to follow. As she climbed over Fai’sahl’s body his eyes opened.

‘Adibh... what...?’ His words splintered into a blood-flecked cough and he clutched at her. She took his hand instinctively, gripping it as spasms rippled through his body. The predator she’d glimpsed earlier was gone, along with its baleful magnetism.

In death he is only himself, she sensed.

‘The emissary still lives!’ she shouted to Kyuhai.

‘His injury is mortal,’ the Seeker replied. ‘You cannot help him.’ Reaching the hatch, he heaved Daukh aside and tugged at the opening lever, but it wouldn’t budge.

As the emissary’s convulsions subsided Adibh leaned in close. ‘The Cog Eternal,’ she urged. ‘What is it? The truth, Fai’sahl.’

‘Told you... truth,’ he wheezed as his eyes clouded. ‘Greatest... good...’ His head fell back, revealing a circular scar under his chin.

‘That is a lie,’ Adibh said sadly. ‘But I don’t believe it is yours, old friend.’

She released Fai’sahl’s hand and crawled towards the Seeker. As she approached the fissure an electronic burbling sounded from somewhere below. *Her drone.* She leant over the rift’s lip and reached down, expecting to touch the ground, but there was nothing. The car must have come to rest above a cavity. She stretched further and her fingers brushed smooth metal.

‘Seeker, I—’

A cold blue light flared into life below, dazzling her. She jerked away, but something seized her wrist in a vicelike grip.

‘Do not be alarmed,’ a sterile voice boomed. ‘Your security is my primary directive.’

Adibh shrieked as the Warden yanked her through the fissure.

‘Watchmen. Heading this way, shas’el,’ Voyle warned as a group of robed figures appeared on the road ahead.

‘You must delay them,’ Akuryo ordered.

‘Yes, shas’el.’ What else was there to say? They could not abandon an Ethereal. After the crash they’d climbed to the stranded car, where the Fire Warrior was wrestling with the hatch while Voyle covered the road. It hadn’t taken long for more of the Order’s troops to arrive, but as they drew closer he saw there was something new among them – something much larger. He sighted down his scope and grimaced. The hulking figure was swathed in the customary purple robes, but it was almost twice the height of its fellows. A bulbous helmet encased its head and shoulders, locked into place by heavy chains that crisscrossed its chest. Its visor was carved into the likeness of a cog, with a single lens at the centre and smoking censers affixed to each tooth. The giant’s right arm split at the elbow, spawning a pair of armoured tentacles that were wrapped around the haft of a massive industrial hammer. Its right arm was a weapon in its own right, bulging into a serrated claw that dragged along the ground behind it.

They’ve given up on hiding their secrets, Voyle thought, targeting the cog-faced hulk. As his plasma bolts seared its helmet the giant swung its hammer up to protect its lens, almost as if it had read his mind. Moving like clockwork, the watchmen raised their rifles and retaliated with a volley of bullets, then stepped aside, opening a path for their champion.

I can’t put that thing down, Voyle realised as the behemoth broke into a lumbering charge. *This is where I die.*

‘Then lower your weapon... and live,’ the Voice suggested, slithering into his thoughts like a shameful secret. It spoke fluently now, its words redolent with sombre authority. Voyle couldn’t remember why he had ever questioned it.

‘Because you were lost, child.’

There was a metallic creak behind him. Voyle turned unsteadily and saw Kyuhai emerge from the vehicle.

‘I will assist the others, Seeker,’ Akuryo said, his voice seeming to come from

some distant, meaningless place.

‘They are gone,’ Kyuhai said.

‘Por’el Adibh...’

‘All of them, Stormlight.’

The Ethereal turned to Voyle, as if to speak. Instead he *moved*, whipping a metal tube from his belt and whirling it towards the dazed man. It elongated from both ends as it swept through the air, its telescoped segments snapping free with a staccato burst of clicks. In the heartbeat it took to complete its arc it had become a staff. It struck Voyle’s helmet and threw him off balance. As he fell against the vehicle he saw the Seeker twirl the weapon back then thrust it forward – into the visor of the giant that had climbed up behind Voyle while the Voice held sway. The blunt tip shattered the mutant’s cyclopean lens and drove through to whatever lay below.

‘Mont’ka!’ the Seeker shouted and the behemoth shuddered as the staff’s blades sprang free inside its skull. Kyuhai twisted the weapon then wrenched it free, tearing away the creature’s visor, along with most of its face. As the giant toppled backwards Voyle glimpsed a protean morass of tendrils and broken bones inside its helm. Kyuhai leapt back into cover as the watchmen answered their champion’s death with a salvo of bullets.

‘Your actions have invited great danger, gue’vesa’ui,’ he said to Voyle.

‘Yes, Seeker,’ Voyle answered, lowering his head. ‘I–’

‘Later.’ Kyuhai whirled his staff and it contracted back into a tube. ‘We must go.’

‘Support team, your status?’ Akuryo transmitted as they retreated down the mound with Voyle bringing up the rear.

‘*The truck is clear,*’ Erzul replied. ‘*Do you need us, shas’el?*’

‘Negative. We are en-route to you now.’

The Voice almost had me, Voyle thought as he followed the two xenos.

‘Child, you must–’

‘No!’ Voyle hissed, biting his lip until he drew blood. ‘Get out... of my head.’ But now that it had tasted his soul he knew it never would.

– THE INVISIBLE CIRCLE – UNITY

Shas've Bhoral triggered the jetpack of her Crisis battlesuit and launched herself into the air, arcing high above the spaceport. Ensconced within the control cocoon of the hulking machine, protected by multiple layers of angular nanocrystal armour, she felt invulnerable. It had been many years since her duties had called upon her to wear the battlesuit in combat, but the old discipline had returned the instant she'd activated the machine and its sensors had interfaced with her nervous system, transforming her into a towering bipedal tank.

It has been too long, she thought fiercely.

As she neared the city's dome she cut her thrusters and plunged back towards the spaceport, confident in her armour's durability. She came down hard, pulverising an enemy warrior under her massive piston-like legs and sending tremors through the ground. Triggering the flamethrower attached to her suit's right arm she spun at the waist, washing the dead guard's comrades in a whooshing arc of fire. Their robes were scorched away in seconds, revealing the misshapen forms beneath.

These are not common gue'la, Bhoral judged as one of the burning figures flailed at her with a scythe-like claw. A mutant strain perhaps?

She stomped over their charred corpses and fired a fusillade of plasma bolts with her secondary weapon, targeting the guards on the far side of the roof. A squadron of gun drones swept by overhead, their path guided by her battlesuit's tactical system. The ship had carried eighty of the saucer-like machines and Bhoral had activated them all when she had received the Seeker's signal.

Mal'caor.

The word meant 'spider', but the *code* signified 'a-great-peril-awakened'. The protocol for the situation was clear: ensure the ship's safety at all costs. Accordingly Bhoral had launched a surprise attack on the port's guards

immediately, but they had reacted with uncanny swiftness and a total lack of fear.

‘They fight like machines,’ Bhoral observed as a pair of three-armed deviants broke cover and charged towards her. One sported a muscular tentacle, the other a chitinous appendage that ended in a snapping pincer. They were bigger and better armoured than the others she had encountered, their heads protected by sealed helmets bearing ribbed crests.

‘For... Greatest... Good!’ they hissed, their words slurring as if their mouths weren’t shaped for speech.

Before Bhoral could fire, a lanky avian figure sprang past her and raced to meet the mutants with a hooting cry. The Fire Warrior clicked her tongue with irritation as she recognised the kroot carnivore, though she had no idea *which* of the two it was. She had fought alongside the pair in service to the exalted Kyuhai for many years, yet she still couldn’t tell them apart.

‘*The Yasu’caor forges strange bonds,*’ the Seeker had instructed when she had joined his circle, ‘*but it is their very strangeness that makes them strong.*’

Bhoral’s suit chimed a warning as something landed on its blocky shoulders. A moment later the second kroot vaulted from its perch to join the fray. The carnivores whirled about the mutants in a feral dance – hacking, stabbing and feinting with their broad-bladed machetes then leaping away, always one step ahead of the ungainly mutants. Bhoral did not doubt the outcome of the contest, but her allies’ *frivolity* irked her.

‘The Seeker has taught you well,’ she observed, ‘but you remain beasts.’

She felt a twinge of pain as an explosive slug dented her battlesuit’s left arm. It was a sympathetic sensation generated by the suit’s cocoon, sharp enough to bind her to the machine, but not enough to distract her. Her sensors pinpointed the aggressor in moments – a sniper crouched on a tower to her left. An evaluation of the enemy’s capabilities flashed across her awareness, relayed by her battlesuit’s tactical system. The threat was minimal so she dispatched a pair of drones to eradicate it and continued her advance, leaving the frenzied kroot to their game.

The last of the guards had taken cover behind a cluster of machinery. Drones buzzed about them, kept at bay by the defenders’ disciplined volleys. Bhoral strode towards their position, pinning them down with a hail of plasma bolts as she approached. When she was in range she scoured their shelter with fire.

‘Disharmony portends dissolution,’ she decreed, quoting the *Yasu’caor* as her enemies burned. She rotated her battlesuit, scanning the rooftop. The fighting

was over. Even the kroot had finished their foes, though they were still hacking away at the corpses, jabbering at one-another as they tried to make sense of their outlandish victims. The Seeker had forbidden them from eating the dead, but their fascination could not be completely curtailed.

'Forward perimeter is secure, shas'vere,' a voice reported on her transmission link – Hurrell, the leader of the first gue'vesa support team. Something was playing havoc with their communications systems and the signal was badly distorted.

'Confirmed, gue'vesa'ui,' Bhoral replied.

'I have three dead and three more wounded, shas'vere. Permission to evacuate them to the ship.'

'Denied. Remain at your post.'

'Baumann is in bad shape...'

'I will despatch a salvation team to your position.' Bhoral cut the link. The casualties were significant, but she didn't share the Stormlight's sentimentality towards the human auxiliaries. She was more concerned by the number of drones she'd lost; her strategic display recorded thirty-nine damaged or destroyed. When enemy reinforcements arrived the situation would rapidly become untenable.

She switched her transmitter to long-range.

'Seeker?' Predictably she was met by the howling electronic whine that had flooded the channel shortly after the fighting commenced. Coming to a decision, Bhoral stomped back to the kroot. They looked up from their butchery as she loomed over them.

'Bad meat,' one of them grunted, holding up a glistening tentacle.

'Eee-veel,' its companion added sagely.

'Enter the city,' Bhoral commanded, speaking slowly. *'Find our master.'*

The carnivores exchanged a glance then sprang up and sprinted away.

It is almost as if they already know where he is, Bhoral mused. And maybe they did. She had reluctantly accepted that the savages' bond with the Seeker was tighter – or perhaps *deeper* – than her own.

Her battlesuit's strategic display bleeped as another drone's signature went dark. She frowned as the rest of its squadron followed in rapid succession. Somewhere in the spaceport the enemy was still active. Bhoral checked the squadron's last known location and hissed through her teeth. *The hanger bay...*

The truck rumbled along the dark streets, its headlights boring a tunnel through

the gloom. Voyle was driving, with Erzul beside him; if anyone could retrace their outbound journey it was the squad's pathfinder. The rest of the survivors were crouched in the back, their rifles levelled over the sides. The district was deserted, its citizen-slaves presumably banished to their hovels, but an expectant watchfulness pervaded the streets. Every one of the fugitives could sense it, t'au and human alike, but none as keenly as the Seeker.

The dissonance here runs deep, Kyuhai reflected, yet I have learnt nothing. Voyle sprang the trap too soon.

But was that really true? The threads of ambivalent fate had woven Ulver Voyle into this tangle. There was no reasoning behind it, for the firmament of reality was blind, but there was a *rhythm* to it. It was a Seeker's path to listen and learn then tune the composition to serve the Greater Good, conducting events by intuition alone. And Kyuhai's instincts had urged him to trust this broken gue'la. Perhaps Voyle had not sprung the trap too soon, but just in time.

'Seeker, a question...' the Fire Warrior crouched beside him began hesitantly.

'Speak your mind, Stormlight,' Kyuhai urged.

'You are quite certain that Por'el Adibh was dead?'

'I could not save her,' Kyuhai said. *I could not attempt it.*

He had seen Adibh fall into the fissure – had even stepped forward to help her – then stopped when he'd heard the soulless voice booming from the rift and understood what lay beneath the wrecked car. The risk had been too great.

'Her loss will not be without purpose,' he promised.

'As you say, Seeker.' But there was no conviction in Akuryo's voice.

Kyuhai could not share the Fire Warrior's sorrow. Like love, hate and the myriad other shades of emotion that elevated or degraded his kin, sadness was a conceit he had transcended. That was what it meant to be *yasu'aun*.

'The void within stands vigil against the void without,' Kyuhai whispered to the lost city.

'Take the right,' Erzul instructed as the truck approached another junction.

She was always the best of us, Voyle thought, obeying. She should have been our gue'vesa'ui. Maybe the others would still be alive then.

'You led them to ruin,' the Voice agreed. 'Because you are lost.'

It hadn't let up throughout the escape, cajoling one moment then threatening the next, but mostly just wearing him down. The worst part was that he *needed* it now.

'As I need you, Ulver. As do your kindred in the Cog Eternal.'

‘Why did you shoot the watchman?’ Voyle asked Erzul, trying to shut out his blessed tormentor. ‘Back at the manufactory when I ordered it – why did you obey?’

‘Because you are the gue’vesa’ui,’ Erzul answered without hesitation.

‘You trust me?’

‘Should I not?’

‘Not at all.’

‘I’ll warn you when to stop,’ Voyle said seriously.

‘Why *did* you order it?’ Erzul asked.

‘Because they’re monsters.’

‘The Imperium damns everything but itself as a monster,’ the Voice observed.

‘Sometimes that’s true.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Erzul said.

‘Sometimes the monsters are real.’

‘Then you are a monster too, Ulver Voyle.’

‘I know it.’ He spat, remembering the taste of rotten flesh. ‘What are you?’ He sensed he shouldn’t encourage the entity, but he had to know.

‘A traveller who became a god in service to a greater god. My children revere me as the Animus-Alpha.’

‘Why can I hear you?’

‘We share the same divine, star-spawned seed, though you are not of my blood. That is why you were invisible to me for so long.’

‘Voyle,’ Erzul said, eyeing him warily, ‘you’re not making any sense.’

‘What do you want with me?’ he pressed, ignoring her.

‘I offer you freedom, Ulver. Your masters have deceived you.’

‘That’s a lie.’

‘They are not liberators, but oppressors.’

‘They... saved me.’

‘They gelded you, body and soul. Have you felt any desire save obedience since they took you?’

‘It’s for the Greater Good,’ Voyle muttered, remembering the endless mantras of self-sublimation and the contentment the tranquillity wafers had brought. ‘Unity.’

‘Slavery!’ the Animus-Alpha corrected. And as Voyle recognised its truth, the invisible god slipped past his guard.

‘Turn left!’ Erzul snapped.

He turned right.

‘Voyle! What are—’ His left hand thrust out and grabbed her hair. Her instincts had always been razor sharp and she reacted quickly, snatching her combat knife free and swinging it towards him in the same motion. If he’d hesitated even a moment it might have been enough. But he didn’t hesitate. Before the blade could connect he rammed her face into the dashboard.

No! Voyle tried to scream, but he no longer had a mouth. It belonged to the Voice now.

Bhoral’s burst cannon vented smoke as it spewed plasma bolts at the four-armed abominations infesting the hanger bay. The creatures zigzagged between banks of machinery as they circled her, their sinuous forms hunched into an insect-like scuttle. Their bodies were sheathed in blue chitin that flared into spines at their joints and along the ridge of their bulbous skulls. In place of jaws their faces trailed thorn-tipped tentacles that whipped about as the creatures moved.

Drones skimmed around the beasts, chattering electronically as they harried them with bursts of plasma, but the machines were falling faster than their prey, their rigid minds confounded by their enemies’ erratic movements. Bhoral hissed as another of the flying discs was yanked from the air and shredded. The beasts’ claws were improbably strong. Even her battlesuit’s armour wouldn’t last long against a prolonged attack.

There are too many, Bhoral judged, immolating an abomination with a spurt of fire as it veered towards her. Her flamethrower’s ammunition gauge chimed a warning. The weapon had already been running low when she’d entered the hanger and engaged the infiltrators. There had been seven when she’d arrived, but more had crawled from the ducts lining the walls, arriving faster than she could cull them. She had summoned all her forces, but they had turned up sporadically, never giving her the numbers to mount a concerted counterattack. Hurrell’s gue’vesa team had been overwhelmed within seconds of their arrival. The drones had fared better because of their mobility, but less than twenty remained now and the chitinous onslaught hadn’t faltered. The battle couldn’t be won.

‘Kor’vre Ubor’ka,’ Bhoral transmitted to the ship’s flight deck. ‘Withdraw the *Whispering Hand* immediately. The Concordance must be alerted to this treachery.’

‘I cannot abandon the exalted one,’ the pilot protested.

‘We must assume he is lost.’ Bhoral abhorred the words, but Kyuhai had made her duty clear. ‘The ship will be overrun if you delay. Authorisation cypher

follows.' She sent the code as her cannon finally overheated and fell silent.

'I understand, Shas'vere. Signal me when you are on board.'

'That is not an option. Go!'

Bhoral kept the beasts at bay with brief bursts from her flamethrower as the docking clamps disengaged and released the slumbering ship. Before their echoes had faded the vessel's engines rumbled into life, sending tremors through the chamber.

'Come then,' Bhoral whispered as her flamethrower ran dry. The tentacled abominations surged forward, vaulting over one-another in their eagerness to reach her. She clubbed the first one aside with a clumsy swing of her cannon and rammed her flamethrower into the face of the next, shattering its skull. Then they were upon her, hissing as they raked at her armour. Within seconds her battlesuit's damage indicator was flashing red in countless places. She ignored it, knowing there was nothing more to be done. Chanting a mantra of certitude, she stood motionless. Waiting.

The hanger's massive external doors slid open behind her, unleashing a shriek of void-wracked air. A heartbeat later Bhoral was wrenched into the emptiness beyond, trailing a string of chitinous horrors. As she whirled about in the vacuum she glimpsed the departing glow of the *Whispering Hand's* engines.

'The circle closes,' she said and overloaded her battlesuit's power core. For a brief moment she burned brighter than the engines.

I didn't warn Erzul, Voyle thought bitterly, remembering his promise to the pathfinder. He sat stiffly in his chair, his hands steering the truck of their own accord. He couldn't even turn his head to check if the woman slumped beside him was still breathing. His comrades hadn't seen the violence that had transpired in the cabin, nor could they know the treachery playing out now.

I've betrayed them all.

'No, you have saved them, Ulver. Along with yourself.' The voice was his, but the words were not.

You lied to me, Voyle accused, struggling to break free. *Where are you taking us?*

'You shall all be enlightened, but the Ethereal among you is of singular importance.'

The Seeker... How...?

'What you know, I now know, child.'

Shame washed over Voyle in a corrosive wave, scouring him of all the hopes

and hates that had bedevilled him since his long fall began. Finally all that remained was a bleak yearning for nothingness.

'It is your shadow to burn,' the Stormlight had advised. *'Only you can light the fire.'*

Hesitantly at first, then with growing conviction, Voyle began to recite the nineteenth mantra of self-sublimation. *The-Winter-That-Rises-Within* focussed on attaining a state of perfect stillness, conditioning its aspirants to slow their breathing and lock their muscles rigid as they purged their minds of desire. Voyle had always been drawn to its oblique words and the ephemeral oblivion they offered.

Emptiness unwound blinds the light that binds unseen.

He repeated the spiralling phrase over-and-over, speaking with his mind until his body listened... and *remembered*. Like creeping frost his grip on the wheel tightened then froze, locking the truck to its current path. From somewhere far away he heard his own voice calling to him, wheedling then reasoning then railing, becoming ever more strident as the road ahead curved yet the vehicle didn't follow.

None of it mattered. None of it was real.

But the deceiver was blind to such truths, and in its turmoil its control frayed. The lapse was brief, but it was enough for Voyle to stamp down on the accelerator.

Emptiness unwound...

With a roar the truck leapt forward, its frame rattling as its wheels left the road.

...blinds the light...

The usurper fled his mind as the building ahead rushed towards the windscreen.

...that binds unseen.

'Bloodtight,' Voyle sighed, closing his eyes.

Kyuhai hit the ground hard, but his armour absorbed the worst of the impact. He rolled with the fall and swept to his feet. For a moment he stood motionless, gazing inward to assess his body. There was some damage, but nothing significant. As in the recent crash, his armour and training had served him well, though he would not welcome a *third* such incident any time soon. He scanned the surrounding buildings but saw nobody. Up ahead the wrecked truck was still blazing, its death throes casting a red haze over the street.

'Your truth dies with you, Ulver Voyle,' Kyuhai said, then turned his attention to the living. Akuryo knelt nearby, wrestling with his helmet. Its dome was

cracked and sparks flickered behind its shattered lenses. One of the gue'vesa lay further along the road, his neck twisted at a strange angle. None of the others had jumped from the speeding vehicle in time.

'How will we reach the ship?' Akuryo asked, finally tearing his helmet free.

'We cannot,' the Ethereal replied. 'It is too late. Either the ship is gone or it is in the enemy's hands now.'

'Then only vengeance remains to us,' the Fire Warrior said bitterly, throwing his ruined helmet aside.

'Vengeance is immaterial. No, we shall keep to the shadows and learn our enemy's truth.'

'To what purpose, Seeker?' Akuryo rose to his feet unsteadily. His scalp was scorched and bleeding.

'To destroy it.' Kyuhai sliced the air with his right hand, indicating *an-outcome-already-proven*. 'It must be done. Of this I am certain.'

'With respect... we are but two.'

'We will find others. I suspect this broken world harbours many secrets, shas'el.' Kyuhai allowed himself the ghost of a smile, though it passed unseen beneath his helm. 'And we are four.'

Akuryo swung round as a rangy avian figure dropped down beside him, landing in a feral crouch. A moment later a second one leapt from the roof behind to join it.

'For Greater Good!' the kroot carnivores growled together.

– THE SPIRAL – OBLIVION

Por’el Adibh opened her eyes as the door of her chamber opened. A t’au stood in the doorway – a female of the Water caste like herself, but much younger and clad in the purple robes Adibh had come to loathe.

‘So Fai’sahl was not the last of his embassy,’ Adibh observed, rising from her chair.

‘Eleven of us remain,’ the newcomer replied. She shared the malignant vigour that Fai’sahl had projected, though her aura was less pronounced. ‘I am Por’ui Beyaal. Por’vre Fai’sahl was my bonded mate.’

‘His death was difficult,’ Adibh said flatly.

‘His death served the Greatest Good,’ Beyaal said without a trace of sorrow. ‘I trust your injuries have been attended to, Por’el?’

‘You know they have, traitor.’ Several days had passed since the Order’s minions had recovered her from the wrecked vehicle, along with the monstrous warrior that had seized her. Since then she had been confined to this room and her questions had gone unanswered. ‘You are aware that your attack on my embassy will be construed as an act of war,’ she challenged.

‘*You* attacked *us*,’ Beyaal demurred serenely. ‘Without provocation.’

‘I do not accept that, but I advise you to release me without delay.’ Adibh softened her tone. ‘Perhaps an accord may yet be reached.’

‘That is our aspiration.’ Beyaal extended her hands, palms upward. ‘The Cog Eternal has embraced the Greatest Good. It has always sought an *alliance* with the T’au Empire.’

‘Then release me.’

‘As you wish.’ Beyaal bowed her head. ‘Please follow me, Por’el.’

Adibh didn’t move. ‘You agree?’ she asked doubtfully.

‘The Animus-Alpha will address all your concerns,’ Beyaal assured her.

‘Who?’

‘He is the First Architect of the Cog Eternal, but many of us have come to see him as a father. I believe you shall too.’

Adibh’s eyes narrowed as she spotted something lurking in the passageway behind Beyaal.

‘Your pardon, Por’el,’ Beyaal said, catching her glance. ‘I wanted to introduce my son, Geb’rah.’ She called over her shoulder. ‘Enter, child! There is nothing to fear.’

A squat figure shambled in, its heavysset form swaddled in robes. Lovingly Beyaal pulled its hood back and smiled at her prisoner.

Adibh stared, aghast, struggling to make sense of the infant’s face.

‘He is but three *tau’cyr*,’ Beyaal crooned, ‘but children grow swiftly here.’

As the hybrid thing grinned at her through a veil of tendrils Adibh’s composure finally unravelled and a dark thought flashed through her mind: *Perhaps the xenophobia of the gue’la is not a sickness, but a strength.*

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