

WARRHAMMER
40,000

DAN ABNETT



RAVENOR RETURNED

A MIND WITHOUT PURPOSE WILL WALK IN DARK PLACES

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

RAVENOR RETURNED

Ravenor - 02

Dan Abnett

(An Undead Scan v1.0)

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For Matthew Churchill, the first to notice.

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst his soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants — and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

“Words not deeds.”

—Dedication over the main entrance of the Administery Tower, Formal A, Petropolis.

“In the prosecution of his work, an agent of the Holy Inquisition may display a badge of office, which shall be a rosette bearing a crimson sigil. This may be further inscribed with the mark of his affiliated ordo or the code of his issuing officio planetia. It is his symbol of authority, stark and unequivocal.

“Under certain circumstances, an agent of the Holy Inquisition may elect instead to carry the mark of Special Condition, which shall be a rosette bearing an azure sigil. This denotes the bearer to be operating alone, beyond the resource or support of any ordo: rogue, driven to independence by extremis, who will act with singular devotion, and recognise no law or master save the God-Emperor himself.”

—from the Inquisition’s Rubric of Protocol

THEN

Just after Firetide, Bonner's Reach, Lucky Space, 402.M41

"You."

The voice was so low, so very, very deep, the single word resounded like a seismic rumble. A curious hush fell across the vast free trade salon. People began to look. Some picked up their drinks and moved away. They knew what this was.

The implanted eyes of all the Vigilants present also turned to stare at the confrontation, green and cold. But they would not intervene. Not unless the Code of the Reach was broken.

"You," the voice repeated.

To his credit, the man in the lizard-skin coat had not turned around. He was sitting at one of the high tables, conducting some business with a pair of far traders. The traders both looked up nervously at the figure standing behind the man in the lizard-skin coat.

"I... I think you're being addressed," one of them muttered.

"I've no business with anyone here except you two gentlemen," the man in the lizard-skin coat said loudly. He picked up one of the napkins on which the traders had just been scribbling cost estimates. "Now this figure here seems very high—"

The far traders pushed back their chairs and stood up. "Our business is done," one of them said stiffly. "We don't want to get involved in... whatever this is."

The man in the lizard-skin coat tutted and got to his feet. "Sit down," he told the traders. "Order another flask of amasec from the tenders on my account. I'll just deal with this and we can resume."

He turned around. Slowly, he lifted his gaze until he was looking up at the face of the man who had interrupted his meeting.

Lucius Worna had been in the bounty game for fifteen decades, and every second of those savage years showed in his face. His head, shaved apart from a bleached stripe, was one big scar. Livid canyons split through his lips and eyebrows, and formed white ridges on his cheeks and jawline. His ears and nose were just eroded stubs of gristle. The blemish of old wounds overlayed one another, scar tissue upon scar tissue. The carapace armour he wore had been polished until it shone like mother-of-pearl. Even without its plated bulk, he would have been a big man.

"I have a warrant," Lucius Worna declared.

"You must be very pleased," the man in the lizard-skin coat said.

"For you."

"I don't think so," the man in the lizard-skin coat said, and began to turn away again.

Lucius Worna raised his left paw and displayed the warrant slate. The hololithic image of a man's head appeared in front of it and gently revolved.

"Armand Wessaen. Two hundred seventy-eight counts, including fraud, malpractice, embezzlement, illegal trading, mutilation and mass murder."

The man in the lizard-skin coat pointed one lean, well-manicured finger at the slate's image. "If you think that looks remotely like me, you're not very good at your job."

Behind him, the far traders chuckled. "Get on your way, bounty," one of them said as his confidence returned. "Any fool can see that's not our friend here."

Lucius Worna kept staring at the man in the lizard-skin coat. “This face is Wessaen’s birth-face. He has changed it many times, in order to evade the authorities. He escaped death row incarceration on Hesperus and absconded from that planet by smuggling himself offworld a piece at a time.”

“I think you’ve had too much to drink,” one of the traders laughed.

“I don’t really care what you think,” replied Worna. “I know what I know. Armand Wessaen had himself physically disassembled by a black market surgeon on Hesperus. His component parts — hands, eyes, limbs, organs — were grafted onto couriers, hired mules, who conveyed them off planet. Wessaen himself, wearing a body made up of all the transplants removed from said mules, followed them. He later slaughtered the mules instead of paying them what he’d promised, and harvested his component parts back, reassembling himself. All except... the face. There’s one mule still to find, isn’t there, Wessaen? That’s why you’re trying to arrange passage to Sarum.”

Worna glanced sideways at the far traders. “That’s what’s he’s after, isn’t it? Passage to Sarum?”

The traders looked at each other. One nodded, slowly.

“This really is nonsense,” the man in the lizard-skin coat smirked. “My name is Dryn Degemyni, and I’m a legitimate businessman. Your suggestion is... is little short of farce. I cut myself apart, did I? Posted myself offworld, bit by bit, attached to others, and now I’m sewn back together?” He laughed. Some onlookers sniggered too.

“Not sewn. Surgically rebonded. A process paid for by the four hundred thousand crowns you embezzled from the Imperial Guard Veterans’ Association on Hesperus while you were acting as their treasurer. They sponsored this bounty, as did the families of the mules you used and killed.”

“You’re just annoying me now,” said the man in the lizard-skin coat. “Go away.”

Lucius Worna adjusted the setting of the warrant slate. The headshot changed. “Just the face left. And this is the face of the mule you used to smuggle your features out.”

The far traders suddenly began to back away. The hololithic image now plainly showed a perfect match for the face of the man in the lizard-skin coat.

The man sighed sadly, as if all the air had drained out of him, and bowed his head.

“Armand Wessaen.” Worna intoned. “I have a warrant for your—”

The man in the lizard-skin coat flicked out his right arm and stabbed the bounty hunter in the face. Lucius Worna recoiled slightly and dropped the warrant slate. The flesh of his right cheek was sliced open to the bone. There was blood everywhere.

A shocked murmur ran through the onlookers. No one quite understood what had just happened. They’d barely seen the man in the lizard-skin coat move, let alone produce a weapon.

With a resigned shrug, ignoring the terrible wound, Lucius Worna lunged at his quarry.

Wessaen darted aside, easily avoiding his big, clumsy opponent. He moved like quicksilver, and as he ducked under Worna’s reaching arms, he lashed out with a sideways kick.

This should have been as successful as kicking a Baneblade. Wessaen was slender and unarmoured. It seemed insanity for him to try and take on a giant in a suit of powered battle plate in close combat.

But the kick connected, and Lucius Worna was flung sideways, thrown by a force even his suit’s inertial dampers couldn’t deal with. He crashed into the high table, knocking over the drinks and two of the chairs. Then the man in the lizard-skin coat was on his back, right hand raised to strike at the nape of Worna’s neck.

Just for an instant, the onlookers glimpsed that hand and understood. It was folded open, like the petals of a flower, hinged apart between the middle and ring fingers. A double-edged blade poked from the aperture. A graft weapon. An implant. The hideously folded fingers seemed to form a hilt for the blade.

Worna reached around, grabbed the shoulder of the lizard-skin coat, and flung the man over his head.

The man somersaulted in mid-air, controlled his fall, and bounced feet first off the far end of the high table with enough force to slam the table's opposite edge up into Worna's chin. Worna staggered back. Wessaen landed on the salon floor and renewed his attack.

The onlookers in the free trade salon crowded in closer, astonished by what they were witnessing. Some of them had seen the bounty hunter at work before. You didn't mess with that, not hand-to-hand, unless you were crazy, or suicidal or—

Or something else entirely.

Something laced with grafts and glands and implants. Something so augmetically re-engineered it would take on a monster without hesitation. In any fight, there was an underdog. Despite all physical appearances to the contrary, that underdog was Lucius Worna.

This was something the crowd wanted a ringside seat to see.

Worna threw two heavy punches at the man in the lizard-skin coat. Each one would have demolished his skull if it had connected. But Armand Wessaen seemed to slide out around them, leaving empty air. He landed two strikes of his own: his graft blade slit through Worna's left eyebrow, and his left fist actually dented the mother-of-pearl surface of Worna's chest plate.

Worna stumbled away from the force of the blows.

Wessaen's left hand produced a cisor from the pocket of the lizard-skin coat. The warmth of his hand woke the large, black beetle-thing up, and its exposed mandibles, razor-sharp, began to chitter and thrash.

"You've picked on the wrong man tonight," he hissed as he came in again.

Worna swung around. Again, his punch hit nothing but space. Wessaen had danced nimbly to the left, and stabbed the graft blade up under Worna's left shoulder guard. He tugged the blade out, escaping the blind retaliation. Now blood was spurting down the bounty hunter's left bicep guard.

Worna pivoted at the hips and clawed at his adversary. Wessaen backed away with abnormal speed, executed a deft tumble, and came back on his feet behind his cumbersome opponent. The cisor ripped into Worna's lumbar plating, the mandibles chewing through it like it was tissue paper.

Worna pulled away, but no matter how tightly he turned, he was just a thundering hulk in heavy armour, and Wessaen was always behind him, jittery-fast. Wessaen was glanding something potent, and hyperactivity pulsed through his hard-wired, reconstructed body.

Worna made another desperate grab. Wessaen kicked him in the face, and then followed the kick with another stab of the graft blade. The blade punched through the bounty hunter's midriff armour.

Where it stuck fast.

Wessaen swallowed.

Worna grabbed the man in the lizard-skin coat by the right wrist and wrenched the graft blade out of his belly. As the cisor chattered in, Worna caught that wrist too.

Wessaen's eyes went glassy-wide. Glanding, he was faster than the massive bounty hunter, and almost as strong. Almost.

Stragglng, Worna raised the man's right wrist until the graft blade was in front of his face. They were locked, quivering with matched fury. Worna slowly leaned his head forward.

And bit the graft blade in half.

Wessaen squealed. Lucius Worna laughed, a deep booming laugh, and spat the broken blade out of his mouth. He let go of Wessaen's right hand and yanked on the other wrist, straightening Wessaen's left arm as he brought his free fist up under it.

The left elbow of the man in the lizard-skin coat snapped the wrong way with a bone-crack that made the onlookers wince.

The cisor fell onto the floor, and began to eat the carpet. Wessaen started to squeal again, but the squeal ended abruptly as Worna's right hand punched him in the face and sent him flying across the floor.

"End of story," said Lucius Worna.

Oblivious to the blood streaming from his wounds, Worna clanked towards the fallen man. Wessaen lay in a twisted heap, his broken arm limp and dislocated like a snapped twig. He was moaning, blood pattering from his mashed lips.

"I have a warrant." Worna boomed, his voice like tectonic plates scraping together.

Closing his bitten-off graft weapon so that his hand refolded, Wessaen fumbled into his lizard-skin coat and wrapped his fingers around the summoning whistle.

His last resort.

It had cost him a fortune, more than all his body enhancements in fact, and he'd not used it before. But he knew what it did. And if there ever was a moment for it, this was it.

It wasn't actually a whistle. It was a smooth piece of rock that had been hollowed out by a technology unknown to the Imperium. But blowing through it was the only way a human could activate it.

Wessaen blew.

All the onlookers winced. Glasses shattered on the salon tables. The huge bio-lumin tank-lights suspended in clusters from the salon's high roof flickered. Every forparsi in the chamber fell down, ears bleeding.

Ten metres from Armand Wessaen, the nature of space-time buckled and popped apart. The surface of the air itself bubbled and began dripping, like the emulsion of an old tintype pict exposed to flame. A seething, iridescent vortex, whisked up from molten, pustular matter, yawned into being, and the hound stepped out of it.

Just a skeleton at first, dry-clicking into view. Then, as it came on, organs materialised inside its ribcage, blood systems wrote themselves into being, muscle grew, sinews, flesh. It solidified, clothing its reeking, yellow bones in meat.

It was hyenid in structure, its forelimbs long, its back sloping off to short hind legs. Its skull was massive, with a pincer jaw and long yellow fangs that could shred anything, even a man in ceramite armour. It stood two metres tall at the hunched shoulders.

Its eyes were white, the hair on its hunchback a bristly black.

The eager onlookers now recoiled. The traders and merchants in the salon began to flee in blind panic, along with the tenders. Not just from the sight of the monster, but also from the smell of it. The gross stink of the warp.

Worna turned to face it, drawing an execution sword from his harness. He knew it would be over fast, just as well as he knew the outcome wouldn't favour him.

Wessaen began to laugh, despite his injuries. "You picked on the wrong man, you frigger! The wrong man!"

The vortex faded. Now fully manifest, the hound padded forward, about to spring, intent on the prey it had been summoned to destroy.

The Vigilants swarmed onto it from all sides, lashing into it with their hand-and-a-half-swords. Blades rained and sliced. The hound coiled and turned, but by then it was already too late. In less than twenty seconds, the Vigilants had hacked it into bloody slabs and shreds.

The Vigilants turned, as one, to face Worna. In unison, they rested their bloodstained swords on the floor, tip-down, their hands folded over the pommels.

"Oh, Throne, no..." gurgled the man in the lizard-skin coat.

"Code," Worna said. "The Code of the Reach. No weapon is permitted that has a range longer than a human arm. And *that* came from more than an arm's reach away."

Worna picked up the cisor. It wriggled in his hand, cluttering. "The mule wants his face back," he said.

And that was when the man in the lizard-skin coat really learned to scream.

"Holy Throne," remarked Ornales. "I honestly don't think we need a piece of that."

The free trade salon stank of blood, and other things less savoury. Under the watchful gaze of the Vigilants, tenders were hosing the floor down. A few traders had been lured back in with the promise of free drinks. Business was still business at Bonner's Reach.

"No, I think we *do*," Siskind told his first officer.

"His type comes with trouble."

"Only for the ones he's going after," said Siskind. "Come on."

"What do you want?" asked Lucius Worna, barely looking up as they approached. He was just finishing packing the various tagged and numbered pieces of Armand Wessaen into the individual cryo-caskets his servitors held ready.

"I want to retain your services," Siskind said.

Worna straightened up and looked at the ship captain directly. "You sure? Some people don't like what they get. If this is a midnight wish, then forget it. You're drunk. Go to your bed."

"A midnight wish?" Siskind echoed.

"Look at your chron, master." Worna rumbled, returning to his labours. "The Imperial calendar is about to flick over one more meaningless digit. A new year. If you're partied up, and fancy to settle some old score, sleep on it. I'll still be here in the morning."

"No," said Siskind. "I know what I'm doing. I want the services of a bounty tracker. I'm prepared to pay."

"How much?" asked Worna.

Siskind glanced at Ornales. "Twenty thou. Plus a ten per cent stake of whatever cut we make."

Lucius Worna dropped a still-twitching hand into one of the icy caskets and closed the lid. He looked at Siskind. "You've got my attention," he growled. "What sort of cut are we looking at?"

"You know, you're still kind of *bleeding* there..." Ornales said timidly, indicating his cheek.

"Yeah." Worna replied. "You gonna sew me back up, pussy-boy?"

"N-no, I just—"

"Then I'll get to it when I get to it," Worna said. "What sort of cut?"

"Six, maybe seven million in the first year."

"At ten per cent? That's a real lot. What's the job?"

"I need you to hunt for me."

"That's what I do."

"I was meant to meet a body here, here at Bonner's Reach. A good friend. Name of Thekla."

"So go look around."

"I have." Siskind replied. "He's not here. He told me he would be, at Firetide, but he's not. If he'd gone out on some trade run, he would've left a message here for me on the personal spindles. But he hasn't."

"Why's it so important?"

"I know he has enemies."

"Yeah?"

Siskind shrugged. "I want to employ you, Worna. To find my friend, or find the bastard who killed him before he got here. There's a lot riding on it."

"And who might this bastard be?" Worna asked.

"Gideon Ravenor. An Imperial inquisitor. Is that a problem?"

"Not even slightly," said Lucius Worna.

NOW

Local winter time, Eustis Majoris, 403.M41

I have to admit, after ten months aboard the *Arethusa*, I am filled with an almost unquenchable desire to throttle shipmaster Sholto Unwerth. And I don't have any hands.

I employed Unwerth through my team principals. It was, in fact, Harlon Nayl who arranged the contract and negotiated the terms of Unwerth's service. The price had seemed agreeable at the time, but as it turns out, there were hidden costs, infuriation being chief amongst them. Unwerth is diligent enough, and ineffably eager to please me. It is clear he takes his secret compact to serve the ordos of the Imperial Inquisition very seriously. But he is everywhere, everywhere I turn, underfoot, tormenting me with questions, and butchering the language with such a disregard for—

Well, enough.

It has been a trying time. The trap at Bonner's Reach tested us all, and cost us. I doubt Cynia Preest will ever forgive me for the damage done to her beloved ship and the losses suffered by her crew.

I glide along the third deck companionway of the *Arethusa* towards the small stateroom Unwerth obliged me with. Zael is there, playing some game of his own devising with the pieces of my regicide set. He's just a boy: sallow, shaggy-haired, no more than fourteen. He often tells me he's eighteen, and I know he's lying. I also know he doesn't know what the truth is.

Zael looks up as I whisper in. After all this time, he's still not used to my presence and appearance. I sense his fear. I am... no longer made as other men are. Grievous injuries, received over sixty years ago on Thracian Primaris, have left me confined to an armoured, enclosing support chair. The chair is dark-matt, sleek, suspended and propelled by a humming field projected by the ever-turning anti-grav hoop. I am just a mind, wrapped in a shred of ruined flesh, locked in a mobile life-support unit. I have no face anymore.

"Ravenor." Zael says. For all his wariness, he has never been afraid to call me by my name. No rank, no deference. Behind my back, I know he calls me *The Chair*.

"Want to play?" he asks.

I've been attempting to teach him the rudiments of regicide. So has Nayl. It is diverting to sit with Zael and push the playing pieces around the board with my mind. But for a bright lad, he's slow to pick up the knack.

I switch to "speech" via my chair's mechanical vox-ponder. My words issue flat and monotonous, a quality I despise, but Zael is unsettled by my psi-voice. "I have work to do, Zael. Can you find somewhere else to be?"

Zael nods. He gets up. From the flash of his surface thoughts, I understand he's deciding whether to seek out Nayl and ask him impertinent questions about women, or go and torment Unwerth's manhound, Fyflank.

Zael's excited. I pick that up too. We're going home. To what he thinks of as home, anyway. It's just a few days away now. We're going back to the place where all this started, before I went off chasing wild geese. To finish it.

Zael leaves. I shut the hatch with a flick of telekinesis, and slide the bolt. Alone, I turn the chair to face the transcriber unit. Another flick, and it turns on, ready. I start to write, moving the stylus armature with my mind.

To my Lord, Rorken, Grand Master of the Ordos Helicon, salutations. Sir, this missive is a testament—

Too slow and fussy. Too painstaking. I am seized by an urgency to get it all down at last, almost as if time is running out. I extend a mechadendrite cable from the base of my chair and link it to the transcriber's terminal. Now all I have to do is think the words.

Sir, this missive is a testament, and I am recording it in the event that I will not survive to communicate it to you in person. I have sent this statement in encrypted form via astropath to the ordo office on Gudrun, with explicit instructions that it be delivered to you by a senior ranking interrogator. It has opened and decrypted only because it has registered your bio-template. You are the only one I can trust anymore. The heresy I am endeavouring to expose may reach into the upper society of the Angelus subsector itself. To the very top, I fear.

My lord, here are the facts. Corroborating evidence may be found in the encrypted data-curls attached to this report.

In the early part of 401, I took my team to Eustis Majoris, capital world of the Angelus subsector, to investigate the illicit trade in so-called "flects". These corrosively addictive objects are flooding the black market throughout the subsector group, smuggled in from the Mergent Worlds rimwards of Angelus. Flects are dangerous things, abominably dangerous. They are splinters of glass from the billion broken windows of the decaying hive ruins out in the Mergent Worlds, swollen with abhuman energies due to their long exposure to the warp. They have soaked up the light of Chaos, marinading for centuries in its glare.

In these little splinters of corrupted glass, a user might glimpse a reflection of something wondrous and be uplifted for a brief time to some transcendent high. When they come down, they immediately crave another glimpse of the wonder, another "look", as the slang goes. But a great number of flects contain nothing except a flecting vision of ultimate cosmic horror, a true vision of the warp. Such a sight destroys minds. And, of course, no user ever knows what he or she is about to see until they look into their next flect.

Flects are a curse. A disease. A plague. They are more addictive and destructive than any of the prohibited chemical drugs that blight Imperial culture. Not only do they kill, they corrupt. Every single flect that passes into the community carries with it the potential to open a gateway to the Ruinous Powers and destroy the Imperium, piecemeal, from within.

Reading this, it may surprise you, my lord, to hear that flects are no longer my primary target. The trade must be stamped out, and the distribution of flects stopped as soon as possible, and if I and my band can assist in that great work, so much the better. But because of the flect trade, I have uncovered something far more insidious.

The flect trade is just the by-product of a greater heresy.

A cartel of rogue traders, operating under the terms of an off-book, black-budget arrangement known as Contract Thirteen, is providing the senior ministries of Eustis Majoris with tech salvage procured in secret from the polluted Mergent Worlds. This trade is in the form of codifiers, cogitators and other calculating engines recovered from the warp-drowned Imperial hives in that doomed territory. Someone, someone very high up in the hierarchy of Eustis Majoris, is paying well for such tainted artefacts. At the time of writing, their motive is not clear to me.

The cartel, risking everything to slip past the battlefleet blockade sanctioning the Mergent Worlds and anxious to maximise their profits, has been smuggling in flects as a supplement to their lucrative trade in logic engines.

Ironic, then. I come to Eustis Majoris to choke the flect trade and the traces of it bring me to greater threat. In their greed, the rogue traders have betrayed their true agenda. Contract Thirteen.

I pursued the matter of the flects to the hilt, until it brought me face to face with agents of the Administratum itself, in the form of one Jader Trice, First Provost of the Ministry of Subsector Trade. He seemed to share my concern about flects, and arranged for several of his agents to

accompany my team on a trip to the black market source, up the line into what is known as Lucky Space.

But this was a trap, a trap sprung by Trice's agents and by the rogue traders I was chasing. I commend them for their ingenuity. At Bonner's Reach, they took control of my ship, the Hinterlight, murdered several members of the crew, and sought to dispose of us into the local star. Taking me down on Eustis would have caused a fuss. If I and my team failed to return from Lucky Space, it might have been years before anyone thought to examine why.

My team and I prevailed. Against the odds. We overcame Trice's agents, and also the rogue trader, the Oktober Country, which was their instrument for our deaths. I will convey a more complete report concerning these actions later, if I have the chance.

In short, my lord, this is the situation. For want of any definite communiqué, our enemies on Eustis Majoris now assume that we are dead. My chartered ship, the Hinterlight, seriously damaged in the battle, is moving at low speed to the Navy yards on Lenk, where I have made arrangements for it to be repaired. Along with my warband, I have procured transit aboard a freelance merchant ship called the Arethusa, which is giving us passage back to Eustis Majoris, via Encage, Fedra, Malinter and Bostol, in other words, by an indirect route away from the Lenk/Flint trade lane.

We intend to re-enter Eustis Majoris clandestinely. Our enemies believe us dead, and I do not intend to disabuse them of that idea. Undercover, anonymous, we will infiltrate the upper levels of the Administry on the capital world and attempt to reveal the corruption there.

Or die trying.

That is why I am writing to you in this way. What we seek to uncover may run high. Jader Trice is second only to the Lord Governor Subsector, Oska Ludolf Barazan, himself. My lord, I may be about to topple the highest from power. The Angelus sub might be plunged into confusion. I beg of you, stand ready. I don't know how far up this goes. For this reason, I am now operating under the terms of Special Condition status.

As far as the galaxy is concerned, I am dead. My warriors are dead. We will play that deceit as far as it goes until it becomes the truth. At that time, may it be far off, the Emperor protects, I trust you will action this missive and mobilise the ordos to finish what I have started.

In the name of Terra!

Your friend and servant,

Gideon Ravenor.

The scratching stylus creeps to a halt. I instruct the transcriber to encode the document, keying it to a pheromonal sample of Rorken kept in my chair's databanks. Then I retract the mechadendrite and turn away.

There is one thing I have not covered in my report to the grand master. One detail. On our way back down through the edgeworlds of the Angelus sub, we diverted to the waste-world Malinter because of a summons from an old friend. Call him *Thorn*. He warned me of a danger, a danger that had been predicted and foreseen. It might be me, it might be one of my team. But something was going to happen on Eustis that would make the Imperium shake.

I wanted to believe it, but I couldn't see it. *Thorn*, God-Emperor watch him, was not as reliable as he used to be. I feared his judgement was off. I am sound. So are my people. I trust them all with my life.

Maybe he had meant Unwerth.

There is a knocking at my cabin hatch.

"Yes?"

"Master Ravenor, I would be obligated if you might spare a moment or two to circumcise this star chart I am grandiose to be embrouching for your diverse perspicacity."

Unwerth. Throne, let it be Unwerth that *Thorn* warned me about.

Throttling him would be a pleasure.

PART ONE

Smoke and Mirrors

ONE

Jairus hammered as moody as any, when the whet was on him, and the whet was on him now. Blurry souled, knuck-brained, his left hand twitching like a beater-box, he woke from a dream where he had been awake all the time, dreaming of sleep.

Jairus was gut-hollow hungry, and thirsty after the last flect. His eyes were filmy, because they had been open and unblinking all the while he'd been asleep, staring at the pimple-board tiles of his hab's ceiling.

Outside the broken window, the city boomed, boomed as loud as the burning city that had backdropped his waking dream. Snatches of looped triumphal marches from the public tannoys, street-vendor cries, pound music from the sink-level clubs, the drum of rain, bells, the *whit-whup whit-whup* of a Magistratum cruiser going past at full pursuit.

The sounds of down-stack Petropolis.

Craproaches ran up and down inside the panes of his eyes, and Jairus moaned aloud, until he realised the roaches were real and the surface they were running up and down on was the cracked plastek of his hab's casement.

Jairus found his gun under a sweat-wet pillow. A knockoff Hostec 13 long-jaw, twenty in the clip, two in the spout. Reassuring as a mother's love. He aimed it at one of the roaches.

Then he lowered his hand. Waste of a load. Man could get more for the price of a bullet than one bug. Specially when the whet was on him.

Saint, but it was.

He staggered to the wash sink and stared at himself in the mirror over the bowl. The mirror was dent-smashed. He'd done that with his forehead the night before last, starving for a look to flect him happy, angry with the mirror for being so...

...so nothing. So empty.

Jairus felt like butting it again, but his reflection showed a forehead still crusted with blood from the last time.

He saw himself. A mound of vat-grafted muscle, a face peppered with clan-piercings. A tongue — and he unrolled it now — fitted with its own snapping teeth at the tip.

Beauty boy. Slab-clanner. Moody hammer.

In the cracked room behind his face, Nesha was still unconscious on the mattress. She lay twisted on top of the cover, her naked body dancing with snake tattoos. Two cobryds were twisted over her belly and up around her bosom, the gaping mouths framing her dark nipples. She would be out for hours. But when she woke, she'd want a look too.

More than want.

Need.

Need, screw you very much sir, *need!*

Going out time. Hunting time. Scoring time. Jairus flexed his arms and saw the gun still in his right paw. Just so.

He grabbed his coat and his big black gamp.

Street level, the city booming still. Burn alarms singing from the street posts as the rain pelted out of the west, showing up like a laser blitz in the sodium glow of the sidewalk lanterns. Vehicles splashing by The bell, the bell again.

The bell. Jairus followed the sound.

At the junction of Rudiment and Pass-on-over, there was a chapel. A select place, reserved for highborn worship. The bell was ringing from the acid-gnawed tower. Grand men in long-tail coats were hurrying along the pavement to attend the service.

Jairus joined them, gamping for one of the fine fellows.

“My thanks,” the man said, as they reached the chapel door, and palmed Jairus a coin. Jairus folded his gamp and let the rain trickle off it. Always a useful tool, the gamp. Everyone needs a gamper in Petropolis. Jairus had got his from a ten year-old boy he’d knifed to death in the underpass below Golgotten Walk.

They were closing the chapel doors. Jairus slipped inside, into the dry gloom, and made a hasty observance at the sacristy so he wouldn’t look out of place. Down the aisle, the gentlemen were settling in the front few pews as the cleric took the silk cloth off the triptych of Saint Ferreolus, a patron of automation.

Light sang down in colours through the apse windows. Unnoticed, Jairus shuddered as an aftershock of his last look fluttered through him. He took a seat at the back. He smelled the acid in the rain dripping off his furled gamp as it bit into the marble floor. The gun felt deliriously heavy in the hip pocket of his coat.

The service was beginning. The same old junk. The cleric intoning, and the unison answers echoing back from the congregation. Jairus was back in the embracing shadows. Down the front, the gilded triptych was caught in a jetting beam of white light from the overheads, haloed, almost glorious. The cleric’s hands moved in front of it, making symbols, like pale puppets.

Head down, Jairus looked left. He saw the temple boys waiting behind the dossal, straightening their cassocks and mantles, whispering to each other as they prepared the censer, the magnetum and the plate.

The plate. The offering plate. That was what Jairus was interested in. A congregation like this, rich men from the inner formals... that plate could be a major score. Forget flects for tonight. This would be a week of looks, plus enough lho and yellodes to cushion the come down afterwards.

He was still twitchy. *Calm, calm*, he told himself.

He blinked. The cleric had just said something that sounded odd. The congregation answered. As Jairus watched, the cleric touched the top of the triptych and it folded in on itself.

The tri-part image it then revealed was worse than anything he’d ever seen, even in his worst looks. He gasped and jumped in his seat. The images, the images, they were so...

...they reminded him of the dream of the burning city.

Jairus realised he had wet himself involuntarily and cried out. Too much noise. The entire congregation, and the cleric himself, was looking back at him.

Just make your exit, just make your exit nice and nothing needs to—

“Hello,” said the man, sitting down beside him in the pew.

“U-hh,” was all Jairus could manage.

“I think you’ve come in for the wrong service,” the man said gently.

“Uh. I think so.”

The man was lithe and long-limbed, his face lean and refined. His clothes were dark, immaculate. His hands were gloved.

“What’s your name?” the man asked. “My name is Toros Revoke.”

Say nothing, Jairus thought. “My name is Jairus,” his mouth said anyway.

“How d’ye do, Jairus? You’re a clanner, am I right? A... what is it now... a ‘moody hammer’?”

“Yessum, sir.”

“And you’re... how does it go... ‘witchy for a look’?”

“Yessum, sir, I guess I am.” *Why are you answering? Why are you answering him, you knuck?*

“Bad luck, old boy,” the man said, and patted Jairus reassuringly on the thigh. Jairus cringed.

“You weren’t meant to see any of this. Closed chapel, you see. How did you get in?”

There was something about the man. Something in his eyes or tone that compelled Jairus to answer, even though he didn’t want to.

“I... I pretended I was a gamper, sir.”

“Did you? How cunning.”

“Master Revoke?” the cleric called from the front. “Is there a problem?”

“Just a poor man who mistook his way into our assembly, father. No need for a fuss. He’ll be going shortly.”

The man looked back at Jairus. His pupils were stale yellow, like burned-out suns. “What were you doing here?” he asked softly.

“I was just...” Jairus began.

“Intending to rob the collection plate,” the man said, looking away. “To afford the price of a look. You were going to hold up this entire body of good people to slake your habit.”

“Not I, sir, I—”

Somehow, the man had got hold of Jairus’ gun. He held the weapon up.

“With this.”

“Sir, I...” Jairus fought the man’s compelling force. This was madness! He was a slab-ox, vat-built, he ought to be able to crush a wimp like this in a heartbeat. He swung around, grabbed the man by his dove-grey lapels and smashed him repeatedly against the pew back until the skull cracked open, red and wet. Then he ran for the chapel door and—

Jairus was still sitting in the pew, unable to move. The man was smiling at him. “Interesting idea,” the man said. “Very robust. Very direct. But... *never* going to happen.”

“Please...” Jairus mumbled.

“I’ll tell you what,” the man said, reaching his free hand into his tailored coat, his other hand toying with the heavy handgun. “Here’s one on me.”

He handed Jairus a small parcel wrapped in red tissue paper.

“Now... get on your way.”

Two rectors unbolted the chapel doors for him. Jairus ran.

He got as far as the ironwalks above Belphagor Under-sink before the steel teeth of panic finally began to relax their bite. His breathing was ragged and he was twitching all over. He grabbed the handrail for support, leaning over, ignoring the acid-itch on his palms from the recent rain.

The man had been bad enough, but the other thing... the tri-part image revealed when the triptych slid open.

Most Glorious Throne of Terra, what a thing! Of all things holy, that certainly wasn’t one of them.

The city sub-levels lay below him, a blizzard of lights in the darkness under the ironwalk. Jairus wanted to calm down, relax his pumping heart.

He took out the parcel the man had given him, unwrapped the red tissue paper and looked at the flect. That would do it.

Except... that man, that soft-spoken man with his stale yellow eyes. How could he trust a man like that who simply gave flects away?

Jairus weighed the lump of glass in his hand, then turned and threw it into the darkness off the ironwalk.

“Shame.”

Jairus turned. The man was sitting on the ironwalk stairs behind him. He looked like he had been there for hours. He was smoking a lho-stick in a long holder which he held pinched between his slim, gloved fingers.

“That would have been quick and clean. There would have been pain, but only very briefly.”

Jairus bunched his fists.

“We now have to move to other options.”

“What are you... what... what...?” Jairus stammered.

“You saw too much. Far too much. And I’m a secretist. I’m paid to ensure there are no loose tongues. And your fine augmented tongue, Jairus... well, it looks loose to me.”

“I shall do this?” inquired a whisper-thin voice. Jairus realised that there was a second presence, standing on the stairs behind the man. So thin, so pale, almost transparent.

“No need, Monicker,” the man said, getting to his feet. “I feel like some practice.”

The man flicked away his lho-stick, slid the holder into his pocket, and took a step towards Jairus. The half-visible figure behind him remained motionless.

“It really could have been quick,” the man whispered. “With the flect, I mean. A happy way to go. It’s not going to be quick now. And it certainly isn’t going to be painless.”

Jairus settled his shoulders low and raised his hands. “Let’s see,” he replied. It was the boldest thing he’d ever said. And it was the last thing he’d ever say.

The man uttered something. A word that wasn’t a word, a sound that wasn’t a sound. A single syllable.

Jairus reeled. He felt as if he’d been smacked in the face with a jackhammer. Blood sprayed from his mashed nose.

“Is good,” whispered the half-visible figure.

“It gets better,” said the man. He said three more un-words in quick succession, his lips flexing oddly to make and accommodate the sounds. Jairus shuddered as something broke his collar bone, something else shattered his left elbow and something else splintered his right knee.

He fell down. The pain was enormous. Years before, he’d been beaten by a rival clan crew. They’d used panel-hammers. He’d been in the public ward for eight months.

That had nothing on this.

The man stood over Jairus, who clawed at his trouser leg. The man announced some more un-words.

Jairus’ teeth exploded out with the first. All of them. Incisors like cracked porcelain, molars like bone pegs with their bloody roots. His tongue burst. The second un-word detonated his spleen. The third caved in his ribs and collapsed his right lung. The fourth relapsed his colon. Blood was pouring out of him, through every natural exit it could find.

A final un-word. Jairus’ kidneys were quivered to mush.

“He now is dead?” the half-visible figure asked.

“Ought to be,” said the man. He paused and raised a glove to his face, dabbing a tiny trickle of blood that leaked from his own lower lip.

“Your technique, it improves,” his companion noted.

“Practice makes perfect,” the man replied.

Jairus was still twitching. The blood draining out of him was streaming through the open mesh of the iron-walk deck.

“Can’t leave him here,” the man said. “The wound-type is very... singular.”

“I will not carry him. Not I. He smells, and he is messy.”

The man looked up and called out: “Drax?”

A third figure appeared, up at the roadway level. He was tall and slender, hunched about his heavy shoulders. A mane of wispy grey hair framed a face that was curiously shallow and wide, with small piggy eyes and a massive jaw that gave him an underbite.

“Mister Revoke?”

“Pick him clean, please.”

The newcomer, Drax, hurried down the stairs to join them. He was wearing a skin-suit of leather jack-armor with a row of buckles down his chest, but his entire right arm and hand were encased in a thick gauntlet of chainmail.

“Step you back, then, Mister Revoke,” he said. He took a psyber lure from his belt, unwound the silver cord and began to spin it in slow circles. The lure made a humming murmur.

“Here they come, the little beauties.”

Jairus coughed blood suddenly and opened his eyes. He stared up at the sky.

The last thing he saw were the sheen birds, hundreds of them, mobbing down out of the dark towards him, metal pinions fluttering. They were the last thing he saw because they went for his eyes first.

The last thing he felt was agony. It lasted for six whole minutes as the sheen birds pecked and stripped the flesh from his bones.

TWO

So, late in the year 402.M41, we returned to Eustis Majoris to finish the work.

It had been well over twelve months since we had last stood together upon that dark, overpopulated planet, and we returned now incognito. Our enemies believed us to be long dead. So much the better. Secrecy was the only real weapon we had left. From the moment of our return onwards, everything would be secrets and lies, until death rendered all things equal and void.

On the last night of our journey back, I visited my comrades, one by one. It was a courtesy I paid out of respect. I was about to ask a lot from each one of them.

I found Harlon Nayl hunting game on a shelf of evergreen forest below a pearl-white glacier. The air was cold and thin. Will Tallowhand was with him, and they were walking together with their long rifles leaning across their shoulders.

I approached through the long grass, spreading my hands to ruffle the stalks that swished around me. Will saw me first. He turned and smiled at me, then tapped Harlon on the shoulder.

Will Tallowhand had been dead a long while. He called something out to me that I couldn't catch. By the time I'd reached them, he had faded away like smoke.

Harlon Nayl looked me up and down. "Been a long time since you've done this, Gideon," he said.

"I know." I replied.

"Looking good," he said.

"Looking whole." I answered.

He nodded. He was a big man, tall and corded with muscle. His bullet head was shaved but for a tuft of beard on his chin.

"Is it that bad?" he asked.

"That bad?"

He shrugged. "Been a long time, like I said. It must be bad for you to come to me like this. I think I know what you're here to ask."

"Do you now?"

Harlon nodded again. "Think I do. You want to know if I want to go on."

"And do you?"

"I always thought I'd be in it for the long haul..." He looked away as his voice trailed off wistfully. The ghost shapes of prong-horn game were melting into the tree-line.

"Where is this?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I forget. Durer, maybe, or Gudrun. Sleep often brings me here. Although last time, the glacier was over there."

We reached the edge of mountain lake lying like a glass spearhead amongst the evergreens. It was so still and glassy it mirrored the trees, the glacier and the sky.

And there we were too, side by side. Harlon, broad-shouldered, thick-armed, his physique as tough and flexible and well-worn as the leather bodyglove he wore. And me, as I had been at the age of thirty-four, an eternity before. A little shorter than Harlon, rather lighter in build, long black hair tied back from a high cheek-boned face that I'd once seen regularly in other mirrors.

"What are you in your dreams?" Harlon asked.

“Am I like this, do you mean?”

“Yeah.”

I shook my head. “No, not for years now. I dream like I live, confined and yet unlimited, in the darkness. But I thought I’d look like this for a change tonight.”

“Because it’s that bad? I hope this isn’t a psychological game. You wearing your old face to remind us how we met you and who we first swore allegiance to? Hard to say ‘no’ to someone’s face.”

“Do you want to say no?”

“Boss, we’ve been through plenty together. Plenty of bad things. Molotoch. That business on Dolsene. Stuff I don’t want to remember. Is this really that much worse?”

I paused. “It could be.”

“What about the others?”

“I haven’t asked them yet. I’m asking you.”

“And I’m saying yes. You’re going to the others now?”

“Yes.”

“Can I come?”

I said yes. We broke the mirror lake into shards and blurred into a stone cell in a tower on Sameter where Patience Kys was singing a lullaby to her long-lost sisters. Prudence and Providence were snuggled up in their cots, ten years old. Outside, an electrical storm split the night.

“Who are those men?” Prudence asked, pointing.

Kys turned sharply. The two silver kineblades pinning her long black hair plucked themselves free and circled towards us in the candlelight.

I brushed them aside carefully. Even in dreams, such weapons can wound.

“What are you two doing here?” Kys spat. She was a tall, slender woman in her mid-twenties, agile and quick. Unloosed, her straight black hair framed her pale, high-cheek bones and her fierce green eyes.

“I’m sorry to intrude, Patience.” I began.

“He’s come to ask the question, Kys,” Harlon Nayl said beside me.

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” I said. “If you want to step off, I’ll understand. Do it now before it’s too late.”

“You staying?” Kys asked Nayl.

“Of course,” he replied.

“I’m staying too,” she told me, fixing me with those terrible green eyes. “It’s an honour thing.”

“Because you want revenge?” I asked.

“No, because I’m sworn to you, and this is what we do.”

We left Kys to finish her song. Carl Thonius was harder to locate. The boundaries of his dreams were thick and clotted, and when we entered them, we found ourselves lost in a forest of clothing racks hung with thousands of beautiful garments.

The air was colder than Nayl’s alpine dream.

“Carl? Carl?”

At the heart of the forest of hanging clothes, Carl Thonius sat naked in a clearing, surrounded by framed mirrors. He rose as we dragged our way in through the jackets and pantaloons and waistcoats. He put on a robe.

The innermost rings around the clearing were bare metal racks rattling with empty clothes hangers.

"This is an intrusion," he said. Carl Thonius was a very mannered person: slender and spare, elegant, his hair a blond, coiffured fringe. His voice trailed away as he saw the guise I'd come in.

"He wants to ask you the question," Nayl said, grinning at Thonius' discomfort. "You know, *the* question."

"The inquisitor knows the answer." Carl replied tersely. "I am his interrogator. I go where he goes, in the Emperor's name, worlds without end."

"Thank you. But I had to ask, Carl," I said.

"I know you did, sir," he answered, pulling his robe tight. "Our status is Special Condition?"

"Yes. When we arrive at Eustis Majoris," I said, "our first problem will be establishing and maintaining cover identity. False documents won't get us very far and I'll be damned if we're going to lose our only advantage."

"We'll all be damned," smiled Carl.

"Then we need something else. Something clever."

"I'll give it a little thought, sir," he said.

Two pale, wan suns were setting over us as we crunched down a stretch of foreshore together. There was a figure ahead of us in the twilight, scooping and searching along the beach.

The shoreline was littered with billions of left hands, each one real and flesh and blood. All the same, each one was impossibly fitted with a chrome bracket at the wrist.

Zeph Mathuin was moving along the shoreline, picking up each hand in turn and trying it against the socket of his left arm. Each mis-fitting hand he tossed aside.

Mathuin was a tall, dark-skinned man of enormous physical strength. His black hair was braided in rows. In this, his dream, his eyes weren't the red-coal augmetic flicker of life. They were soft and brown.

He looked round as we approached, discarding another clenching hand.

"Shit," said Nayl, gazing at the long, wide beach of twitching hands. "Zeph's dreams are so much freakier than mine."

"Zeph?" I called out.

"I can't find it. Can't find it. Can't."

"Zeph," I said again.

"What?" he barked, turning to glare at me.

"I wanted to ask—"

"The answer's yes," he said, and turned back to his sorting along the shoreline of wriggling fingers.

We finally located Kara Swole in a dressing room behind a thunderous wooden carnival hall in the backwoods of Bonaventure. Outside, barkers with brass voice-trumpets shouted the odds, and the crowd was roaring. Kara sat before the harshly-lit make-up mirror, her red hair pulled back in a lace strap as she white-powdered her face.

Short, supple, voluptuous, she turned in her camp chair as we came in.

"Is it time already?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Time to go on?"

"Yes."

She came over to me and stroked my arms, tugging at my cuffs.

"You were such a handsome man, Gideon."

"Thank you."

"Sometimes I forget... I forget what you looked like, back then. You haven't come to me this way in a long time."

"That's just what I said," said Nayl.

Kara's face changed. "I'm dreaming, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are."

"We're starting tomorrow, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"This is the dream where you come and ask me if I want to go on, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Even to the death?"

"Even that."

"What about the others?"

"Patience, Zeph and Carl are all with me," I said.

"Me too," said Nayl.

"Frauka and Zael?"

"I couldn't get into Frauka's dreams if I tried... and I won't get into the boy's. It's just us, the band. I needed to know you were still with me."

"Of course!"

"Kara... Now's the time, the last time. If you want out, say now."

"Are you kidding?" she said. "The show must go on."

The following morning, ship-time, the *Arethusa* translated back into material space on the edge of the Eustis System. The old freighter had been so often repaired and rebuilt during its lifetime, that all clues to its original class and designation had long since vanished in the patchwork mess of its hull. Unwerth liked to think of it (and, by extension, himself too) as a rogue trader, but it was little more than a tinker ship, scraping a living in cheap trinkets and surplus perishables up and down the trade lanes.

From retranslation, we joined the busy in-system route, and finally picked up the services of a pilot boat which led us in through the overcrowded rafts of the high anchor harbours to a vacant dock. Berthing fees were twenty crowns a day, and we reserved the anchorage for a calendar month.

The stained globe of Eustis Majoris revolved slowly beneath us. The orbital harbours were superstructures of brass and steel, resembling in their structure and their glittering lights giant circus calliopes the size of continents, linked together in a loose string. More than ten thousand vessels alone clung at anchor to the scaffold-wharves around Us. Some of the ships were private merchantmen, haulers, trade-runners; others vast mass conveyance vessels from the noble chartered companies and the franchised lines. Rows of dull, grey Munitorum freighters suckled against raft-edges. Gold and crimson mission-ships of the Ecclesiarchy, splendid as ceremonial sceptres, dragged at the titanic chains that moored them to private, consecrated docking areas. In the distance, threat-black warships skulked in armoured pens separate from the main harbours. Near-space bustled with traffic: shuttles, service ships, mobile derricks, tankers, lighters, lift ships bound for the surface, taking the traders' merchandise down to the markets of Eustis Majoris' cities.

Apart from cursory identification, pilot ship dues and berthing registration, no one really noticed the *Arethusa*. Just another mangy, nondescript tramp limping in with ice on its pitted hull, trailing skeins of fuel vapour from where the pressures of the Empyrean had flexed and deformed its fabric.

Carl had come to me early, and described the plan that had evolved in his mind. I valued Carl most for his technical brilliance, but this scheme impressed me as much for its daring and audacity. As an operative, he was maturing.

"There are risks," I said.

“Of course. But as you said, we need to be able to operate freely without fear of detection. Even the best forged documents will show up as false if subjected to thorough Informium inspection. And we have every reason to believe that the people we’re dealing with will have access to such resources.”

“So the perfect solution is to get the Informium itself to forge documents for us?”

He smiled. It was the smile he used when he was insufferably pleased with himself. “In a manner of speaking.”

“You’ve planned this operation thoroughly?”

“In all particulars. Timings, distances, codes. All the minutiae. Sir... I’d like to run the operation personally I would regard it as an honour if you’d allow that.”

“I see. Why, Carl?”

He fiddled nervously with a garnet ring on his right pinkie. “Three reasons. First, it’s my idea. Second... how can I put this delicately? Physically, you are our weakest link. The rest of us can disguise our appearances, but you do rather stand out. And your form is known to our enemies.”

It was something I’d been thinking about since we’d begun our journey back to Eustis Majoris. Because of the secrecy, I was going to have to rely entirely on my agents during this mission. I could not allow myself to be seen. It was a frustrating prospect. We were here, undertaking an extremely hazardous endeavour, and all because I insisted it should be so. Yet I was going to have to sit back and watch as they took all the real risks for me.

“Very well.” I told him. “I’m going to have to get used to being the least visible player in this game. You can run this.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I will be watching, and helping, if I can.”

“Of course. But there will be no need.”

He got up to leave my cabin. “What was the third reason, Carl?” I asked.

He turned and faced my support chair squarely, as if he were looking me in the eyes. “Last year, I fouled up. On Flint, and later, when the ship was taken. I was the weak link then. I want an opportunity to redeem myself.”

We assembled in the main hold. Nayl had a lifter whining up to power. Kara, Kys and my blunter, Wystan Frauka, were loading the last of the equipment packs into the lifter’s cargo pod. Carl was nearby, talking quietly to the boy, Zael. Carl and I had agreed that Zael could play a part in this initial operation, and the boy was clearly excited by the role Carl was explaining to him.

I still had some doubts about Zael. He was very young and inexperienced, and displayed the beginnings of a potent psychic gift that he as yet did not understand. That rare quality of a mirror psychic, not active but passively reflective. I kept him with me to watch over that growing talent, to nurture it. But he was growing restless being on the sidelines all the time. Giving him a responsibility would boost his confidence and make him feel part of the group.

Mathuin arrived, escorting our prisoner. Feaver Skoh had been a game agent, a player in the Contract Thirteen cartel, and one of the men trying to kill us at Bonner’s Reach the year before. We’d captured him there, and much of what we knew was based upon things he had given up under interrogation. Both Nayl and Thonius believed there was nothing more we could get from him, and considered it a waste of effort keeping him with us. But he was our only resource, and I wasn’t about to give that up yet.

Incarceration and misery had shrunk him down. He was a shadow of the bruiser who had gunned for us in Lucky Space. His sandy blond hair had grown paler and thin, and a straggly beard covered his once jutting chin. He shuffled along in his manacles as Zeph led him to the lander. He was pitiful but, I sensed, not yet broken.

He ignored everyone and said nothing, but he turned and fixed me with one brief stare before Zeph led him up the ramp.

The squat figure of Sholto Unwerth hurried over to me.

“Are you all in the readiness, sir? Are you concupiscent for the rigours that may prevail?”

“Yes, Master Unwerth.”

“And you wish upon me to have myself stay positioned here?”

“Yes, Master Unwerth. The berthing fees are paid in advance. Remain here with your ship. If we have not returned, or made contact with you by the time the prepayment runs out, you may leave and continue with your own business. With my thanks.”

“Well, then, I bid you all formaldehyde and gross misadventure. Just the one singularly thing...”

“Yes?”

“In all these copious months, you still haven’t pertained to me what your business is.”

“You’re right, Master Unwerth,” I said. “I haven’t. And I won’t. For the good of your health.”

THREE

Orfeo Culzean was a rare beast. His papers declared him to be a dealer and purveyor of antiquities, but that merely described the legitimate business he conducted to disguise his real work. It allowed him to travel widely through the sector, and availed him of opportunities to acquire curios and inspect the reserved collections of many museums and archives. His scholarship was highly regarded. He had not a single blemish of criminal activity on his record.

But Orfeo Culzean was a professional malcontent, a mercenary, a shaper of destiny. No warrior he — Culzean had never lifted a finger against another soul personally — his speciality was subtle and invidious. He made things happen. He was an architect of fate, one of the foremost expeditors employed by the Divine Fraternity.

Culzean did not belong to the Fraternity itself. He had no interest in being a seer, and bore no wish to sacrifice an eye or blister his skin. But it was he, and a few rare beasts like him, that the Fraternity turned to when it wished to make its prospects into a reality.

Under normal circumstances, he would have been the most dangerous man alive on Eustis Majoris. But that winter, he was up against stiff opposition.

The Fraternity had summoned him to Eustis Majoris, financed his passage, and paid for an exclusive suite at the Regency Viceroy in Formal C, at the heart of Petropolis. Two days after his arrival, the magus-clancular of the Divine Fraternity cell active in Petropolis came to visit him.

The magus-clancular was called Cornelius Lezzard. He was three hundred and ten years old, infirm and raddled with disease, his crippled body supported in an upright exoskeleton. Two brothers of the Fraternity escorted him. All three wore simple black suits with velvet hats. All three had moved their purple velvet eye patches to cover their everyday augmetic optics, so as to do Culzean the honour of regarding him with their sacred, real eyes.

What those eyes saw when they entered the opulent suite was a portly man in late middle age, dressed in a high-buttoned suit of blue worsted, his thick, dark hair and beard perfectly groomed. He was sitting in a leather armchair, caressing a little simivulpa that played on his lap. As the fraters came in, he put the pet down and got to his feet. The silky fox-monkey barked and clambered up to perch on the back of the chair.

Culzean bowed slightly.

“Magus-clancular, a pleasure to meet you again.” Culzean’s voice was as soft and heavy as comb honey.

“We look upon you, Orfeo.” Lezzard replied.

“Please, repatch yourselves. Let us not stand on ceremony.”

The two escorts replaced their velvet patches over their organic eyes, exposing their crude, glowing augmetics.

One had to help Lezzard, who fumbled at his own patch with palsied hands.

“It has been a few years since we last worked together on a prospect.” Lezzard said. His voice had a tremulous, breathless quality. Tubes from his exoskeleton’s bio-support pack were sutured into his scrawny neck.

“Indeed. On Promody. The plague was a thing of exquisite beauty.”

“This prospect is many times more wonderful.”

"I imagined it would be. The summons was... eager. As I understand it, this particular prospect is the Fraternity's chief current interest."

"It is. That is why I asked the Fraternity masters to engage your services. Let me introduce my companions. Arthous and Stefoy, both able seers."

"Brothers." Culzean nodded. The men were typical of the Fraternity: their faces scarred and twisted from the rigours of cult initiation, their hands worn and eroded from working the silver mirrors. "Will you take refreshment?"

"A little wine, or secum liquor, perhaps?" Lezzard said.

Culzean nodded. Nearby stood his watcher, a tall, muscular woman with short blonde hair and an anvil-hard face. She wore a tight khaki bodyglove with a fur trim. Her name was Leyla Slade.

"Leyla?"

She retreated obediently to call for service.

Lezzard limped around the chamber, the pistons of his exoskeleton wheezing. Culzean had decorated the room with his own ornaments. Lezzard examined a few, chuckling from time to time.

"Your collection grows, I see," he said.

"People die all the time." Culzean replied lightly.

"Indeed they do. But tell me... this key?"

"It choked a child on Gudrun."

"Did it? And this paving stone?"

"Once lay at the very top of the processional steps outside the templum at Arnak. The glass vial beside it contains some of the rainwater that made it wet and treacherous to an unsuspecting pilgrim."

"Forgive me," one of the fraters — Arthous — said, "I don't understand."

Culzean smiled. "I collect deodands," he said.

Arthous looked bemused.

"A deodand," Culzean said, "is an object that has directly caused the death of a person or persons. This tile, from the roof of an auction house on Durer, which cracked the skull of a passing magistrate. This ink pen, whose filthy nib poisoned the blood of the Administratum cleric who accidentally speared himself in the buttock. This thunderstone, falling like a missile from the open sky onto a herdsman in Migel County. This apple, sealed in a plastek block to preserve it - you notice the single bite mark? The poor woman was allergic to the juice."

"Extraordinary," said Arthous. "May I ask... why?"

"Why do I collect them? Cherish them? You know what I do, Frater Arthous. I engineer destiny. These objects fascinate me. I believe they contain a vestige of some outer force, some happenstance. Each one crude, and of itself worthless, but empowered. I keep them by me as charms. Every single one has changed a person's fate. They remind me how fickle and sudden fate can be, how easily twisted."

"They're the source of your power?" Stefoy wondered.

"They're just a collection of things," Culzean said. "All of them yearn to shape the future as completely and as fully as I do."

Leyla Slade returned, with a tray of hot secum in drinking kettles. She served the men as they took their seats under the tall windows of the suite. The simivulpa scurried playfully under their chairs. Outside, the rain lashed the grim, high stacks of the city.

"Tell me about the prospect," Culzean said, sipping from his drinking kettle's spout.

"How much do you know, Orfeo?" Lezzard replied.

Culzean shrugged. "The Fraternity's seers on Nova Durma have seen something in their silver mirrors. A prospect that is — and I understand this is almost unheard of — almost one hundred per cent likely. Something will occur here, on Eustis Majoris, before the end of the year. A daemonic manifestation. It will shake history. Its name will be Slyte."

“A decent appraisal,” the magus-clancular replied, as Stefoy helped him suck from his kettle. “Arthous, the rest.”

Arthous leaned forward in his seat, and put his kettle down. He stank from the sores on his body, but Orfeo Culzean was too well-mannered to register distaste.

“The name, expeditor, will indeed be Slyte. Perhaps the name may be Sleet or Slate or—”

“Slyte will do,” Culzean said, raising a hand. “What I don’t understand is this. I was told of an almost one hundred per cent certainty. Why in the name of darkness do you need my services?”

“The key word, sir, is *almost*,” Stefoy said. “In the last few months, our brother-seers on Nova Durma have reported a clouding.”

“A clouding?”

“The prospect is becoming less certain. As if fate is twisting against it. We need to confirm fate’s path. Make it certain again. Make it true. The prospect was seen to occur between the start of 400 and the end of 403. That time is almost on us now.”

“I see,” said Culzean. “Now, does this prospect have a focus?”

Arthous reached into his suit pocket and produced a sheaf of crumpled parchments. “These are the transcripts made by the seers. The focus is named here, you see. A person called Gideon Ravenor.”

“Ravenor?” Culzean said. “The writer?”

“He is an Imperial inquisitor.”

“Yes, but he writes too. Various essays, treatises. All rather fey and ponderous to my taste, but well thought of. This Ravenor’s the focus?”

“Him, or one of his close associates.” Lezzard nodded.

“Curious,” Culzean said, taking the parchments and studying them.

“The Inquisition is already alert to this prospect,” Stefoy said. “They have attempted to thwart us. One agent in particular, Ravenor’s old mentor, the inquisitor, Eisenhorn.”

Culzean looked up. “Eisenhorn? That old bull? Now he I’ve most certainly heard of. Where is he in this picture?”

“He attempted to warn Ravenor of the prospect on Malinter last year. We were unable to stop him, though it seems Ravenor himself did not believe the warning. Eisenhorn was later tracked down and slain by our brothers on Fedra.”

“Glory! You killed Gregor Eisenhorn?” asked Culzean.

“We believe so. He was confronted on Fedra, at the Mechanicus temple on Mars Hill. A considerable battle ensued, which ended with the explosive destruction of the entire site. His thread vanished from the seers’ vision thereafter. To a degree of certainty, we are sure he is dead.”

“To a degree of certainty?”

“He no longer appears in our scrying mirrors,” Lezzard said dryly.

“What about Ravenor? Is he here?”

“This is where the clouding troubles us. There is contradiction in the seers’ visions. Some say he is dead already. Others say he is here, amongst us, in Petropolis. It is possible he is here under a veil of the utmost secrecy. If so, that might explain the contradiction.”

“And what are the determiners I can use?” Culzean asked.

“With Stefoy’s help, the master-dancular produced more crinkled papers. These are the determiners we have established. Nineteen names: persons who, we have predicted, will manifestly influence the outcome of the prospect.”

“Some of these people are... highly placed,” Culzean said, reading.

“Indeed.”

“And Ravenor himself is on the list.”

“Yes. At this time,” Lezzard said. “We don’t know why.”

Culzean looked up at Leyla Slade. "I'll need a psyker, immediately. Non-aligned, black market. Find out if Saul Keener is still operating on Eustis Majoris. He does good work."

"At once," she replied.

"Can you help us?" Stefoy asked. "Can you expedite this?"

"I believe so," Culzean said, rising to his feet. The simivulpa ran up his sleeve and sat on his shoulder. Culzean was still studying the papers. "We need to be quick and ruthless. We can't worry about these determiners. They are all fungible elements. We have to clear the field and hone the prospect down to a bare, simple fact."

"You mean we have to kill them?" Arthous said.

"Probably. It's like surgery. We have to excise the muddle. I think we should start with him."

Culzean showed Lezzard the page.

"The Fraternity couldn't begin to attempt a killing like th—"

"That's what you pay me for. I've brought devices with me."

"Devices?" mumbled Stefoy.

"Shining weapons of destiny," Culzean said with a smile. "I believe we should wake the incunabula."

"Really? Are you sure, sir?" Leyla Slade asked.

Culzean nodded energetically. He was hitting his stride now, in command, in control. "The Brass Thief is very malleable, very adaptive. Yes, I'm sure. We'll wake him up."

"It," corrected Leyla Slade.

"You don't know him like I do." Culzean grinned. He turned to the fraters. "We can begin in a day or so. Where are you based, master?"

"The occulting lighthouse at the bay end of Formal Q." Lezzard replied.

"Remote, is it? Discreet?"

"Yes, Orfeo."

"I'll come to you there. We'll wake the incunabula and begin our work."

"What is this thing you speak of?" asked Stefoy.

"Just a tool. A deodand."

"Like a roof tile or a pen?"

Culzean shrugged. "Slightly more proactive than that. There will be a cost involved."

"The Fraternity's funds are at your disposal for this, Orfeo." Lezzard replied.

Orfeo Culzean raised a fist and coughed politely into the core of it. Leyla Slade took a step forward. "Magus-clancular, sir, my employer did not mean a monetary cost. You must arrange for there to be persons present whose lives can be used as payment."

"Sacrifices?" asked Lezzard.

"At least a dozen," said Orfeo Culzean. "The Brass Thief gets his name because he steals lives. And when he wakes, he will be so awfully hungry."

FOUR

“Hey, I’ve an idea. Try opening it.” Nayl suggested.

“Try *waiting* for me to open it.” Kara growled back, fumbling with the power driver. It whined pathetically in the gloom, and she coughed as rust flecks billowed down. “Damn thing’s corroded shut. Just use your cutter. This is wasting time.”

Nayl lit the torch blade of his las-cutter. The fizzling glow lent their surroundings an even greater sense of decay and neglect.

Kara jumped down from the crusted metal rungs. She made an “after you” bow - difficult to do in a bodysuit so laden down with kit.

Nayl clambered up the ladder, and dug the cutter into the rim of the heavy roof hatch. Metal curled away, glowing, melting, dripping onto the floor below in fat, orange droplets.

The vox pipped. “Are you two quite ready yet?” Carl said. “This plan relies on perfect co-ordination. I explained that, didn’t I?”

“Yes, Carl. You did.” Kara replied. “Little technical difficulty with the roof access.”

“I blame the acid rain,” Nayl said, still at work.

“So noted.” Carl’s voice cracked over the line.

“I blame Nayl,” said Kara. “It makes me feel better about myself.”

“Also noted. I applaud the sentiment.”

“We’re through.” Nayl called, killing the cutter blade and slipping it back into his hip pouch. “Mask up and brace yourself.”

Kara checked her hood seals and pulled the breather mask down over her face.

Nayl punched the ancient metal hatch and it flopped over, open onto the exterior roof. Immediately, a pressure wave of wind and rain burst down onto them. It was even worse than she’d expected, howling, murderously violent. The acid-warning lights inside their headsets lit up. A stormy night in downtown Petropolis.

The high, flat roof of the Mansoor Hagen Manufactory was just a jumble of duct heads and old reheater blocks in the darkness. The roaring crosswind drove the acid rain in slantwise sheets across the mouldering roof and threatened to tear them off their footing.

They staggered on, heads low, two strange, bulky shapes in the dark, moving east. Up ahead, through the fuming rain, the lights of the city glowed, one in particular.

The Mansoor Hagen Manufactory in Formal H had once, proudly, been the subsector’s chief producer of buttons and other quality clothing fasteners. Twenty years before, it had ceased production and closed down; maybe there had been a new trend in button recycling, maybe the citizens of the Angelus Subsector had begun to care less if they were decently fastened up. Whatever, the place had died, and the site had been sealed by the guild foremen.

The manufactory itself was a massive ouslite blockhouse a kilometre long and half a kilometre wide, rising nearly four hundred metres above the top of the upper stack levels. It lay across eight sink blocks, arranged roughly east-west along its longest sides. The western end looked out to Formal F and the sprawl of factory residuals. The eastern end faced the vast donjon of the Informium Depository on the boundary of Formal D.

Nayl and Kara reached the east-end lip of the massive building. They had to cling on to the old support wires to prevent themselves being torn off the roof by the wind.

“Decent take-up.” Nayl noted, his voice tinny over the vox.

“There’s a kindness. Check the direction.”

Nayl fumbled with the instrument strapped to his left wrist.

“Blowing due east. Eight over seven. It’s going to be a quick trip.”

Kara did some quick mental math. “Really quick,” she replied. “No more than eighteen, nineteen seconds. We’ll have to be really sharp not to overshoot. Shave off another two seconds to compensate for the way the wind’s going to carry us even when we’re uncoupled.”

“Two?”

“Yes, two! Trust me! Now, are you set?”

Nayl played out the carry-tube from his belt and the wind immediately tugged at the limp sack like a flag. He kept one hand clenched to the guard wire, and took hold of the inflator pump with the other.

“Set!”

Kara had done the same with her own kit.

“We’re set,” she voxed to Carl.

“Then I’ll start making my way in. Thonius out.”

“Ready?” Kara asked Nayl.

“For this? No,” he said. “But let’s do it anyway.”

They both activated the pressurised helium canisters fixed to their belts. In less than a second, the two limp sacks trailing wildly in the wind at the end of their carry-tubes had expanded into taut globes a full metre in diameter. The wind grabbed them at once.

Kara and Nayl let go of the wires and the windshear, wrestling with their globe balloons, yanked them forward with brutal force, off the edge of the manufactory, into the open sky.

Carl Thonius hurried across the rainswept street, past the singing burn alarms, and reached the north portico of the Informium Depository. Under the awning, he paid off his gamper, tipping the boy well. The gamper took the coin with a smile, shook off the huge, acid-resistant folds of his gamp, and went in search of other business.

Thonius brushed down his blue merskin jacket, flushed out his lace cuffs, and straightened his cravat. He took a moment to check his reflection in one of the deep windows of the entranceway.

“Sublime,” he murmured.

Tucking his document case under his arm, Thonius clipped up the wide steps and entered the towering north atrium. It was dreadfully warm inside, almost tropical. Well-armed Magistratum guards lingered on the vast marble floorway, and beyond them stood the ornate silver podiums of the public interlocutors. At this late hour, only a few citizens bustled to and fro, most of them lawyers or legal assistants chasing down last minute details before the courts opened the following morning.

“May I be of service, sir?” asked a uniformed docent.

“I don’t know.” Thonius smiled back. “May you?”

The docent produced a datawand from under his mantle and flipped it on. A hololithic list of headings and sub headings projected up into the air from the wand’s tip. “Do you require births? Deaths? Marriages? Lineage? Augment or cloning records? Land rights? Settlements? Copyright manifests? Historical and/or analytical claims? Tithe records? Buskage? Tullage? Vellement? Remallage? Gubernatorial records—”

“Do you have frottage?”

“Uh, I don’t believe so, sir.”

“Pity. I’ll tell you what. What it is, you see, is that I’m actually a student of High Imperial architecture: modern, intuitive, post-modern, quasi-modern, whatever. I’m on sabbatical here on this lovely... and I do mean very, very lovely... world of yours, and I was told to look this place up.

Lingstrom, they said, for that is my name, Lingstrom, you really must behold the Informium in Petropolis before you die.”

“Are you dying?” the docent mumbled, wide-eyed.

“My dear soul, we’re all dying. Each in our own way. I intend my parting to be extravagantly consumptive and melancholic, yet a touch romantic. How about you? By the look of you, I’d say the best you could hope for is a bad step on a wet stairwell. Or maybe a ram shellfish supper. Alone, no doubt.”

“S-sir?”

Thonius spread his arms wide and looked up at the vast, frescoed ceiling of the atrium two hundred metres above their heads. “Just look at it. No, look! Really look!”

The docent looked up, and blinked, as if he had never seen the magnificence before.

“Splendid, isn’t it?” Thonius said.

“I... I suppose so, sir,” the docent replied.

“I’m in the front door.” Thonius whispered into his concealed vox-mic. “Get our little friend in position, Patience.”

“You know what to do?” Patience Kys asked.

“I think so.” Zael replied. She was shooing him along under the walkway canopy towards the Informium’s west entrance. Acid rain beat on the tight covers above them. Zael was fidgeting with his right hand.

“Leave it alone.”

“It itches really bad,” he complained.

“Wait a minute,” Kys said, stopping suddenly. “Let me check... No, I don’t care. Get on and don’t mess this up.”

“Stop ragging me. I’ll do this.”

“You’d better.” Kys warned. She fixed the boy with her hard green eyes. “One hair out of place and I’ll debone you faster than you can say, *Oh, Mr Ravenor, bweh bweh bweh...*” Kys mock-sobbed, her knuckles up at her eyes and pulled a stricken face, her lower lip stuck out.

Zael laughed.

She slapped him round the chops.

“What the hell was that for?” Zael asked, his eyes reddening with tears.

“Just getting you into character. Come on.”

She grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him at a run into the quiet of the west entrance. This was a minor public entrance, just a couple of interlocutor podiums staffed by clerks and a handful of guards.

Kys pulled Zael up to one of the desks and yanked him to attention. From his high silver podium, the clerk peered down. He adjusted his augmetic implants to focus properly.

“What is your business?” he asked.

“I need this one gene-screened,” Kys said, indicating Zael.

“And you are?”

“Subsist officer, Formal E department.” Kys flashed a leather identity wallet open and shut perfunctorily, just too fast for it actually to be seen. She was wearing a sober, well-tailored grey suit, her hair in a tight coil, and no make-up. Her blunt demeanour and austere look was precisely that of a humourless social welfare agent. “Found this one sleeping rough. Thieving too. We need a screen to establish next of kin and get him assigned.”

The clerk looked at Zael. The boy’s clothes were worn and frayed, and his face was sullen.

“Very well.” The clerk selected some coloured forms from his desk and passed them to her through the grille. “Fill these out. There’s a booth over there. Then bring him back for scanning. The fee will be two crowns.”

“Thank you.” Kys replied. She tucked the forms under her arm and led Zael over to the writing booths.

“We’re inside, Carl. Just say the word,” she whispered.

Below them, the city whipped by, dark and dotted with lights. The hindwind was fierce. Kara feared for a moment that it would lift their globes right up into the stratosphere.

The vast, illuminated shape of the Informium was coming up. A gigantic rotunda of basalt, its exterior dressed in ashlar and swathed with climbing ivy and tether-weed around its upper levels. It was one of the largest single buildings in the inner Formals, and the depository of all civic documents and records for Eustis Majoris.

“Fourteen seconds!” Kara voxed. “Fifteen. Sixteen. Release!”

Kara hit her harness lock. Let go, her globe shot up at once and was lost in the high altitudes of the storm. She dropped like a rock. There was no time to look around for Nayl. Blackness turned over and under her. The city lights whirled dizzily.

Then the upper parapets of the rotunda were rushing up at her. Kara coiled, and landed with a winding impact on a fringe of stone roofway thick with bushy tetherweed and ivy. The plant growth helped cushion her landing. She rolled hard to rob her body of momentum. Sheen birds, startled by her landing, flocked up into the sky.

Battered by the wind and streaming rain, she got to her feet.

“Kara?” the vox crackled.

“Harlon?”

“Teensy problem.”

“Where are you?”

“Somewhere I’d rather not be.”

She scrambled to the edge of the stone roof, struggling through the acid-bleached ivy and stiff weed. She peered down. The sheer drop was giddying. The street was a necklace of lights a kilometre below.

Ten metres beneath her, Nayl was hanging over the drop, clinging to the beard of ivy that cascaded down the outer wall.

“You stupid ninker,” she said.

“Thanks for that. Uh, help?”

Kara quickly unwound the mono-filament line wrapped around her waist. From below, over the vox, she heard Nayl curse. The bushy vines were weak and sickly from years of acid rain, and they were beginning to tear and snap under his weight.

“Kara?” Carl voxed. “Is everything all right? Are you in position?”

“We’re fine. Everything’s fine,” she heard Nayl vox back. “We’ll call you back as soon as we’re in place.”

“Okay, Thonius out.”

“Why did you tell him that?” Kara called down.

“I don’t want to mess up his frigging plan, do I? I don’t want to let him down. He’s trying to prove something to the boss with this operation.”

“Harlon, you don’t even like Carl. You’ve never liked him. You—”

“Kara. Baby. Quit it with the mouth and help me, for Throne’s sake.”

“Okay. Don’t move. Don’t even breathe.”

Standing in the booth, Kys mimed writing with the pen. She’d finished filling out the forms minutes earlier. Now she was just playing for time. She sent a nudge.

+Carl? We’re waiting.+

“Keep doing just that. Kara and Nayl are not quite in place.”

+Is there a problem, lady?+

Kys stiffened. The telepathic voice wasn't Ravenor, it wasn't any mind-voice she knew. It had come from right beside her.

+Zael? Was that you?+

+Yeah. It was me.+

+I didn't know you could cast. Since when could you cast?+

+I dunno. I just thought out loud and there you were.+

Kys looked at him. After all these months, she still didn't know what to make of the kid. There was something about Zael that worried her, scared her even.

And it took quite a lot to scare Patience Kys.

Wystan Frauka looked up from his data-slate. It was yet another of the tediously bad erotic novels he wiled away his time reading, though he never seemed to derive any titillation from them at all. He took the lho-stick out of his mouth, exhaled, and said, "What's the matter?"

"What do you mean?" I replied, using my chair's voice transponder.

"Something's the matter. I can tell."

"Really? How?" I asked.

"It's the way you always..." his voice trailed off and he shook his head sadly. "You're a floating box. I don't have the first clue. I was trying to be personable. Remember how you said I should improve my people skills?"

"I remember," I said. "Here's a tip. Referring to me as a 'floating box' is not all that personable."

"Right ho," he said.

"However, there is a problem." I admitted. "Carl's in place, so are Kys and Zael. But Kara and Nayl are experiencing difficulties."

"So intervene. Help them," Wystan said.

"Carl's so anxious to run this show and make it work. He wants to prove himself to me. If I intervene, it'll dent his confidence. It'll look like I don't trust his abilities."

"So?"

"So I'm supposed to be training him. Making an inquisitor out of him."

"If he screws up, he screws up this entire operation, right? I thought you told me it was important."

+It is important?+

Wystan stubbed out his lho-stick and immediately lit another. "Hello?"

Sometimes I forgot that Frauka was deaf to my mind.

"It is important. Very important. I'm impressed, Wystan, I didn't think you were even listening at the briefing."

"You wound me, inquisitor. I listen. Quite often, actually. I just don't care much."

We were holed up together in an empty hab on the sixtieth floor of a stack two kilometres from the Informium. The place was a dank wreck, rain pelting hard against the smeary window. Wystan was sprawled on a sofa that looked as if it had been used as a practice target on an artillery range and then given to hungry rats. He was my untouchable, my psychic blank the real outsider of my team. Most of the time there was very little for him to do, and he sat around with his limiter activated, smoking and speed-reading his dreary pornography.

I cast my psi wide, and summoned a picture of Kara on the roof of the Informium, Nayl hanging from the slowly tearing vines below her.

"You said they were experiencing difficulties," Frauka said.

"Yes."

“What sort of difficulties?” he asked.

“The falling off a tall building to certain death hundreds of metres below kind,” I said.

“Bummer,” he remarked casually.

“Any time you like.” Nayl murmured. The vines were really starting to give way now.

Kara played out the filament line down to Nayl.

“Grab it and hook it up!”

He got hold of the end, swaying out as he did so on the bending boughs. Frantically, he cinched the carabiner to his belt.

She tightened the line and braced her body against the stonework.

“I’m having a sodding ball, you know.” Nayl mumbled.

“Try and stay rigid. I’m going to lift you now.”

“Rigid. Not a problem.”

“Here we go.”

It took thirty seconds. Thirty seconds of effort that almost broke Kara’s back. Nayl dragged himself up over the lip of the roof.

“Ahem? Are you there yet?” Thonius voxed.

“Two minutes more, Carl. That’s a promise.” Kara replied.

Kara got Harlon to his feet and together they hurried up the slope of the donjon’s domed metal roof towards the branching radiator vanes that rose like a metal forest from the summit of the dome.

Most of the data storage in the Petropolis Informium was beneath the ground in colossal vaults, or housed in crypts in the building’s massive outer walls. The sheer quantity of cogitator activity in the donjon was so great that it generated a staggering amount of bleed heat. Superconductor nets, laced throughout the Informium’s superstructure, channelled the heat waste away to prevent the files from corrupting or combusting, and it was vented into the central flues of the building and out through the roof vanes.

Harlon and Kara hurried in amongst the acid-gnawed trees of the radiator array. Despite the screaming winds and heavy rain, they were both sweating profusely in their sealed suits thanks to the exertion.

They began powerdriving open the inspection plates of the radiator vane, one by one, and packed each thermostat with insulation felt. In short order, six of the vanes were packed and resealed.

“Carl... We’re in place and the vanes are lagged.” Kara voxed. “You’re good to go.”

“They tell me the internal vaulting is really worth a look,” Thonius said. “They say, Lingstrom, they say, for that is my name... did I mention that?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the docent. His mind was still a little punchy from the essay the visitor had delivered on ouslite dressing and the miracles of ornamentation the Informium’s original architect had managed, despite a lifelong battle with scrofula and “a testicular asymmetry”.

“Well, I should so love to see the internal vaulting.”

“The building’s about to close to the public,” the docent said. “In just a few minutes, in fact.”

“That’s all I’d need,” Thonius said. “Just a peek, you understand.”

“Very well,” the docent replied. He led Thonius across the marble floor to the silver podiums of the public interlocutors.

“What is your business?” asked the nearest.

“A visitor expressing interest in the architecture,” the docent explained. “A very knowledgeable man. He’d like to see the internal vaulting. He understands that public access will finish in a short while.”

“Very well,” said the clerk.

“Thank you, dear sir!” said Thonius, bowing.

The silver podium chattered quietly and issued a yellow pass ribbon from a slot in its side. The docent took it and pinned it to Thonius’ lapel. “Visitors’ permit,” he explained. “Public areas only.”

Carl smiled. The docent wore a pass ribbon of his own, but his was scarlet instead of pale yellow.

They passed between the podiums, pausing to let the optic scanners read their permits. Then the docent led Carl through the broad archways onto the wide marble terrace that ringed the ground floor of the inner rotunda. The cavernous vaulted roof rose above them, a kilometre high.

“Oh, now that is quite magical!” Thonius cried.

“I’d like my diversion *now*, please,” he whispered into his vox.

Kys grabbed Zael by the wrist.

+We’re on.+

She led him back to the interlocuter’s podium and handed over the forms, along with the payment.

The clerk painstakingly read and stamped each form in turn. “All in order,” he said. He wound on a brass handle.

Part of the silver podium’s front slid open to lever out an articulated glass palm reader.

“Place his hand on the plate, mamzel.”

“Do it.” Kys instructed the boy. Zael did as he was told.

There was a pause. A light on the podium flashed diffidently. “Now that can’t be right...” the clerk began.

Klaxons started to howl on full alert. Screamer alarms started to shrill. There was a hollow series of clangs as security hatches slammed closed around the Informium, sealing every exit shut with portcullis cages of electrified bars. The guards looked at each other, raised their weapons, and hurried forward.

“One diversion, as ordered,” whispered Patience Kys.

“What in the name of Terra is that awful ruckus?” Thonius cried.

The docent turned, unnerved at the screaming alarms. Guards and other staff members were hurrying back to the podiums behind them. The outer doors of the building had auto-caged.

“A security breach!” the docent said. “You’ll have to come with me. Back into the atrium. We’ll need to do a head count and permit check.”

Thonius grabbed him, fearfully. “Are we in danger, my friend? I can’t abide danger!”

The docent gently undid Thonius’ grip and ushered him on. “You’re perfectly safe, sir. Just head for the exit over there and join the other visitors assembling in the atrium. The guards will tick you off the list. I can assure you, you’re perfectly safe. The guards are very professional, and this kind of thing hardly ever happens.”

Thonius blinked at the young man. “You’re not going to leave me, are you?” he said.

“You’ll be perfectly safe, sir,” the docent assured him. “Just go to the exit over there and wait. I have to check in at the staff muster point and await instructions.”

“But—”

“Really, sir, there’s nothing to worry about. That exit there.”

“Bless you,” said Thonius, and began to walk in the direction the docent had pointed. Ahead, a guard was waving visitors out through a barrier gate into the atrium.

The docent hurried off in the opposite direction.

As soon as the docent was out of sight, Thonius changed course and turned back into the main body of the building. He passed a security point, and let the optic scanners read his permit ribbon. A permit that was now scarlet.

“Now let’s be nice and calm about this,” the lead guard said, though he kept his weapon raised. Zael was doing a fine job of cowering in terror between Kys’ legs. Kys was staring at the guards in disbelief.

“What is this?” she stammered. “What the Throne is this?”

The guard looked up at the clerk as his comrades closed in on the woman and child. “What’s going on?” the guard asked.

“The reader’s posted an extreme crime link,” the clerk said, as if he didn’t believe it himself. “It’s sealed the building, and sent an automatic response to the Magistratum headquarters. Units are en route. We have to secure the premises and... and detain the malefactor.”

“The what?” asked the guard. “Him?”

He looked at the teenager crouched beside Kys. The other guards had all aimed their weapons at Zael.

“Him? That’s ridiculous!”

Up on his podium, the clerk shrugged. “I just do what the system tells me. He’s a malefactor. Wanted on seven worlds. High profile, max security case.”

“You’re bullshitting me!” the guard cried.

“This is outrageous!” Kys cried indignantly. “He’s just a subsist child—”

“Calm down, ma’am,” the guard said. “There has to be some mistake here. You men! Shoulder your weapons, you look like idiots.”

Reluctantly, the other guards raised their aim and hit the safeties on their firearms.

“This has to be a glitch. Just a glitch,” the guard was saying. “What does the system say?”

The clerk peered at his screen. “Palm scan identified as Rinkel, Francis Kelman. Eight counts of rape-murder, five counts of wounding, three counts of public affray.”

“Him? That kid?”

“It’s what it says. The system is never wrong,” the clerk said.

“He’s just a kid!”

The clerk shrugged.

“How old does the system say this Rinkel is meant to be?” asked the guard.

The clerk consulted his display. “Sixty-eight.”

“Sixty-eight?”

“He’s had work done—”

“My ass he has!”

“Juvenat drugs?” suggested one of the other guards.

“He’s just a kid!” the lead guard repeated.

There was a long pause. The clerk shrugged again. “You’re right. It’s a mistake.”

The lead guard nodded. “Thank you.”

“Let’s scan him again and sort this out,” the clerk added.

“Right,” the guard said. He turned to Kys and the boy. “Come on, son. We have to read your hand again to sort this out.”

“No! I won’t! I saw what happened last time!” Zael’s voice came out from behind Kys’ legs.

“Be a good boy now,” Kys said. “This nice man is trying to help you.”

Zael had already peeled the moulded plastek glove off his hand, removing the fake hand print. He had tucked the peel into Kys’ trouser pocket.

“Come on, kid. Up you come. We can sort this out nice and simple,” said the guard, holding out an armoured hand.

“Vanes are cooking off nicely now.” Kara voxed. “Overheat in two minutes.”

“Excellent.” Carl responded.

Zael placed his hand on the reader plate.

There was a pause as the system considered the findings.

“Hoffman, Arap Behj,” said the clerk. “Fourteen years old, registered to the scholam in Formal H.”

The alarms suddenly cut off. The silence was shocking. “System re-enabled,” the clerk said. There was a series of whines as the security gates and cages began to retract into their wall slots.

“I told you it was a mistake,” the guard said.

Carl Thonius heard the alarms shut down. “Well,” he whispered. “I do love it when a plan comes together.”

He had run down a wide flight of steps into the deserted inner rotunda, and along a hallway to the arch doorway of one of the Informium’s seven thousand clericulums. It was empty. The clerks had evacuated at the sound of the alarm. The rows of abandoned cogitator desks winked and flashed. The optic scanners at the doorway simply accepted his permit as he went inside.

He sat down at the first desk. The system was still running, open. In their hurry to evacuate, as Carl had predicted, none of the clerks had shut down their cogitators. No user codes to break no passkeys.

Carl punched up some data gates, and the screen showed entry to the main banks. Then he opened his document case and took out the compact codifier concealed inside. Carl connected it to the desk’s out-ports, and the little machine began to murmur and sigh.

Carl cracked his knuckles and prepared to type. “Any minute now...” he said.

Simultaneously, red warning lights lit up on every desk. A box appeared on the valve screens announcing a system overheat. The sabotage Kara and Nayl had performed on the rooftop radiator vanes was finally registering.

The Informium’s vast data system was programmed to hibernate if an overheat was experienced. It was automatic. The databases shut themselves down, and subsystems also disengaged, to try and compensate for the problem. The first routines to close off were the activity records. Which meant that any operation conducted during hibernation would not be logged. When the system came back up, there would be no trace at all of any tampering or adjustment.

Carl delicately loaded the graft program from his codifier. It sank into the Informium’s oceanic mass of data and vanished. Literally without trace.

But it would stay there, and through it, Carl would be able to access any material he needed.

“We’re done,” he voxed. “Extract yourselves.”

“Thank you. Sorry for your trouble.” Kys told the guards as she led Zael away across the entry and out into the night. They nodded goodbye.

The rain had eased a little. Zael was stripping off the second plastek palm, the one he’d worn under the first.

A transport pulled out of a side street opposite and drew up at the kerb. The cabin door popped open. At the wheel, Zeph Mathuin nodded to them.

“Good job, kid,” he said. “Get in.”

Kara and Nayl slithered down the metal roof. They had removed the insulation felts so the vanes could resume their normal function.

“Wanna try batting out?” Nayl voxed.

“Not in this wind. We’ll go over the wall on the fasteners.”

Nayl pulled out the climb anchors and fixed them to the inside lip of the roof balustrade. He handed a line to Kara.

“One sec,” she said. “Carl? We’re about to drop the east facade on fast gear. What’s the situation? Everyone out?”

“Just me inside still, and I’ll be out in a sec. Off you go—”

“Understood.”

Kara turned to Nayl. “Let’s drop,” she said.

They took their lines in their hands, double-tugged to make sure the anchors were locked, and walked backwards over the lip of the wall. Then they kicked free.

As they fell down the wet stone face of the Informium, the miniature winding gears took up and carefully moderated their plunge.

The alarm was over. The guards in the north portico of the Informium were thanking the visitors for their compliance and sending them on their way.

“Every one’s accounted for,” one of the guards called to the chief clerk.

“All the visitors?”

“All of them, every one.”

“Good job,” the clerk replied. “I’m scanning only one anomaly. Docent Wiggarr did not check in or out during the lock down.”

“Where’s Wiggarr?” the guard yelled out, his voice echoing across the marble space.

“Here, sir! Right here!” the docent cried, running forward.

“System says you didn’t check in or out,” the guard said.

“But I did, sir,” the docent replied. “As soon as the alarms went off, I went through the barrier to my assembly point.”

“With that?” the guard said, pointing.

The docent looked down. The ribbon pinned to his robe-front was pale yellow.

“Oh crap!” the docent said.

“Lock down! Lock down!” the guard yelled out, turning. “We have an intruder!”

The alarms began to bay again. The cages came down.

The Informium depository, for the second time in the same night, locked up tight.

FIVE

Carl Thonius heard the alarms shrilling. He sat up straight. "Oh, no," he whispered to himself. "No, no, no, no..." He began to unclip the codifier from the desk ports and put it away.

+Carl?+

"Everything's fine. It's fine."

+It's not. This isn't part of the plan.+

"These things happen. I can deal with it."

+The building's on lock-down. You need help.+

"No!" he snapped. "Honestly, sir. I'm on this. I can handle it." Carl closed the document case and realised his right hand was shaking. The tremors were intense, and he could only stifle them by grabbing his right hand with his left.

+Carl?+

"I can do this!"

Carl got up. Then he punched himself in the mouth. It was easier than he'd imagined. His right arm hadn't seemed like part of him since Flint. It was like someone else hitting him. It wasn't shaking anymore.

He took off his permit and tossed it into the waste-basket. Then he went out into the corridor, purposefully dribbling the blood from his split lips down his front.

Three guards ran up.

"That way! He went that way! He hit me!" Carl cried.

"Get into cover, sir!" the guard leader yelled, and they ran on.

I had a good remote view of Carl Thonius now. He was heading back towards the north entry. I could feel how much he wanted to do this, how much he wanted to prove himself. But his plan had just gone up in smoke. I didn't blame him. The unexpected came with the job.

+Carl. Stop it. Your plan's broken. You need my help.+

"I can do this!" he repeated.

+No. You can't. You've done a great job tonight, but I'm taking charge now. Do exactly what I tell you.+

The original version of the plan would have seen Carl sneak out the way he'd got in, but the cover had been blown on his stolen permit. Now we had to go with my version, the worst case version.

All right, not the worst case version. That involved Zeph and his rotator cannon. All the same, Carl was very unhappy as I told him what I wanted him to do.

"I don't like this," he whispered.

+Neither do I. It'll be a strain. Keep walking.+

The atrium was seething with security officers. The moment Carl passed the optic scanners at the gate, he'd be detected.

+Wait.+

A few guards passed through the barrier and began to spread out into the building, joining the search. We let a couple go by, Carl huddled back in a doorway, until one came along that was roughly his build and height.

+This one.+

Carl came out of cover behind the man, and felled him with a neat folded talon punch to the back of the neck.

+I could have done that.+

“Well, it wasn’t beyond me.”

+But you bruise like a ploid.+

Carl laughed mirthlessly and dragged the guard into a side office.

“Do I have to wear his awful clothes?”

+No. There’s no time. Just let me see his face.+

Carl rolled the man so he was staring up at him, and I wore Carl’s eyes for moment to get a clear view.

+All right. Are you ready?+

“Just do it.”

I reached out with my mind and gently began to knead the muscles of Carl’s face. He whimpered in discomfort. I slackened some, tightened others, caused flesh to swell and droop, pinched eyelids. His face was like clay.

It hurt him a lot.

“Are you done?” he slurred, his lips ill-fitting.

+Just about. It’ll do. You’ve got about five minutes before it starts to relax.+

“Throne, it hurts!”

+Move, Carl!+

He started back towards the gates, limping, coming into plain view and pushing past the banks of optical scanners.

Several guards turned and trained their weapons on him.

“Hold it, you... Jagson?”

“Bastard got me!” Carl slurred. “Bastard got me and took my kit!” \

The guards started to scramble towards the gate. “I’ve advised,” one yelled into his link. “Intruder may be disguised as staff security and using Jagson’s permit!”

Two of the men vaulted the gate in their hurry.

Carl limped on past them, ignored.

Almost.

“So why are you wearing his clothes?” another guard asked.

“Bastard left me bare-ass naked.” Carl growled, fighting to stop his unnaturally slackened lips from drooling.

“You okay?”

“Just need some air. Hit my head hard...”

Carl limped on. The exit arch of the portico seemed so far away.

+Keep going.+

Another fifty metres. Another forty. Moving as fast as he dared without drawing attention to himself.

Ten metres.

“Hey! Hey!”

Carl stopped and turned slowly. “What?”

“You want me to get a medicae to check you out, Jagson?”

“No thanks. Just let me catch my breath. I’ll be fine.”

Another few steps. The smell of the rain. The night air.

Carl was out.

A few at a time, they came back to me in the ruined stack hideaway. Patience and Zael first, followed by Zeph, who'd taken a few extra minutes to conceal his transport in a lockup storage hut.

+You did well.+

Patience nodded, and went into the mouldering bedroom to strip off her ragged clothes and put on something a little more Patience Kys.

"You too, Zael," I said, switching to transponder. The boy wasn't listening. He was trying to peer around the door into the room where Patience was changing.

Wystan Frauka put down his slate, leaned forward, and gently turned the boy's head to face me.

"Adults only, kiddo," he said.

Zael scowled, partly because his view had been deprived, mostly because Frauka had leaned back on the sofa and, under the show of reading his slate, taken a good, connoisseur's eyeful himself.

A kineblade whacked into the seat back beside Frauka's neck and quivered.

"Hey, just checking you were okay, Patti," Frauka said, A second kineblade thumped in beside the first. "Not a Patti. Right," said Frauka, unruffled, and turned back to his read and his latest smoke. The kineblades pulled themselves out and hovered back into the bedroom.

"You did well, Zael." I repeated.

"Did I?"

"How did you feel it went?"

"Okay?" he shrugged.

"You played your part."

"Yeah, like Mr Thonius said. With the faked-up hand prints. Is this what it's like?"

"What?"

"Being part of an inquisitor's warband?"

"Sometimes."

"There wasn't much... war."

"Then thank the Emperor for that." I told him. "Go get yourself some refreshment."

Zael wandered away and found the bags of salt rind and the swoter loaves we'd bought the night before.

Zeph came in, damp with rain.

"Any problems?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"Were you followed?"

He looked at me as if to question the temerity of such a suggestion.

"Watch the stairwell, please."

Zeph took out his handgun, armed it, and went back out into the dim hallway.

Twenty-eight minutes later, Nayl and Kara arrived. They came in and began to strip off their packs.

"Well done," I said.

"Is Carl out?" asked Kara.

"He's on his way."

"I heard there was a problem," Nayl said.

"Everything's fine. Carl got what we wanted."

Frauka tossed him a lit lho-stick and Nayl caught it in his teeth. "Sweet." Nayl said.

Carl Thonius arrived last. I heard some banter on the stairs, Zeph pretending he didn't recognise Carl and threatening to whale on him.

There was a heated exchange.

“That awful man’s a complete frigwit,” Carl said when he came in. Truth was, he didn’t look like Carl Thonius. Nor did he look like the guard whose visage I had moulded. The slackening had begun, the stroke-like collapse of muscle tension as the effect faded. Carl looked dreadful, and though the process was passing, it was painful as it wore off.

“Holy Throne,” said Patience.

“Just don’t look at me,” Carl said, and wandered into the bedroom.

+You did well, Carl. Really well.+

“Whatever.”

Alone in the bedroom, Carl sat down on a creaking chair in front of the dressing mirror and gazed at his face. Tears welled in his eyes as he tugged at the misshapen muscles and tissue with his fingertips.

He knew the suffering would end soon, and he’d get his face back. He tried to take his hands away, but the right hand stayed there, pinching and pulling at the flesh of his face.

He had to grip his right wrist with his left hand to drag it away.

He wanted to feel better. He’d fouled up. He’d been given a chance and he’d spoiled it. He wanted to feel better. There was a way. The way was in his coat pocket.

He knew he couldn’t do that here. Not in such an intimate billet.

But the craving...

“Carl?” Patience peered in around the door. “You okay?”

“I’ll be fine. Facial transfiguration by psionic manipulation is a complex process, painful, and may take many hours to relax. Four to five hours is the norm, after the initial slackening, though some tics and discomforts may be felt as long as forty-eight hours later.”

“The stuff you know,” she smiled.

Carl stared at himself in the dirty mirror. “I don’t know who I am anymore, Kys,” he said.

“Oh, that’s just the face thing,” she said, and pushed the door shut after her.

“Not what I meant,” he said at his reflection. “Not what I meant at all.”

SIX

It was a chilly morning, but at least they had been spared rain. The sky over Formal A in the heart of Petropolis lowered like grey smoke. When Deputy Magistratum Dersk Rickens got out of his matt-black transporter in the wide flagstone plaza of Templum Square, the first thing he noticed was the knot of onlookers gathered around the main doors of the grand templum, and the two uniformed officers keeping them out.

Rickens approached. He walked with a steel-shod cane, the legacy of an old line-of-duty injury. He observed the crowd. Mostly worshippers, the sick or the elderly, their sores plastered with faith paper, waiting to get into the grand templum to receive their daily blessings and the food provided by the almoners. But there were temple clerics too, young men in robes of scarlet and purple. They looked upset. Why weren't they being let inside?

The grand templum was an ancient, towering place, though it was dwarfed by the enormous Administry towers around it. It was just one of the tens of thousands of Ecclesiarchy temples and chapels in the wide city, but it was held in particular regard because of its location. It stood at what was popularly regarded as the precise geographical centre point of Petropolis, which made it the axis of all city life and faith. It was here that the primary religious services were held, here that the chief ministers and men of office observed the feast days and holy days, here that the nobility and the highborn were baptised, married and seen to their rest. It was here that the Lord Governors Subsector were inaugurated.

With a nod to the uniforms, Rickens went through the crowd and into the templum. He loved it in here: the delicious cool, the tobacco darkness, the coloured windows, the sense of boundless space. The domed vault was so high that the images of the God-Emperor and his primarchs painted up there were only half-visible in the candlelight.

Rickens advanced down the nave, his cane tapping against the marble tiles. He was just a tiny speck in that immensity. When his wife had passed away, he'd come here a lot, to sit and mourn in the tranquility.

Junior Marshal Plyton suddenly appeared at a door in the west end and hurried down to him the moment she saw him.

"Morning, sir. Sorry to call you in."

"Something you can't handle?"

"Something I think you should, sir."

Maud Plyton was a dark-haired woman in her early twenties, her slightly thickset frame curiously at odds with her delicate features. The functional duty uniform and harness she wore were not flattering to her build.

Rickens thought highly of her. She was a sharp-witted and extremely capable officer. It worried him that she thought this was something she couldn't deal with herself.

"Particulars?" he asked as they started to walk towards the west end.

"A senior cleric of the templum, Archdeacon Aulsman, has died."

"In here?"

"No, sir. In the old sacristy, actually, but I thought we should close the entire place until we've checked over everything."

“And what’s the answer to the question?” Rickens said. Plyton smiled. Rickens was the head of the Department of Special Crimes, the smallest and most underfunded of the hive’s Magistratum divisions. Their remit was essentially to investigate anything that did not fit into the procedural scope of the other departments. They got the odd, the weird, the nonsensical and, most often, the downright boring wastes of time nobody else wanted to be bothered with.

“The question,” was what Rickens always asked his officers. “Why us? Why has this been given to Special Crimes?”

“Because we don’t know what sort of crime it is, or even if it is a crime.” Plyton said. “The beat marshals who were first on the scene called it in to us because they didn’t know who else to vox.”

“I see.”

“There’s also the sensitivity issue, sir,” said Plyton. “That’s why I sent for you. The suspicious death of a senior cleric in what is, let’s face it, the most revered sacred building in the hive. I thought we should be seen to be dealing with it seriously.”

Smart woman, Rickens thought. They passed through the west entrance, and out along a wide exterior cloister to the door of the old sacristy. Though now regarded as a side chapel and annexe of the grand templum, the sacristy was actually an entirely separate building. It predated the templum itself by nearly three centuries, and had actually been the city’s original high church in the early years. As Petropolis expanded and grew, the sacristy was deemed too slight and small to properly serve a thriving hive-state, and the grand templum had been raised beside it, eclipsing it and turning it into just one of the many buildings — dormitories, almshouses, beneficent chapels and church schools - that clustered around the grand templum’s skirts.

They entered the sacristy. Though far smaller than the grand templum, it was still an impressive vault. The narrow dome was painted with gilt figures against a white field and this, together with the deep, clear-glass windows, made the place seem much lighter and brighter than the great temple.

But it also showed its great age, and the way it had been neglected in favour of its more splendid neighbour. Plaster peeled, and there were patches of damp on the limed walls. The stone flooring was worn, and the slabs cracked and uneven.

Rickens saw the scaffolding at once. It was hard to miss it, especially because of the man hanging by the neck from the upper platform.

“That the reverend cleric?” asked Rickens. “Or is there something you’re not telling me?”

“That’s him,” Plyton said. “We left him in situ while we covered the scene. *Medicae mortus* and forensic fysik are waiting to move in.”

“He hanged himself,” Rickens said.

“He hanged to death, yes,” replied Plyton. “More than that, we don’t know. Suicide, murder, accident...” She shrugged.

The scaffolding was a huge structure that reached right up into the bowl of the dome. Pews had been cleared aside to accommodate it. Drip sheets had been stretched out, and there were piles of unassembled scaffolding, along with artist’s equipment and pails of paint and lime. Two more of Rickens’ junior marshals were present, Broers and Rodinski. Broers was standing beside a long-haired young man in paint-spattered overalls who was sitting on a pew.

“What do we know?” Rickens asked.

“The sacristy is undergoing cleaning and restoration, sir,” said Plyton. “Archdeacon Aulsman was responsible for supervising and approving the work.”

“Who’s the young man?”

“A limner. Name’s Yrnwood. Part of the restoration team working on the dome. He’s eager, very skilled, I think, loves his work. He came in early this morning, to put in a few extra hours. It seems he found something up there, sir. When Aulsman looked in to see how he was getting on, Yrnwood took him up the scaffolding and showed him what he’d found. And then...”

“Then?”

“Yrnwood’s not making much sense. Aulsman was troubled, apparently. Upset. Before Yrnwood understood what was happening, the archdeacon had fallen off the scaffolding. Either he got tangled in a trailing rope on the way down, or it was already around his neck. Anyway, here we are.”

“And you make of it what?” Rickens asked her.

“Like I said. A nasty accident. An unconventional suicide. Or someone — and the fingers would point at Yrnwood — killed him.”

Rickens looked around the sacristy again. There was something about the place that had always made him feel uncomfortable. In the days immediately after his wife’s passing, he’d come here first, assuming the sacristy would be more private and soothing than the grand templum. But for all its lime-wash white and glowing gilt, it had seemed oppressive. Enclosing. After a few visits, he’d taken to sitting in the umbran shadows of the grand templum instead.

“If Aulsman killed himself, we’ll soon know,” Rickens said.

“I’ve already got Limbwall running background checks,” Plyton said. “Trying to turn up any private troubles.”

“Tell him to be thorough. Secret debts. Hidden illness. The usual things, up to and including shameful secrets involving altar boys or dining hall waitresses.”

“Of course.”

“Thorough, but circumspect, Plyton. I want to find secrets, not create a juicy scandal.”

“Sir.”

Rickens tapped his way over to Broers and the young man. The young man was very handsome, in a wild, artistic way. Long, agile fingers, long hair romantically flecked with dots of paint. A long face, narrow and bony, with the sort of stark cheekbones Rickens had last seen on himself in his graduation pict. Magistratum Induction, class of seventy-two. *Two hundred and seventy-two*.

I’m getting old, Rickens thought.

“Rickens, Special Crime. What can you tell me, Master Yrnwood?”

The young limner looked up. His eyes were wet with tears, and he was shaking. “He just fell off.”

“Why did he fall?”

“He was upset. I’d showed him what I’d found. It surprised me too, of course. But when he saw it, he... he just went to pieces. He was shouting these things I didn’t understand and—”

“What had you found, Master Yrnwood?”

“The other ceiling, sir.”

Rickens looked up at the dome and then back down at the restorer. “Other ceiling?”

Yrnwood swallowed. “I’ve been working on the dome for weeks now. Replacing the gilt where the damp had got to it. It’s bad in places. You have to lie on your back on the scaffold and work above you. It’s tiring on the arms.”

“I bet.”

“Some parts have just collapsed. I mean, the lime plaster’s like wet paper, and just hanging off. There was a particularly bad bit up there.”

The limner rose and pointed to a shadowy black stain on the roof just above the golden shoulder of Saint Kiodrus.

“It was really going, with the recent rains, so I came in early to try and seal it before it spread. I got up there, and it just came away.”

Rickens saw a splattered mess of old plaster and shredded mulch on the sacristy floor under the scaffolding.

“I thought for a second the whole dome was going to fall on me.” Yrnwood went on. “Then I saw the hole. It’s quite big. A hole right through the dome. So I got a lamp and looked up through it.”

“What did you see, Master Yrnwood.”

“The other roof, like I said. This dome is a false ceiling. There’s a cavity up there, and beyond it. There’s a whole other dome about two metres above it. It’s painted. I mean, the frescos are beautiful. So very old. There’s no record of it. I mean, it must have been hidden up there for centuries. Centuries! Why would they cover something like that over? Why doesn’t anyone know about it?”

“This is what you showed the archdeacon?”

Yrnwood nodded glumly. “He was intrigued. Excited, when I told him. He climbed up, and borrowed my light. Looked through. Then he simply went... mad.”

“Describe mad.”

“He came back out of the hole, and first off he was just murmuring and shaking. Then he started shouting, and threw the lamp at me. I ducked. I didn’t want to fall. Next thing I knew—”

“He was dead.”

Yrnwood nodded.

Rickens looked around at his juniors. “Anyone else taken a look?”

Broers and Rodinski shrugged. “Not yet, sir.” Plyton admitted.

“Maud,” Rickens said. “There’s no way in the world I’m going to get up there. With my hip.”

Plyton nodded. Rickens only called her Maud when he really needed her. She stripped off her gloves, unhooked her helmet from her belt, tossed the gloves inside it and handed it to Broers. Then she slid out her power maul and gave that to him too.

“Be careful,” Rickens said.

“I’ve a head for heights,” she grinned.

“That’s not actually what I mean.” Rickens muttered.

Plyton started up the scaffold ladder. The entire structure trembled slightly as she went. The lashed ladders zigzagged up the scaffolding frame.

The air had become very cold by the time she reached the top platform. The last part of the climb had taken her right up past Aulsman’s body, so close she had looked into his bloodshot eyes and seen the swollen, mauve flesh of his throttled face. His body had begun to pendulum slightly from the vibrations of her ascent.

Maud Plyton had no head for heights at all, but she was damned if she’d let her beloved superior down. The floor of the chapel was so far away now, the figures looking up at her were the size of dolls.

“Crap,” she whispered, as she finally dared to rise to her feet on the top platform. So high up. The platform boards did not quite meet, and she could see the drop between them. That was so much worse. That, and the vibration.

Look up, she told herself. The dome was just above her face. What had looked splendid and golden from the ground was mouldering and rotten close up. She could smell the decay, see the gilt tissue peeling like scabs from the blind faces of disintegrating worthies. Saint Kiodrus’ face had discoloured so much that it looked as dark and dead as the archdeacon’s.

Left hand out for balance, Plyton walked along the boards, plucking her service stablight from her belt and switching it on. The tight bright lance shone like a las-beam in the cool gloom.

She saw the hole, the mucky, blackened puncture in the ceiling. The smell of rot was more intense here. Old air, stagnant like water that had stood too long. The smell wafted out of the hole.

She looked up through the hole, aiming her light.

“Oh, Holy Throne...” she said.

“Plyton?” her vox-link buzzed. “Plyton, what can you see?”

“Another ceiling, sir,” she said. “Like the man said. A whole other dome above this one. It extends... Throne, I can’t see how far. So old, so very old...”

Golden images, figures, faces, intagliated beams, lapis lazuli and pure selpic, ornate lettering in traced silver, lines and constellations, a hint of some vast organised chart that covered the ceiling.

“Plyton? Maud?”

“Sir, it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

SEVEN

Two days after Carl's successful penetration of the Informium Depository, my team took up occupation of a rented townhouse in the ninth ward of Formal E.

The house was called Miserimus, and it was a dank, sulking manse of rain-eaten ouslite and formstone that stood in a quiet up-stack neighbourhood of private gardens and secluded mansions.

The lease was acquired in the name of Morten Narvon. The forename was that of a childhood friend of Nayl's, the family name that of the first boy Kara had kissed. Carl Thonius' devious concealed graft program had done the rest, including transferring down-payment from an obscured account to the rental guild. Hidden within the Informium's data-core, the graft program could now provide anything we needed, not falsified but genuinely created by the unimpeachable archive of all records. It was superb work, but I think none of us showed proper appreciation to Carl. It was the sort of thing we expected from him. He remained sullen and unhappy about the way things had gone.

The empty halls and chambers of the unfurnished townhouse were cold and unfamiliar, but it was a home of sorts, a safe house. We settled in. Carl and Patience went out and purchased some simple items of furniture to make it liveable. They used false names and false accounts provided by the graft. In those first few days, that became the game. My friends would sit around and dream up alter egos, and Carl would tap his codifier, send them through the Informium's data-wash, and make them real. It cheered him up somewhat to amuse the others with his skill.

There was a tension however. An apprehension about the task ahead. We had names, most of which Skoh had provided: Akunin, Vygold, Marebos, Foucault, Strykson, Braeden. Each one the shipmaster of a rogue trader. Each one a member of the Contract Thirteen cartel.

"Search them down." I told Carl. "Find out if any are logged as on planet. Find me backgrounds and trade histories. Find me connections. What links them?"

Carl nodded.

"You have the Informium at your disposal now, Carl. The central registry of data in this subsector. And you can use it to sift and search it invisibly. Do so."

Carl had set up in the east bedroom, his equipment resting on packing cases. His cogitators had a vapour link to the local wireless mast (registered, via the graft, to an invented rickshaw firm) and dry ground splices to the main civic data conduits in the street outside, courtesy of a midnight pavement excavation by Nayl and Zeph. He also had click-links to the municipal vox system and landlines.

"What else am I looking for?" he asked.

"Links to the Ministry of Subsector Trade." I replied. "Anything fuzzy, anything irregular. Jader Trice especially. We can't be sure, but there's a better than good chance he knew he was sending us downriver into a death trap when he teamed us with his agents last year. Who knows? Trice may be clean and the conspiracy might be operating at a level below him. But I met him and I doubt it. By the same token, look upwards."

"At the lord governor?"

"At the lord governor. If Barazan himself is involved, I need to know as soon as possible. It makes our action here so much harder if this rot has spread to the very top."

"I'll get to work," Carl said.

"One last thing," I said. "See what you can recover concerning the Divine Fraternity."

Carl nodded again. I'd told him everything about the warning my once-mentor Eisenhower had delivered on Malinter, six months earlier. *Thorn* had been quite specific. The Divine Fraternity, a cult of seers based on Nova Durma, who delighted in farseeing the future and then manipulating it to their own dark ends, had seen something — a prospect — that concerned either me or one of my team. We would awaken something here on Eustis Majoris before the end of the year, which was just a few short months away now, and the Imperium would pay dearly for that mistake. The danger went by the name of Slyte or Sleight or Sleet or something of that form. I hated farseers. I'd done enough farseeing myself in my early days with the eldar to know that way led only to madness.

I was also concerned about the Cognitae connection. The Cognitae was — is — a cult school for genius heretical minds ran nearly a century before by a witch named Lilean Chase. My nemesis, the now-dead Zygmunt Molotch, had been a pupil of that school. Though shut down, its hand was in everything, stirring, tainting, fiddling. So many of its brethren were out there, unrecognised. I had encountered a shipmaster on my way into Lucky Space, a man named Siskind. He had been of the Cognitae bloodline, and his cousin, Kizary Thekla, master of the *Oktober Country*, had been the primary architect of our fate at Bonner's Reach.

Although deceased, one member of the Contract Thirteen cartel had enjoyed strong Cognitae associations. It made me worry. Were we entering a war as bloody and deceitful as the campaign we had waged against the bastard Molotch?

I left Carl to his work, and glided along the empty halls of the townhouse. In one room, I saw Kara working out against a makeshift punch bag. Her compact, voluptuous body was clad only in tight shorts and a vest, and it moved wonderfully as she slammed blow after blow at the target. I so resented my enclosed state.

Nearby, Wystan Frauka was asleep on a window seat. I pinched my mind and extinguished his still-burning lho-stick as I slid past. In the next room, Kys and Zeph sat either side of an upturned box and played regicide. Kys was laughing coyly. I sensed how much she was attracted to Mathuin, and how little of that infatuation he realised.

In the next room down the hall, Harlon Nayl, stripped to the waist, was standing before a trestle table on which the tools of his trade were laid out. Autoguns, laspistols, bolters, sense-rifles, grenades, daggers and estocs, throwing darts, revolvers, pump-guns, sting-blunts, synapse disruptors, ammo drums, mags, individual loads, a matched pair of fighting poniards, a longlas, an Urdeshi-made assault weapon.

I watched him as he selected each weapon in turn, spun it, slammed home a clip, aimed, dry-fired, then unloaded swiftly and cleaned. It was like watching a conjurer at work, a cardsharp. So smooth, so deft. So certain. He reached down and grabbed a twinned set of nine mil Hostec 5 autos, burnished in gold, raised them, one in each hand, spun them forward, spun them back—*Click! Clack! Click!* - smacked them into grip, forward spun them again and then set them down.

I wasn't the only one watching. In the corner of the room, I spied Zael. He was staring in awe at Nayl's activities.

"What do they do?" he asked.

"The 5's? They kill folk."

"How?"

"Your basic squeeze and forget. Self-aiming. One touch drains the clip. Here's the slide, see?"

"Where?"

Nayl beckoned him over and racked back the top of one of the golden pistols. "See, the ejector port here? The safety? Here's where the mag loads in..."

I left them to their study.

One final room to visit, and I did so only with my mind. The "guest bedroom". Locked, the room was bare except for a wooden chair in the middle of the room. Skoh sat on the chair, his wrists manacled, and the manacles secured by a long chain to an iron peg Mathuin had secured through a

floor joist. The chain gave him enough slack to walk around the chair, or lie down beside it on a blanket. The window, the door and the walls were out of reach.

We checked on him regularly. He never seemed to do anything except sleep, or sit silently on the chair, staring at the wall. It was tempting to think he was broken and harmless. But Skoh was a huntsman, one of the very best, and that meant he excelled at stillness and patience.

I knew he was only waiting for us to make a mistake.

My link bipped. It was Carl.

“Tchaikov,” he said. “Keeps coming up. If not banker to the cartel, then money launderer at the very least.”

“We thought as much. Can we get anything on her?”

“No, it’s a dead connect. I can’t hack her systems. We’ll have to face-to-face with her.”

“Understood.”

“She fronts a fabric import place in Formal K.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go. But we have to be careful.”

“Careful. I couldn’t agree more.”

Carl and I had not been idle during our months spent in transit aboard Unwerth’s vessel. We had been preparing the ground, investigating, searching data, developing evidence. All inquisitors do this. If they tell you they don’t, they’re either lying or incompetent. I know for a fact my old mentor Eisenhorn would spend months, years sometimes, locking together the intricate webs of data that supported his investigations. Any effort of the Inquisition founders immediately if the ground is not well prepared.

I had a back-file of data on Contract Thirteen that filled twenty-six slates. Carl and I charted the threads together on a tri-D strategium that Fyflank rigged up in the belly hold of the *Arethusia*. Such an obedient, capable creature, that man-hound. I am sure Unwerth underestimates him.

Two light-days out from Eustis Majoris, Carl and I finally settled on our preferred strategy. The names, the places, the links. Where we would look first. As an analogy, imagine a verthin nest. You know the thing — that great hummock of chewed material, populated by a billion billion stinging insects. Stick a probe in, dig it in, and you’ll be stung badly by a swarm of soldier verthin, most of which you have no business with. Petropolis is like that. You need to be delicate, careful, extend your probes without hostility into the bowels to get results.

There has to be a careful process of enquiry and inspection, divulging secrets without the keepers of those secrets knowing you’ve exposed them. Delicacy is the key.

That’s why we had the strategy. None of us wanted to get stung.

We would put it together, carefully, piece by piece.

Now Tchaikov seemed to be the first.

The hard-nose round struck a steel cabinet, glanced off, and started to tumble. It passed through a stack of files on the nearby desk and hit Harlon Nayl in the upper left arm, deformed and flat-on.

There was a puff of blood and a spatter of meat and Nayl started to fall, growling in pain.

So much for bloody careful.

“You snotwipe,” spat Patience Kys and pinned the moody hammer’s neck to the doorpost with two kineblades.

Dying, twitching, he dropped the autopistol, blue smoke still spilling from its muzzle.

Nayl came up behind the desk, his left arm streaming with blood, and fired his Tronsvasse Heavy twice. A second hammer folded and fell hard as he came in through the door.

“We’ve started something.” Nayl grimaced.

“No, d’you think?” Kys replied.

Las-rounds started to whip down the hallway outside. They broke in blossoms of orange flame as they impacted.

+Where's Tchaikov?+

"No, honestly, I'm fine thanks." Nayl growled, returning fire on auto. His weapon made a dull, dead sound in the enclosed chamber.

"I've got her." Kara reported.

She was in the corridor outside, overlooking the vast loading bay of the fabric importer warehouse, high in stack 567 of Formal K. There was the tiny, round-shouldered figure of Tchaikov, scurrying away under escort to a waiting flier. Already, the massive exit hatch of the bay was winching open on thick, catenary chains.

Kara leapt off the balcony into the bay, somersaulting, an Urdeshi machine pistol in each hand.

She was firing before she even landed. Her caseless rounds stripped through the hammers around Tchaikov, bursting blood steam into the cold air of the dock, dropping them like stones.

Tchaikov turned.

She was tall, her black hair pinned in a bun, her face sheathed behind a molidiscu mask of silver velvet. She wore a long gown of embroidered ordskin that swirled around her like gleaming smoke as she faced Kara. Gold and red and pamaganter. Her long legs were bound in white linen, her feet arched high on brass clogs.

"Face to face," Kara said, tossing the empty machine pistols away to either side so they slithered across the deck. "And research says...?"

+Carl is sure her favoured weapon is the litoge whip.+

"Let's hope Carl's right." Kara replied, drawing the shivered sword sheathed over her back.

The sword had been mine — when I'd been a wielder of such hand weapons — long ago. Forged so hard by the hammers of master smiths, the blade had been knocked slightly sideways in time, so it resonated and shivered against the mundane now.

A beautiful weapon, and Kara Swole was beautiful enough to wield it.

Tchaikov produced her weapon. A litoge whip, just as Carl had predicted. Eight metres of thin, coiling, sentient iron, manufactured by an abominable race who dwelt deep in the outworlds.

The winding length of the whip curled in the air and flew at Kara, hungry.

She swept up with the sword, and took a metre off the whip. The cut length fell to the deck, its fused end fizzling.

Tchaikov cried out and lashed again. Another two metres of living metal flew away, smouldering at the cut.

Tchaikov ripped out yet again with her truncated weapon, and this time the shorn tip glanced away from Kara's block.

"Got anything else, bitch?" Kara said, her hand braced on the raised shivered sword.

Tchaikov dropped the litoge whip. It fell dead on the deck.

She turned and reached a hand out towards the open hatchway of her flier.

A sword flew into her grasp. It was a power-weapon, the blade wide and long, the grip double-handed, keyed to her response. Even from a distance, I could smell and taste its thirst. Blood. It was vampire steel, hungry and insolent.

"I have *this*, bitch." Tchaikov replied, and executed a flourish with the blade.

Holding her shivered sword up in her right hand, Kara beckoned with the fingers of her left.

"Then let's go," she said.

"Well, this is unexpectedly annoying." Carl Thonius said.

"What is?" I asked.

"This," he said, indicating the engraved glass cube sitting on the top of an otherwise plain burrwood desk in Tchaikov's private quarters.

“Oh, good.” I replied. “For a moment I thought you were still banging on about the slight tear in your furnzi mantle.”

He looked wounded, and glanced sadly at the pulled threads on the hem of his expensive, fur-lined cape. He’d caught it on a doorpost coming in.

“Well, that is a dreadful crime. I love this mantle so. But I had put it out of my mind and moved on to other doings. How shallow do you think I am?”

“Want me to answer that?” I replied. “We’re raiding a premises, and you come dressed up for a gaudy night.”

Carl adored fine clothes, and prided himself on his turn-out. For this endeavour, where the rest of the team were wearing bodygloves and wire armour, he’d chosen the mantle, a silk blouse embroidered with silver thread, perskin pantaloons and little slippers of gold crepe.

“You can talk,” he said. “You got dressed up too.”

It was true. I had. I was waring Zeph Mathuin. My physical form was a considerable distance away, in Miserimus House, watched over by Wystan and Zael. My mind had possessed Mathuin’s body for the duration of the mission.

Waring is a skilful, strange activity. I am able to ware almost anyone, though the level of trauma for both me and the subject increases dramatically if they are unwilling. I hardly ever used Nayl, Kys or Carl this way, except in emergencies: it was too much like hard work. Kara was more pliant, though waring left her weary and strung out. For some reason, Zeph was the most usable candidate in my team. I could slip in and out of his mind with a minimum of pain. He never objected. It was one of the reasons he remained in my employ.

Waring gave me a physical presence I otherwise lacked, and the opportunity to empty the skills and talents of the subject directly. Zeph Mathuin was a tall and powerful man, an ex-bounty hunter like Nayl. His skin was dark, and his black hair tightly braided out down his back. His eyes were little unreadable coals of red-hard light. His left hand was a polished chrome augmetic tool. He was a mystery, his past a secret, a blank. Even from inside his mind, I knew little about him expect that which he was prepared to tell me. I never probed. Mathuin worked for me because he liked the work and he was good at it. He could keep his secrets: that was all that mattered.

Clothed in his flesh, I felt strong and vital. I felt the weight of his leather stormcoat hanging from his shoulders, I felt the solidity of the matt-black Bakkhaus laspistol in his right hand, I felt the beat of his heart as if it were my own.

“What is it?” I asked, gesturing with Mathuin’s hand at the cube.

“Unless I’m mistaken — which I’m not — it’s a gullivat riddle box. Rare. Priceless, actually. It explains a lot.”

“I’m glad. Now you explain a lot.”

Thonius shrugged. “It explains why we’re here. We were forced to mount this raid because I couldn’t hook in to Tchaikov’s data systems covertly from outside. Couldn’t get a line, not even the whiff of data heat. This is why. She doesn’t use a data system.”

“Not at all?”

“You see any cogitators? Any codifiers? Any data engines at all?”

He was right. The room was devoid of any computation devices. There wasn’t even any electrical wiring, no ports, no vox links, nothing. Tchaikov ran her entire operation on paper, the old-fashioned way. There was nothing that could be hacked or broken into.

“She’s from Punzel. They pride themselves on mental rigour there, the old ways. Didn’t you see the abacus frames the warehouse stackers were using as we came in?”

I had.

“Plus, of course, the records suggest Tchaikov was Cognitae-trained. The Cognitae use machines as little as possible, preferring to trust their own minds.”

“Indeed.”

“We could take her paper files — if we had a bulk lifter — and check through them, but I can tell you now, they’d only be legit accounts and manifests. Her secrets are in here. Stored in a non-electronic format.”

I raised Zeph’s pistol and head shot a moody hammer who had run into the chamber behind Carl.

Carl flinched. “Throne! Some warning, if you don’t mind!”

“You mean like ‘Look out Carl, there’s a man behind you with a gun, oops too late, he’s shot you’? That kind of thing?”

“Smart ass. You know about riddle boxes, don’t you?”

“Not really.”

He stroked the edges of the glass cube gently. “They were made by the gullivat three thousand years ago, before they suffered their cultural backslide. The gullivat are now a proto-primitive race unable to fathom the mechanisms they created. They adored secrets and puzzles. Indeed, to this day, no one knows why their culture collapsed in the first place. The riddle boxes are artefacts. They come up for sale, once in a while. I doubt Tchaikov was rich enough to buy one. The cartel must have given her this to run their dealings.”

“How does it work?”

“It’s inert, a crystal cube within a crystal cube within a crystal cube, et cetera. There’s no way of knowing how many layers it has. Usually, they are built with anything from ten to seventeen layers. You see the figures carved into the sides?”

“Yes?”

“The riddle box must be turned, each layer in sequence, carefully rotated, until a final alignment is made. Then it opens. Inside, there will be a codex stone, the size of a small pebble, a perfect glass sphere onto which all Tchaikov’s secrets are etched in microscopic form.”

I glanced around. Outside, in a nearby hall, I could hear Nayl and Kys engaging fiercely with the last of Tchaikov’s household guards.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “It could be just a curio, an ornament.”

Carl shook his head. He pointed to a side table on which sat a complex instrument that looked like a microscope to me. “There’s the reader. You place the sphere in here, and study it via the scope. And look, here’s the etching needle mount that swings in when she wants to add new information.”

“So we just break it open.” I suggested.

“It’s constructed to grind the sphere clean if the cubes are tampered with.”

“I see. So why didn’t Mamzel Tchaikov take this vital piece of data storage with her?”

“Because they’re not called riddle boxes for no reason,” Carl said. “Unless you know the key, they’re utterly impossible to open.”

I was about to retort, but a las-round ripped across the chamber between us and hit the far wall, bringing down a silk hanging. Two house guards, both hammers of the K Bright clan, had burst in through the west door, weapons up. I started to turn, but Carl had already swung round, bringing up the Hecuter 6 Will Tallow-hand had given him years before.

The 6 barked loudly, its fatnose rounds slamming both hammers back off their feet in showers of gore. Empty casings tinkled onto the marble floor. Carl walked over to the twitching bodies, and put a round through each one’s forehead.

Carl Thonius was famously unhappy around guns. In fact, he was all but allergic to combat and physical confrontation. He was a thinker — a near-genius thinker — not a doer, and that was partly what endeared him to me and made me choose him as my interrogator. Let Nayl and the others handle the bloodshed. Carl’s worth was his mind and all the skills that lay within it.

Indeed, he'd never fired his weapon in anger before that awful night on Flint, a year ago, and then only in desperation. Now he used it with the nerve and confidence of a seasoned gunslinger. I was impressed, and not a little unnerved.

"You've been practising," I said.

"Oh, you know..." he replied, bashfully bolstering the piece. "The cosmos moves on and all that. Besides, I was tired of you taking the piss all the time."

"Me?"

"No, Mathuin."

"This box, Carl. Who has the key?"

He smiled. "My guess... Tchaikov and Tchaikov alone."

+Kara. Whatever you do, don't kill Tchaikov.+

"Not actually a problem." Kara Swole replied, diving sideways in order to keep her head attached to her shoulders. Tchaikov's vampiric blade raked sparks from the metal deck. "Any chance you could give this bitch the same advice, vis-à-vis me?"

+She's wearing some sort of damper. I can't get in. Sorry.+

"I had to ask."

Kara leapt up and around, and cycled with the shivered sword, but Tchaikov was there to deflect the strike — a ringing chime — and then plough under with a gut-stab.

The very tip of the power blade managed to slice into Kara's midriff armour and draw blood before she managed to cartwheel clear.

Tasting blood, the vampire sword began to scream.

"Soon," Tchaikov said, patting the sweating blade.

Kara landed stuck, feet wide, shivered sword horizontal at forehead height, left arm extended. Tchaikov turned her back and then came in again, sweeping up and low as she twisted. The blades met... once, twice, three times, four times, parry and redirect.

"It's tasted you now." Tchaikov spat. "This is over."

Kara blocked two more strokes, then staggered back, gasping. She clutched her belly and stared in disbelief. Blood was leaving her body. It was leaving her body through the cut, tumbling in droplets through the air, the slow arc of red drizzle pulled towards Tchaikov's blade.

Kara fell on her knees. Her blood was flying out of her now, like red streamers, flowing towards the thirsty sword, collecting like dew on the blade.

It was sucking her dry.

"Throne!" Kara gasped. "Help me..."

Patience Kys landed on the loading deck with a thump. Her kineblades orbited about her body like pilot fish around a shark. She blinked and they flew forward at Tchaikov... and then clattered to the deck, dead, a few metres from her. Tchaikov's damper had cancelled out Kys' telekinesis.

"Oh gods!" Kara cried, falling onto her side, trying to stop the blood from leaving her body with her hands.

Patience ran forward a few steps, but Tchaikov turned and aimed the point of the blade at her.

"You be next, witch," she warned.

"No, I'll be next," said Harlon Nayl. He staggered onto the dock through one of the inner gates, his bloody left arm limp at his side. His right hand raised and aimed his Tronsvasse Heavy.

Tchaikov turned to face him, Kara's lifeblood drooling off her blade.

Nayl fired. Tchaikov swung the sword and deflected the shot so it ricocheted away across the warehouse and buried itself in a bale of fabric.

Nayl fired again, and again Tchaikov knocked the round aside in mid-air with her sword.

Nayl nodded, impressed. "A guy like me could grow to love a woman who can do that," he said.

Tchaikov bowed slightly in acknowledgement, and then readdressed, her sword upright in both hands, angled over her right shoulder.

Nayl raised his handgun again and slid his thumb across the selector lever.

“How do you do on full auto?” he asked.

The gun began to fire, roaring, one squeeze of the trigger unloading the full clip at auto-max. To her credit, Tchaikov parried the first three shots.

The fourth hit her in the left thigh, the fifth took off her right leg at the knee. She fell and the rest went wide.

The sword clattered to the deck, and then began to inch itself towards the pool of hot blood spreading from Tchaikov’s severed leg. It rattled itself into the pool and began to drink.

Tchaikov moaned, twitching.

Nayl bolstered his weapon and walked over to her. He squeezed his gunshot left arm with his right hand and splattered blood onto the ground. The sword writhed and turned, scenting a fresh victim. It slithered towards Nayl.

He squeezed his wound harder and more blood spurted out. That was too much for the sword. It flew at him.

He side-stepped, and caught it by the hilt as it flew by. As soon as it was in his hand, he wrenched round violently and swung it down into the deck.

It took three, savage blows before the blade finally shattered. By then, the deck was deeply gouged. The blade wailed as it died.

Nayl threw the broken hilt away. He walked over to Tchaikov.

“The key, please,” he said.

“Never!” she hissed.

“You’re bleeding out fast, mamzel,” he noted.

“Then I will die,” she replied, her rapid breath wafting her molidiscu mask.

“Doesn’t have to be that way,” Nayl said.

“What? Are you proposing to save me? Spare me? Get me to the medicaes?”

Nayl shook his head. He reloaded his handgun and aimed it at her right temple. “My offer is to make it quick. One brief instant of pain compared to a slow, lingering death.”

Tchaikov gasped. “You are a man of honour, sir. I thank you. The key is five-two-eight six-five.”

“And thank you,” Nayl said. He rose and began to walk away.

“I gave you the key!” Tchaikov cried. “Now do as you promised! Finish me!”

Nayl continued to walk.

“All right! All right!” Tchaikov called. “Five-eight-two six-five! That’s the key! The real key! I lied before, but that’s the real truth! Now kill me! End this pain! Please!”

Nayl kept walking. “Still going to check,” he said.

EIGHT

Wystan Frauka heard the low warble of the detector alarm. He shot a look at Zael and put a finger to his lips, then he got up, took a chromed autosnub from his jacket pocket, and went over to the portable vox.

He pushed the set's "active" key.

"Yes?"

"It's us. Screen down, pop the locks and let us in."

Frauka turned to the portable console nearby which controlled the security screens Harlon had set up around Miserimus House and deactivated them. He also turned the auto-locks.

"Clear," he said into the vox.

A minute or two later the five figures came tramping up the stairs. Zeph Mathuin led the way, followed by Thonius, who was carrying some kind of glass box.

"How did it go?" Frauka asked Mathuin, knowing full well that it wouldn't be Mathuin who replied. Ravenor's dormant chair sat in the corner of the room where Frauka had been keeping company through the evening with Zael.

"Badly," said Ravenor in Mathuin's voice. "We got what we needed, but it turned into a bloodbath."

Zael had got to his feet, and was now staring wide-eyed at the returners. Nayl had a messy wound in the arm, and he was half-carrying Kara, who looked pale and ill.

"This is beyond our basic medical ability," said Ravenor. "We're going to need a physician. Someone who won't ask questions."

"I'll go find one," said Kys grimly.

"I know where to find one," said Zael. They all looked at him. "I come from here, remember? I know a guy."

"Very well," said Kys to the boy. "You're with me."

They hurried out. Nayl took Kara to one of the bedrooms and made her comfortable.

"Carl, get to work deciphering the contents of the box," Ravenor said. "Oh, and check on Skoh too, please."

Thonius nodded and hurried away with his prize.

Ravenor sat Mathuin's body down in a battered armchair.

"Not a good night then?" Frauka said.

"Tchaikov's security was on a hair trigger. The moment they thought something was wrong, they just went off. It was bloody. We ended up torching the place to cover our tracks."

"You burned it down?" Frauka asked laconically, lighting a lho-stick.

"There were a lot of bodies," Ravenor said. "The longer it takes anyone to figure out what happened, the better. Tchaikov was a powerful underworld figure. From the mess we left, people will suspect she ran foul of a rival operation."

Mathuin sighed. Ravenor had just released him. He blinked and looked up at Frauka.

"Hey, Wyst," he said. He got to his feet. "I'm hungry," he muttered, and left the room.

The support chair hummed and swung around, prowling across the room towards Frauka.

"So Nayl took a bullet?" Frauka said. "What happened to the redhead?"

"Some kind of warped blade."

“All in a night’s work.”

“I suppose so. I’m going to check on her, then I’d better help Thonius unravel the data.”

“Uh, before you go...” Frauka began.

“Yes, Wystan?”

“While you were all gone, the boy seemed to get a bit edgy. So I stayed with him, just chatting, you know.”

“Improving your people skills?”

“Whatever.” Frauka took a drag on his lho-stick. He seemed uncomfortable, as if not sure how to say something. “We talked about this and that, his past, growing up here. I think coming back to Eustis Majoris has woken up some memories. He was telling me about his granna, and his sister.”

“Well, I’m glad he was able to confide in y—”

Frauka held up a hand and waved it gently. “No, it’s not that. Do you know what his name is?”

“Of course.” Ravenor replied. “It’s Zael Efferneti. One of the first things he told me.”

“Yeah,” said Frauka. “Efferneti. His father’s family name. But in our little chat tonight, it just slipped out that Zael’s ma and pa never actually applied for a marriage license from the state.”

“So he was born out of wedlock. So what?”

“Well, just as a technicality, that would mean his surname should actually be his mother’s family name, not his father’s, the one he adopted. Right?”

“Right. But it is just a technicality. Why do you think that’s important?”

“Because it turns out his mother’s family name,” said Wystan Frauka, “was Sleet.”

Thonius unlocked the door and looked in. Skoh sat on the chair. The hunter slowly turned his head and looked at Carl.

“Food?” he asked.

“We’re a little busy. We’ll get to it.”

Skoh raised his manacled hands slightly. “Getting cramp in my wrists again. Bad cramp.”

“All right,” said Carl with a sigh. He walked into the room until he was just beyond the reach of the floor chain. “Show me.”

Skoh raised his hands, to show that both of the heavy steel manacles were locked tight around his wrists.

Carl nodded, took the key from his pocket and tossed it to Skoh. The hunter caught it neatly, unlocked his manacles, and growled with relief. He nursed and rubbed his wrists, flexing them and stretching them out. “Hell, that’s better.”

“That’s enough,” said Carl.

Skoh finished his stretching, and locked the manacles in place again. He tossed the key back to Carl.

“Show me.”

Skoh repeated his gesture, raising his hands so that Carl could clearly see the manacles were tight and secure.

Carl walked out of the room, and locked the door behind him. His right hand was shaking again. The raid at Tchaikov’s had been a real adrenaline rush, a real ride. He’d done well, he’d got what Ravenor needed. But Skoh had brought him down hard. Something about the hunter freaked Thonius out, even when he was locked up.

Carl had a sour taste in his mouth and his heart was knocking. He knew he had to get back downstairs and start work on the riddle box. But he wanted to smooth his wits out first.

He went into bathroom, pulled the bolt on the door, and took the parcel of red tissue paper out of his pocket.

They rode one of the sink-level trains across the eastern quadrant of the city, and climbed off in a filthy substation that the signs said was in Formal J.

“This is where you grew up,” Patience said.

Zael nodded.

“I’m sure I could have found a doctor closer to the house.”

“We need the right sort of doctor,” Zael said. “The right sort, yeah? I mean one who won’t ask questions or anything.”

Patience couldn’t argue with that.

“Well, there was a guy in my hab neighbourhood. We called him the Locum. I think he’s what you want.”

Hot, dirty winds scorched up the transit tunnels as other clattering trains approached. Zael led Patience up the iron stairs into the dark dripping sinks of Formal J.

It was not a good part of town. So much trash and acid wash had accumulated in the lower sinks, most foot traffic came and went on the higher walkways between the crumbling hab-stacks. They passed a few rowdy bars and dining houses, bright with lights and drunken noise, but for the most part it was a slum city, full of poverty-trapped souls who lingered in the doorways of their ratty habs, or sat on the front steps of stacks, passing around bottles without labels. The street air reeked of acid and urine. It reminded Patience a little of Urbitane, the hive stack on Sameter where she’d grown up. But there had been a spark of urgency there, a sense of life fighting to catch a break amid the squalor. Here, it felt like people had just given up all hope.

They walked for twenty more minutes, into a network of dark lanes and channels between condemned habs. A train rattled past on an elevated rail.

“Here,” said Zael, leading her into the ground floor of some kind of community building that had been grossly vandalised. The feral slogans of moody clans were painted on the walls.

“Here?” she queried.

“You saw the sign, right? It said ‘surgery’.”

“Uh huh. But it appeared to have been handwritten in blood.”

They entered a broken-down room where a few people sat around on mismatched chairs. An old man, a far-gone, an emaciated addict with the shakes, a worried-looking habwife with a small child, a young drunk with a nasty cut across his brow.

If this is triage, thought Kys, I can’t wait to see the medicae. Some rancid old quack or backstreet abortionist...

Zael led her through an inner door. The Locum was busy. A moody hammer was sitting in an old barber’s chair and, by the light of a makeshift lamp, the Locum was stitching up the twenty centimetre gash across his shoulder. A blade wound, Kys was quite sure.

The room itself was surprisingly tidy, though nothing in it was new. There were a few pieces of medical equipment, tools thrust into a jar of anti-bact gel in a vague nod to sterility.

The Locum had his back to them as he worked. He was of medium build, slim and wiry. His hair was light brown, and he was wearing heavy lace-up boots, black combat baggies, a black vest and surgical gloves.

“Get in line,” he called. “I’ll get to everyone in turn.”

“Hey,” said Zael.

“Didn’t you hear me?” the Locum said and turned. Kys saw his face. Strong, calm, rather lined and care-drawn.

His eyes were blue and fiercely intelligent. Right now they were a little puzzled.

“Zael?” he said. “Zael Efferneti? That you, kid?”

“Hey, Doctor Belknap.”

“Throne, Zael. I haven’t seen you for... a year or more. Someone said you were dead.”

“Not me.” Zael shook his head.

“Good. That’s good. Who’s this?” Belknap asked, looking over at Kys.

“She’s—”

“A friend of Zael’s,” said Patience. “I need a medicae. He recommended you.”

“Yeah? What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. But I need a medicae to come with me and treat two other friends of Zael’s.”

“You need a medicae,” said Belknap, “go to the local infirmary. Public ward.”

“I need a certain type of medicae,” Patience said smoothly.

“Yeah? What type is that?”

“The type who sews up a moody hammer’s gangfight wounds, no questions asked.”

Belknap looked back at Zael. “Dammit, boy! What have you gotten yourself mixed up in?”

“Nothing bad, I swear,” Zael said.

The Locum turned back to his work.

“Will you come?” Patience asked.

“Yes. For Zael’s sake. When I’m finished here.”

They waited an hour while he treated the people in line. Then Belknap put on an old, ex-military stormcoat, picked up a black leather practice bag and followed them out onto the sink-street.

“You not going to lock up?” Kys asked him.

“Nothing worth stealing,” said Belknap. “And round here, if you lock a door, folk will kick it in just to know why.”

They caught a sub-train and rattled back across the quarter through the dark, labyrinthine foundations of the hive. Just the three of them, alone in a vandalised carriage.

Kys noticed the old dog-tags on a chain around Belknap’s neck. He didn’t seem more than thirty, thirty-five, although prematurely aged.

“Guard vet?” she asked.

“Company field medic. Six years. I mustered out when the chance came along.”

“Why?”

“Couldn’t stand the sight of blood.”

She smiled. “And really?”

He looked up at her. His eyes, always half-dosed, as if squinting at something bright, they were really something.

“I don’t even know your name,” he said. “I’m not about to tell you my personal business.”

“Okay. But between Guard service and sewing up stab-victims in a sink-level ruin, what?”

“Nine years as a community medicae. I had a practice in the fourth ward of Formal J.”

The carriage rocked violently as the train rode over points in the dark. Kys, who was standing, steadied herself against the handrail.

“Why’d you stop?” she asked.

“I didn’t. I still serve the fourth ward in Formal J.”

“Yeah, but not officially. You’re a back-street guy.”

“That’s me. A real vigilante.”

“So? Why?”

The overheads flickered on and off for a second as the jolting disrupted the live rail. The carriage flashed into strobing blue darkness. Then bare white light again.

“You ask a lot of questions,” said Belknap.

“I’m inquisitive,” Kys said. “Professionally.”

+Leave him alone. Stop asking him stuff.+ Zael sent.

Kys still wasn’t happy about him being able to do that. And when he did it, it hurt a little. He hadn’t refined his talent.

+I will ask him what I like, Zael.+ she nudged back. +We're gonna trust him with Kara and Nayl. I wanna know we can.+

Belknap looked back and forth between them, smiling slightly. "What was that?" he asked, pointing a finger at her then him. "You two got a private code or something?"

"Or something," said Zael.

"What is it? A gang code? Number of blinks? Secret signals?" Belknap shook his head sadly. "Yeah, I'll lay money it's a gang code. She's definitely connected, that one."

"Like you wouldn't believe," said Kys.

"And you," Belknap said looking at Zael. "I always hoped you'd escape, you know. Not slide in like all the others. I always said that, didn't I?"

"You did," admitted Zael.

"I know the odds were stacked against you, especially in a dirt-box like the J. But I hoped. You have a good brain on you, Zael Efferneti. If you'd stuck to scholam, trained maybe, got a decent trade. You could have contributed. Made a life for yourself, against all those odds. But I guess the easy option was always going to suck you in."

Kys suddenly, oddly, felt rather protective. Zael looked like he was going to cry.

"Zael didn't take any easy option, doctor," she said quietly.

"Yeah, that's the real truth, isn't it?" the medicae said. "The life you people choose, it looks easy. A few risks, a fast fortune. But it's never easy in the end."

Kys caught Zael's eye and they both started laughing.

"I say something funny?" Belknap asked.

"Hysterical," said Kys. "Now tell me. Why did you quit the community practice?"

Belknap's compelling blue eyes stared straight up at her. "I didn't. You want to know? Okay. I was disbarred. The Departmento Medicae struck me off and stripped me of my practice. They took away my credentials because I was found guilty of serious malpractice. Okay?"

+Throne, Zael! You brought me to him? We need a medicae, not an incompetent!+

+Ask him why+

+What?+

+Ask the doc why he was struck off.+

"Why?" asked Kys.

"I said. Malpractice. Serious professional misconduct contrary to my oath as a Medicae Imperialis."

Kys shook her head, reached into her pocket and threw a handful of change at Belknap. "Next stop, get off. Find your own way back. I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you. We'll find someone else. Someone competent."

Zael got up. "Tell her!" he cried. "Tell her the reason, doc!"

Belknap glanced at him. "It doesn't matter, Zael."

"Tell her!"

"It's my business."

Zael turned to Kys. "They disbarred him for fraud! It was a cash thing! He was only trying to... for Throne's sake, doc, explain it to her! I don't know how to describe it!"

Belknap breathed in deeply. "My community practice had a budget. It was nothing like enough. You've seen the way it is down in the J. I could barely cope. Malnutrition, low-grade pollution disorders, addiction, chronic disease. People were dying — really, actually dying, I mean — because I couldn't afford the treatments for everyone. So I tried to work the system. I filed false subsist vouchers, claimed for practice expenses that didn't exist, defrauded the welfare system, just so I could bulk up my budget and afford the things I needed. The things my patients needed. The Administratum caught me, fair and square. Tore up my license, kicked me out and told me I was lucky not to get a custodial."

“See?” said Zael to Kys.

“So you just practise now anyway?” Kys asked. “As a rogue medicae?”

“Listen, mamzel friend-of-Zael’s. The formal infirmaries automatically deny treatment to any clan members injured in street clashes. Any drag addicts. Any persons who’ve lost their subsist code. Any child who doesn’t present with a registered parent or guardian. The Administratum, by its own figures, recommends there should be one practising medicae for every five thousand citizens of any Imperial city. You know what the split is here in Petropolis? One medic for every hundred thousand habbers. A hundred thousand, so help me! You think the God-Emperor of Mankind is happy that’s the way it is here? I’m just trying to even down the stats!”

The train rocked. The lights went on and off again quickly. The train was pulling into a sub-stop. Belknap collected up the scattered change.

“Good luck,” he said. “Zael. It might be way too late, but be a good boy, all right?”

The train shuddered to a halt. The auto-hatches opened.

Belknap got up, but Patience was right in front of him. “My name’s Patience Kys,” she said.

“Patrik Belknap,” he replied.

“Isn’t that *Medicae* Patrik Belknap?” she asked.

They looked at each other for a long moment.

“Sit down, sir,” she said. “You’ll do.”

He sat. “Patience Kys, eh? I look forward to finding out your real name.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” she replied.

The hatches slipped closed and the train began to pull away.

NINE

Across the hive, out where Formal Q met the bay, the occulting lighthouse was blinking into the night. It was one of the twenty-nine station lighthouses that warded the curved seaboard of Petropolis.

The private flier swung down out of the sky, through the squalling rain. It landed on its eight jointed legs in the centre of the stone dock, and then, wings cased, walked itself over until its body hatch was under the rainguard awning.

The entrance was lit with fluttering candles and glow-globes. Magus-clancular Lezzard and about forty of the Fraternity's seers stood in the wind, waiting.

The body hatch opened, three figures dismounted and strode, side by side, towards the doorway.

Orfeo Culzean, business-like in a blue suit, flanked to his right by Leyla Slade, dressed in dark red. Her right hand was poised on the butt of the handgun holstered in the small of her back, and she scanned left and right, watching for movements out amongst the dark and the rain-blurred lights of the vehicle.

At Culzean's left walked Saul Keener, the notorious unsanctioned psyker. He had prospered over the years by offering his skills via Petropolis' black market, and he was always in demand. He was a short, dumpling of a man. His fine clothes spoke of his wealth and his build positively screamed of the obscene high living his art had afforded him. Keener displayed the symptoms of an obsessive-compulsive. He was constantly rubbing his beringed, sausage fingers together, and he had a great many tics and quivers that flapped his round, jowly face.

Keener held the trigger-orb in his fat hands. He'd had it close to him for several hours, so as to build a sympatico with the incunabula.

"We look upon you, Orfeo." Magus-clancular Lezzard said.

"Magus-clancular, thank you for this greeting. Thank you to the Fraternity for making us welcome here." Culzean's molten voice somehow cut through the sound of the rain and the flier's panting jet-pods.

"Enter," Lezzard said. He turned, his exo-skeleton hissing in step with Culzean. Slade and the psyker came behind, trailed by the body of the fraters.

"Everything's prepared?" Culzean asked as they walked down the entrance hall of the old lighthouse.

"Everything, to your requirements. It's all prepared."

"The device I sent you? It's safe?"

"Perfectly safe, Orfeo."

They came out into the basement chamber of the lighthouse, a drum of a room, formed from local stock brick and dripping from the sea. The correct number of tapers — three thousand, one hundred and nine — were lit about the place. The device sat in the centre of the floor, silent, surrounded by the scribings. The marks on the stone floor formed a perfect pentagrammic ward.

They had been made with bone ash, or at least Culzean hoped so, or the night would come to a very sudden, very messy end.

Inside the outer scribings, the cages of payment waited. The poor human vermin within the iron boxes mewled and scratched.

"Locals?" asked Culzean.

“Mostly,” said Lezzard. “But some of the fraters too. Those who have suffered the Unholy Macula and who are no use to us as seers.”

“Anything you need to update me on? Anything new? New determiners? Has the Fraternity’s meniscus revealed any changes?”

“Some.” Lezzard gurgled. He nodded to Stefoy, and the seer handed Culzean a clump of papers on which recent seeings had been scribbled.

“No. Not important. No,” Culzean said, sorting through them and crumpling some to throw aside. “This, interesting. A change in the clouding, here, just an hour or two ago. Suddenly, the prospect is more likely. Why?”

“We have not yet fathomed it,” replied Arthous. “But we are pleased.”

“Curious.” Culzean continued to stare at the scrap of paper. “There is a name here. What is it?”

Leyla Slade leaned over and looked. “Belknap, sir,” she said.

“Belknap. Fascinating.” Orfeo Culzean threw the crumpled paper away and looked at the next. “Now this...” he began.

“We were pleased by that reading,” Lezzard said. “It supports your instinct. That man, high-born and powerful though he might be, is the key at this time. The most potent determiner. If he continues in his path, the prospect will fail.”

“So nice to be vindicated.” Culzean grinned. “Saul, would you like to take your place and we can get started. I sense a scratchy impatience within the device. Magus-clancular? Withdraw your fraters.”

Lezzard turned and ushered his followers back, until they were lost in the darkness of the basement, behind the candles. Culzean could see their augmetic eyes glowing in the gloom like a gang of cyclopes.

“Leyla?” Culzean said over his shoulder. “Be ready. Shoot anything that doesn’t obey.”

The woman nodded and drew out her Hostec Livery 50. She slid out the dip of standard rounds and slotted in a magazine of specially prepared loads. Then she slunked the slide.

“Master Keener?” Culzean said. “Go to work.”

Saul Keener raised the trigger-orb and, as he had been instructed, started to slide reality with his mind. It grew cold in the basement of the occulting lighthouse.

The device in the centre of the floor began to vibrate. It was a small pyramid, wrought in gold and silver. It started to rock and vibrate, as if a charge were passing through it.

Keener pressed on, turning the orb in his hands. The device continued to quiver.

“I sense him now.” Keener muttered. “Oh, yes. He’s coming to my bidding. Oh, yes, here...”

The three thousand, one hundred and nine candle flames flared and grew taller. The light spread. The little golden pyramid shook again, and then unfolded.

It didn’t unleash a figure. It bent and deformed to create one. The folding golden sides twisted and extended, doming a shape that coalesced out of a mist that spilled from the opening centre of the pyramid. A crouched, hunched figure formed, head down, curled. The golden tracery of the device wrapped itself up and down the figure’s limbs, creating armour, an encasing suit, a crested helmet.

The Brass Thief rose to its feet. Smoke poured off it, gusted from its awakening. It was thin, wrapped in segmented plates of gold and brass, faceless but for eyeslits in the high-crested helm.

“The incunabula is awake.” Keener whispered.

“Tell it to feast,” Culzean said.

Keener spoke with his mind, via the orb, and the golden figure stepped forward. Warp-smoke dribbled off its golden limbs. It raised its hands and, with a wet click, extended the rhyming swords.

It took a step towards the nearest cage. The sacrifices within saw it coming and squealed.

It lashed through the bars, its blades meeting flesh, and began to feed.

Six minutes later, with the cages reduced to buckled frames full of fuming bones, the incunabula clacked to the edge of the scribing and folded its rhyming swords.

“It’s ready,” Keener said, rubbing frantically at his hands. “It’s really ready. It’s fed and it’s yearning to know what is next. It wants to know why you’ve woken it.”

Culzean nodded. He looked round at Leyla Slade, who had been training her handgun on the incunabula for the last five minutes.

“Put that away, Ley,” Culzean said.

He took a step forward until just the outer line of scribing separated him from the incunabula.

“Hello,” Culzean said softly. “Remember me? Of course you do. I’m going to show you a name. You know what to do then.”

Culzean held up one of the scraps of paper. “You see? Read it right. Understand?”

The Brass Thief gently nodded its crested helm.

“That name is Jader Trice,” said Culzean. “Do your worst.”

The Brass Thief rocked and vast metal wings articulated out of its back. The wings flapped and it ascended, turning out of the scribed circle, out of the lighthouse. Towards the city.

TEN

The speech, which had been elegantly crafted and masterfully delivered, came to an end, and the audience rose to its feet, applauding wildly. The furious approval shook the majestic state banqueting hall, the most regal chamber of the diplomatic palace in Formal A.

At the head of the fan of crowded tables, the speaker waved his hand and accepted the applause graciously, smiling at the cheers he had raised from the assembled highborn dignitaries of the Manufactory Guild. The guild was one of the most influential bodies in the subsector, representing both state and private business interests, and its leaders were men and women of great learning, wit and commercial acumen.

And also fools, thought Jader Trice, if they could be brought to their feet in jubilation by meaningless phrases such as “genuine market prosperity”, “financial upturn” and “glorious futures for our children’s generation” all strung together and said out loud. Of course, it was the way he had said them.

The guild mistress, Sephone Halwah, got up from her seat beside Trice, shook his hand, and gestured broadly to calm the assembly. The uproar slowly died away.

Halwah was a tall, poised woman in her one-seventies, who looked a youthful forty-something thanks to the expensive juvenat treatments she had enjoyed. Her hair, the colour of spun gold, was contained in a crispinette of white ribbon behind her round, ermine hat and barrette, and her long gown, covered by the ornately embroidered mantle of her office, was made of ice-white silk and frieze. She raised her goblet. Her gown had long, ballooning sleeves tied with golden thread around her cuffs. Wise, thought Trice, to choose a cut that conceals your elbows, my mistress. It was always the elbows that gave away a woman’s true age, no matter how strenuous the juvenat work.

“My guild fellows,” she said. “I would ask you to join me as I pledge a heartfelt thanks to the honoured speaker at our annual dinner, the first provost of the Ministry of Subsector Trade, Sire Jader Trice.”

More applause, and a general, loud toasting as the cups were raised. Almost at once, music struck up from the gallery and attendants hurried forward to clear the tables. Some guests resumed their seats, others moved forward into the open floor space to begin the stately dances.

“Fine words, provost,” the guild mistress said as she sat down next to Trice. “You know how to stir an assembly.”

“If only you knew,” Trice murmured.

“I’m sorry?” she said, leaning forward. “The music is rather loud.”

“I said I am gratified, mistress.”

Halwah turned to speak with a guild senior who had approached. Trice sat for a moment, toying with his goblet, staring at the dancers, the hurrying servants, the clusters of guests in loose conversation. Jader Trice was a slender, ageless man with a distinguished beard on his chin and long, black hair that he had tied back for the evening. He had unmatched eyes, one sea-blue, the other ember-brown. He wore heavy brocade robes of gold and sarry over a long gown of silver willowthread. His amulet of office hung around his neck on weighty gold links. Sharp-minded, silk-tongued, he was one of the most effective and assured political operators in the Angelus sub. Trice recognised no superior except the lord governor subsector himself, and the ministry he controlled had been established by Barazan when he had come to office in 400.

Trice was a little weary. The day had been long and spoiled by an unexpected turn of events. He also had little relish of functions such as the guild banquet, but these were important people and he wanted to keep them on his side.

+My lord.+

Trice looked up. Right across the busy hall, two hundred metres away, a figure had appeared, and was standing in the grand doorway, half hidden by the ormolu frame.

+I need a word.+

Trice nodded slightly, so only the figure would notice. He rose to his feet.

“Not going, surely? You promised me a spin,” Halwah said, turning to look at him. Several guildsmen around them also urged him to stay.

Trice smiled his most winning smile. “Of course not, my friends. But you know my job never stops. Word is, the value of the crown... which we all worship as the *true* master of mankind, do we not?”

The guilders roared at his joke.

“The value of the crown in the rimward market is still declining. I have to put in a call to the chief treasurer on Caxton before the market closes. Once that onerous duty is done... the chief treasurer does so enjoy the sound of his own voice amplified by astropath...”

More laughter.

“...I will return. Between you and me, honoured friends, it’s jitters. Our Lord Barazan came to office three years ago, and the honeymoon period is over. Investors and some trade amalgams in the rim are getting edgy that the liberal reforms our lord promised at inauguration are slow to be fulfilled. What is it I always say?”

“These things take time!” a senior guildster nearby called.

“Precisely, Sire Onriss.” Trice smiled as the laughter buffeted once again. “So excuse me while I take a moment to dampen their nerves. You’ll appreciate it on the morrow when you slate-read your trading portfolios. As for you, dear Mistress Halwah, I swear on my mother’s pristine honour that I will return in no more than fifteen minutes. Then you will experience a volta more sublime than your wildest dreams.”

Yet more laughter, led by the exaggeratedly demure Halwah. Trice strode from the table.

Immediately, four waiting house guards from the Gubernatorial Service closed around him: bullish men in dark blue leather and ceramite, visors down, hellguns mag-clamped to their chest plates. As a senior official of the subsector Administratum, Trice enjoyed all the protection benefits of the lord governor himself.

Escorted, he walked down the length of the banquet hall and out into the crystal-lit grand processional. The chatter and music of the feast dimmed behind him.

The figure was waiting for him up ahead beside the door of a privacy suite. Servants dashed past.

“Wait here.” Trice ordered his house guard squad, and went into the suite with the waiting figure.

The suite was a series of luxurious meeting rooms, designed to be completely surveillance-opaque, so that the senior ambassadors of the diplomatic department could conduct conversations in the strictest secrecy.

As soon as he was inside, the door closed. Trice felt the vibration hum of audio-bouncers, vox-inhibitors and psy-blunt systems activating and overlapping.

Trice walked over to a gilt cabinet and poured himself a large amasec.

“Anything for you, Toros?”

Toros Revoke shook his head politely. Revoke was wearing a subtle, dark suit, and his hands were gloved. He was as much a part of Trice’s protection as the armed house guards waiting

outside. But nothing like so official. Toros Revoke was a senior lieutenant of an unofficial body known as the Secretists.

“Well, that’s another evening of my life I’m never getting back,” Trice said, sipping his amasec and sitting down on an upholstered tub chair. He crossed his legs, folding the heavy gown across his knees for comfort. “They’re all idiots, you realise? Every last jack one of them. Fools in love with profit. I could have told them I shat stools of solid gold and they’d have asked me to show them how.”

“The public face,” Revoke said.

Trice nodded. “The public face. So tell me about your day. Tell me something to make me happy.”

“Well...”

“You’ve got bad news, haven’t you, Toros?”

“Not at all. Curious news, perhaps. I’ll start with the good. Nine more private masses went ahead tonight, all as decreed, all in temples along the defined axes.”

“I heard there was trouble the other night. Where was it?”

“The chapel at Rudiment and Pass-on-over. The usual story. A poor nobody who shouldn’t have been there wandered in on the service.”

“Did he see anything?” Trice asked, swirling the dark liquor in his glass.

“Oh, plenty. Fortunately, I was there to secret the mass. I’d brought along Monicker and Drax too.”

“How is Monicker? Still not sure who she is?”

“She’s a dissembler. It goes with the territory. We turfed the man out, and saw to him.”

“Cleanly?”

“The Unkindness stripped him bare.”

Trice smiled. “I do so love it when this city looks after its own secrets.”

Revoke crossed the room and sat down in a plush seat opposite Trice. “I understand today has been eventful. I heard about the business at the sacristy. Do you need my people to cover that?”

Trice shook his head. “No, it’s in hand. Could be a blessing, actually. It may transpire that we’ve been mislocating the true centre all this time. There is a secrecy issue. Some strand of the Magistratum has got it already. But I’ve put wheels in motion. So now, this curious news of yours?”

“Akunin wants an audience with you. Pretty much demands it.”

Trice lit a lho-stick from the casket on the table beside his chair. “Shipmaster Akunin knows it doesn’t work that way. No direct contact between me and the contractees.”

“Even so...”

“Even so, screw him. What does he want to see me about?”

Revoke leaned forward. “Earlier tonight, a premises ran by the cartel’s chosen banker was raided. Burned down. A lot of deaths.”

“Then the cartel’s a fool for using a financier who ran so close to the wind. Tchaikov was black market. She had any number of enemies. It’s not our concern where they stash the money we pay them. Die too, did she?”

Revoke nodded. “It appears so. I have my team sifting the wreckage right now. A gang dispute, I think. One of her rivals in the underworld.”

“So... why is Akunin asking for me?”

“He thinks it’s more than that. He believes it could be the work of someone who is trying to break our programme open.”

Trice frowned. He set his glass down and took a long draw from the smouldering lho-stick. “Is that possible?”

“I don’t believe so.” Revoke replied. “There was one potential troublemaker, but you sent him to his doom yourself.”

“I did. Tell Akunin to get over it and use a more reliable money-launderer. But keep an eye on what you turn up. I don’t want us to be caught out. Was that all?”

Revoke rose. “Yes, lord. Thank you.”

Trice stubbed out his stick. Thank you. “Back to the party, I suppose.”

Revoke held the door open for his master, and Trice stepped out of the suite. The waiting Gubernatorial servicemen closed around the first provost to lead him back down the processional to the banquet hall.

An eight-metre square skylight above them exploded in a blizzard of glass debris. Looking up in the storm of falling shards, reaching for their weapons, the servicemen got one brief glimpse of the attacker.

The paired rhyming swords took off two heads and ripped open the torsos of the other two.

Jader Trice turned as the Brass Thief landed behind him. Glass fragments were raining down from the window, and the ripped bodies of the four servicemen were still falling, blood sheeting from their awful wounds.

Crested helm bowed, its arms like gold-sleeved pistons, the Brass Thief struck its rhyming swords at Jader Trice.

Trice gawped in dread as the razor-edged blades swung at him simultaneously. But he was a quick-witted man. He had already activated the displacer field built into his amulet of office.

Jader Trice vanished in an oily smudge of air, and reappeared ten metres away down the processional. The incunabula’s blades sliced through empty space.

It paused, lifting its golden, crested helm, reacquired its quarry, and bounded forward.

Alarms were suddenly ringing. Half a dozen armed Magistratum officers spilled out into the long hallway and found themselves between the chief provost and the golden daemon.

The incunabula didn’t break stride. It had ploughed through them before they had even realised what was going on. Two more armoured heads were carved in half, then the daemon speared its blades into two chests, somersaulted, and brought the rhyming swords down in scything strokes that cleft the last two from their shoulders to their navels. One of the final pair opened fire, but it was just a nerve spasm. Hellgun shots whickered up the processional wall as the man collapsed.

“Avaunt thee!” Trice yelled at the oncoming monster, his hands forming a hexagrammic sign in its face.

The incunabula recoiled for a moment, then spun its blades and pounced at the chief provost.

Auto-fire of tremendous force blew it out of the air before it could reach him. It crashed sideways into the wall, crazed the stone facing, and hit the ground.

Before it could rise, a second blaze of auto-fire smacked into it, tumbling it away across the marble floor. By now, the music in the hall had broken off and hundreds of voices were rising in loud panic.

Toros Revoke strode towards the crumbled incunabula, keeping the hellgun he had snatched from one of the butchered house guards raised and aimed. It wasn’t dead. He could see that. It had soaked up a lot of punishment, but still it wasn’t dead. Revoke started firing again, ripping the creature backwards.

Then the powerclip was out, the weapon dead, and the Brass Thief was surging up at him, renewed, blades whirring. The first chop sheared the hellgun in half.

Revoke flicked aside like a dancer, turning a one-handed spring that took him clear. The Thief jerked its golden head round, cocked on one side, as if curious. It swung murderously for Revoke again, and again he evaded, this time with a rapid backwards handspring.

The Brass Thief made an odd, pulsing sound. It was laughing in delight to have found an opponent who could even begin to trouble it.

It engaged Revoke again. This time there was no holding back. The dark-suited man and the golden daemon turned and spun and dodged and struck and ducked and blocked, inhuman blurs, faster than the eye could follow.

Saul Keener shuddered slightly and groaned. The sound was disturbingly loud in the close silence of the lighthouse basement.

“What’s the matter with him?” Leyla Slade asked.

Orfeo Culzean didn’t reply. The lights of the fraters’ intently staring eyes filled the darkness around them.

“Saul?” Culzean said softly. “Let me look.” He reached out his own right hand and touched its fingertips to the trigger orb. He pursed his lips as he began to share the psy-cast images.

“I see the Thief,” he said. “It’s found Trice. I see the chief provost, fleeing down a great hallway. But there’s someone in the way. A man. He’s preventing the Thief from reaching Trice.”

“How?” Leyla Slade asked.

“He...” Culzean began, uncertainly. “He is fighting with it. He seems to be unarmed, but he has closed with it. He... Oh, so fast! He’s matching it move for move, reading every cut it tries to make, evading. The speed, the skill is... phenomenal.”

“No one can do that,” said Leyla Slade. “Not against the incunabula. It’s not possible.”

“It seems it is. I’m seeing it,” said Culzean. “I knew Trice would employ seriously capable protectors, but this a revelation. The movements are so fluid, so fast, I can scarcely track them. But it won’t last.”

“You’re sure?” asked the magus-clancular.

“The Thief never tires. The man will. And he is, as I said, unarmed. All he can do is protect himself.”

Instinct told Revoke he was just two, maybe three, strokes from running out of luck. He couldn’t sustain this pace of combat much more than a few seconds longer. He sidestepped the Thief and yelled an un-word in desperation.

The force of the un-word smashed the incunabula back fifty metres. It hit the processional’s side wall, cratering it, and fell to the floor.

“What... what was that?” Saul Keener gasped.

“I don’t know.” Culzean snapped. “Hold your concentration, damn it!”

Revoke sprinted down the hall and caught up with Trice. He started to hurry his master towards the nearest exit. “Securitas!” he yelled into his vox. “Securitas to the main processional! Code black!”

“What was it?” Trice asked, his eyes wide with shock.

“Not was, *is*. Still. Come on!” Almost dragging Trice, Revoke reached the stairwell that led down to the palace’s wide courtyard. Behind him, the incunabula stirred and got up. It flew after its prey, down the hall, down the staircase, into the courtyard.

And halted. The raised weapons of sixty palace troopers faced it.

The men opened fire.

The vast barrage blew the stone doorway apart, shattered the lintel and punched deep shot-craters in the stones of the wall. The night lit up with a dazzling storm of energy bolts.

The incunabula came out of that fire, las-rounds bouncing like raindrops off the primaevally-forged metal of its sheathing armour. The rhyming swords glowed red with heat as they swung.

A guard lost his face in a burst of blood. Another went over, headless. A third staggered back, missing his left arm; a fourth was savagely deprived of most of his rifle and both the hands that had been clutching it. Still the shots rained as the Brass Thief hacked into their ranks. Two men toppled

slackly, their waists clean-severed. A decapitation. A trooper fell to his knees, trying to hold his stomach in. Another fell on his back, his sternum snapped through. The troopers kept shooting, though they were now backing away, splashing through the pooling blood that was starting to cover the flagstones. An arm was struck off, a leg at the knee. A man flew backwards through the air, cut in two, and crunched down onto the roof of a parked transport, bursting out the windows. A trooper sank onto his side, clutching his visor. Another dragged himself across the slippery paving, trying to find his legs.

There was an especially vivid flash of light. A specialist trooper team hefting a plasma cannon had begun to open fire. The Brass Thief lurched as it was hit, turned, and threw one of its rhyming swords at the weapon-team.

Tip-first, the whistling blade tore through the plasma weapon's breach and impaled the chief operator. Its power-pod ruptured, the plasma cannon exploded, incinerating the entire team in a boiling cloud of violet energy. The Shockwave felled another dozen men nearby. A fragment of razor-sharp debris from the cannon's focus ring zinged out and sliced through the neck of a guard officer.

Culzean smiled. "Oh, tell him to bring that, Saul. For my collection."

The remaining troopers had broken in terror and were running for their lives. The blazing wreck of the exploded cannon formed a white-hot pyre at the heart of the courtyard, the leaping flames reflected in the oil-dark lake of blood. Bodies and body parts lay everywhere. Nearly forty men of the palace elite, butchered.

The Brass Thief stepped forward, the firelight glinting off its blood-flecked armour. It bent down and picked up the piece of focus ring and hooked it around its belt. Then it held out its empty hand and the rhyming sword it had thrown flew back into its grasp, plucked from the burning corpse.

On the far side of the courtyard, Revoke pushed Trice behind him, and turned to face the oncoming spectre of destruction.

"Toros, old friend," Trice said. "Please, don't let it get me."

Revoke tried to reply, but his mouth was bleeding from the un-word he had used to knock the daemon down in the processional. That had been the only thing that had worked.

Though it hurt and tore his throat, Revoke howled another un-word. The advancing incunabula rocked back as if it had been hit in the chest by a tank round.

Revoke could smell psychic powers suddenly. The trace had probably been there all along, but he'd been too busy to taste it. He reached out with his telepathy, not at the approaching daemon — that would have been futile — but at the distant mind that guided it.

"Toros!" Jader Trice cried out. The Brass Thief was powering forward. Two more un-words, agonisingly voiced, slapped it back. Revoke's real counterattack was somewhere else. As he shouted the monster down, his mind was soaring elsewhere, into the dark, into the depths of the city.

There. There. There! Some twitching lunk called Keener.

"Saul?" Culzean said.

"Mhhh..." Keener replied.

"Saul, disengage now. Right now."

Orfeo Culzean tore his hand away from the orb to break contact. He had felt what was coming. A vengeful telepathic fury of hideous force struck Saul Keener like a hammer blow. He stroked out at once, his brain pulped. His eyes burst into flames.

With a violent, twitching fit, he toppled over, dead.

Loosed, unguided suddenly, the incunabula staggered, off-balance. It glared around the courtyard for a moment, the firelight dancing off its crested mask.

Then it mewed pitifully, writhed and flew off into the night.

Revoke turned and stared at his master. A huge tumult of panic and confusion rang from the palace behind them.

“Dear gods without name.” Jader Trice murmured. “All that I owe you up to now, Toros, is nothing. I owe you my life.”

Blood was pouring from Toros Revoke’s mouth. His lips were split. He spat out gore onto the flagstones, and a shattered tooth came out with it.

“Just doing my job... lord,” he lisped.

Orfeo Culzean caught the trigger-orb as it fell from Keener’s collapsing body. It was smoky-hot.

“Shit,” said Leyla Slade.

“Indeed,” Culzean said. He seemed almost amused.

“What happened?” Lezzard asked.

“They bested us,” Culzean said. “I offer my apologies, magus-clancular. I underestimated their resources.”

“We have... failed?” Arthous asked.

“Tonight, yes, most probably. I am an expediter, Frater Arthous. You employ me for my skills and my experience. Not only because I know what to do, but because I know what else to do when things don’t go according to plan. This is just a setback. I’ll ponder for a while, and decide upon the next best course of action.”

“A setback?” Arthous seemed contemptuous.

“Perhaps not even that,” Culzean said. “Have the fraters look to their mirrors. Examine the prospect and its determiners over the next day or so. It’s possible that even without killing the chief provost, we might have derailed his involvement favourably.”

“What of your servant?” Stefoy asked.

“It is cut loose, wild. It will return here in a few hours and shut itself down. Make sure it’s well fed, or it won’t be willing to serve us the next time we employ it. And — we will need another psyker. Someone very able. I’d like the Fraternity to procure one this time, preferably someone from off-world. Bring them here.”

“Of course,” said Lezzard. “Anything else, Orfeo?”

“Give me time to think, magus.”

“Yes, but the prospect—”

“The prospect is the only thing that concerns me, magus-clancular. One hundred per cent, I will make it happen.”

Orfeo Culzean turned and walked up out of the basement, Leyla Slade at his side.

“I think we should leave,” she whispered.

“We are leaving, Ley.”

“I mean the planet. This is turning into a lousy deal. The Fraternity might turn nasty if we don’t deliver.”

“We will deliver. This is exactly why I choose to be in this game. It’s so seldom a real challenge arises. This is the one, Ley. The expedition that will make my name immortal. Can’t you feel it?”

“I feel something. Those frigging one-eyes glaring at us. I say we make our excuses and quit.”

“Leyla Slade, that’s hardly the backbone I hired you for.”

She shrugged.

“I’m hungry,” Culzean said. “I need a decent meal and some distraction. Is it too late for the last show at the Carnivora?”

“I’ll check.”

“Tomorrow, I want a day without interruption. And I need you to look out some books for me, some old almanacs from my library. Anything you can find on the subject of Enuncia.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“No one really knows anymore. Just a memory of a myth. But that man tonight, the one who kept our Thief at bay. I’d stake my professional reputation on the fact that he was using it.”

ELEVEN

“So how did this happen?” Belknap asked, slowly packing the wound with sterile gauze and tissue-cleaner.

“I cut myself shaving,” said Harlon Nayl.

“Right,” said Belknap. “There was I thinking this was a gross wound caused by a side-blown round on the tumble.”

Nayl sat, stripped to the waist, on a wooden stool in the spartan kitchen of Miserimus House. The doctor’s practice bag was open on the table and the contents spread out. Kys stood in the doorway, watching, Zael at her side. It was almost an hour past middle night, and the city outside was deathly quiet.

“You know a lot about gunshot wounds, do you?” Nayl said.

“I know a lot about a lot, mister. There. Done. Keep it clean and I’ll check it in a day or two.”

Belknap looked at Kys. “Two, you said.”

“The other one’s upstairs.”

“All right, then. Show me. And, just so we’re clear, I’m not happy about this. Slaphead here is moody-class muscle, and you, I don’t know what you are.”

“I can hear you,” Nayl said.

“I don’t care.” Belknap replied. “I’m doing this for Zael, okay? And in return, I’d like you people to do something for me.”

“What?” asked Kys.

“Let him go. Cut him loose. Give him a few hundred crowns... your type probably has that in change... send him on his way. Give him a chance, I mean, before this gang-life of yours swallows him up.”

“Our type?” Nayl said.

“Shut up, Harlon.” Kys warned. She looked at the doctor. “This is not what you think.”

“It really isn’t.” Zael put in.

“A rented house, a gunshot wound, serious muscle, the need for a back-street sawbones. I’m not stupid, lady. This is connected syndicate stuff. You’re in something up to your ears. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re not wrong.” Kys submitted. “We’re up to our ears.”

“Show me the other one,” Belknap said.

They went upstairs.

+Patience?+

+Yes, Gideon?+

+We appreciate this medicae’s help, but can he be trusted?+

+Zael says he can.+

+The question stands.+

+All right. Call me a woman of simple instincts, but I reckon if you cut the doctor through the middle, you’d find the word “trust” written right through him.+

+Let’s hope I don’t have to ask you to do that.+

Kys led Belknap down the upper hallway, Zael trailing behind them.

“How did you sucker him in?” Belknap asked her.

“Zael? Actually, we brought him along for his own good.”

“Your kind always says that.”

“Sometime soon,” Kys said sweetly, “you and I are going to have to have a little talk about what you mean by that phrase.” She opened the door to Kara’s bedroom.

Kara lay on the little cot, twitching and pale in her fever-sleep. The bandages Nayl had wrapped around her stomach were leaking blood.

“Oh... Throne.” Belknap whispered. “What the hell’s this now?”

He sat down beside Kara and undid the bandage.

“Blade wound... hell!” he jerked back as droplets of blood billowed out of the cut in Kara’s belly. “God-Emperor, that’s not normal! What did this?”

“It was something they called a vampire blade,” Zael said. “They said it tasted her. The wound won’t close. Please, Doctor Belknap. Do something. Kara’s too nice a lady to die.”

“I don’t even know...” the doctor began. He rose to his feet and looked at Kys and the boy. “What is this? What the hell is this?”

I slid into the room, my chair hovering noiselessly. Belknap stared at me for a long moment.

“My name is Gideon Ravenor, Doctor Belknap.” I transponded. “These people, Zael included, are my associates. I thank you for the help you have offered us so far. I understand you are scared, and also admirably concerned for Zael Efferneti’s welfare. I believe this might reassure you.”

I activated my chair’s display mechanism. The slot opened and the projector slid out, casting the hololithic image of my rosette.

It was not the regular red sigil. I had adopted the azure mark of Special Condition, the grave, winged skull.

Belknap recognised it all the same. “I... the Inquisition?”

“I am an inquisitor, yes. Once of the Ordo Xenos Helican. Now in Special Condition operation here on Eustis Majoris.”

“The Inquisition?” Belknap repeated.

“These are members of my team, doctor. We are here on a mission of the utmost gravity, and we are here in total secrecy. That’s what Special Condition means. We cannot contact the authorities for help. Not even medical help. That is why Patience and Zael came to find you.”

“This... this is all too much...” Belknap stammered.

“Too much for you, doctor?”

“As I understand it, an inquisitor carries with him the personal authority of the God-Emperor himself,” Belknap said quietly, staring at me. “To disobey the orders of an Imperial inquisitor is to disobey the voice of the Golden Throne itself. Right?”

“That about sums it up,” I said.

“Then I will not question you and I will do everything you ask me to.” Belknap said simply.

“Save Kara’s life,” I said.

He turned to work. “I have a salve, a certain tincture. I can arrest the blood loss for a while. Then, if I can run some tests, I might be able to counter the damage. But, my resources... I’ll need a transfuser, of course...”

“Whatever you need, doctor,” I said. “We have funds. Tell Patience or Zael what you want and they’ll get it for you.”

I swung my chair round and faced Kys.

+Your instinct was good.+

+I’m glad. I thought so, but...+

+Patience, I need to tell you something about Zael. Something Wystan found out tonight.+

+Crap, what’s the kid done now?+

+It’s not like that, Patience. It’s about... what he might do.+

+What do you mean?+

I was about to reply when the psy Shockwave hit me. I was unprepared for the force of it, and it lurched me over. A huge psychonic event had just boomed across the hive.

I left the shell of my chair at once and went bodiless into the night above the house. I could hear Kys' desperate calls echoing below me.

+Gideon? Gideon?+

+I'm fine. Check the house security.+

I rose up, free, into the night sky, the vast city blazing below me. Traceries of bright psi-fire burned over the inner formals. Taking the aether form of a salmon, I swam down towards them and saw-Throne! The blood. The butchery. The dismemberment. The palace yard filled with dead, fire boiling from a ruined weapon. This was the diplomatic palace in Formal A, the heart of subsector power. Wholesale carnage had happened here.

I read the dying fibre-traces of a daemon in the air. It was loose, somewhere, a being so powerful I didn't want to find it. Something primaeval, an atavistic throwback to the pre-formed ages of Chaos, an incunabula.

And there, hurrying for cover, that was certainly the chief provost, Jader Trice, supported by another man in a dark suit. Attendants were rushing to them, medical teams spilling out into the horror of the courtyard. Alarm bells.

What in the name of the God-Emperor had just hap—

The man in the dark suit looked round. He smelled me. He was a psyker — a very, very powerful psyker — and he had caught the scent of me on the wind.

I couldn't allow that. I recoiled at once, pulling back. His mind snaked up after me.

“Wystan?”

Wystan Frauka put down his slate and deactivated his limiter.

The world went dark. Somewhere, invisibly, the hunting mind of the man in the dark suit roamed on, thwarted.

“Ravenor?” Kys asked.

“Get Thonius working. Get him to tap into the news vox and the Ministry-ciphers. Something just happened down at the diplomatic palace, and I want to know what it was. *Now*.”

TWELVE

Even as it began, Maud Plyton decided it was going to be one of *those* days. She knew why, of course. The night before, the public data services had carried special announcements informing all hive citizens of a “grave incident” at the diplomatic palace. They didn’t specify what, but the PDF had gone to stand to, and entry to the hive-heart formals was likely to be restricted, so it had to be something pretty big.

Plyton lived in the spare room of her elderly uncle’s town-hab in Formal E, and usually travelled to work on the rail transit. She’d put in a call to the department to find out what was going on, but all she’d got had been a recorded vox message advising staff to expect delays on the transit network.

So she’d borrowed her uncle’s transport and driven in to work instead. Uncle Valeryn was getting on, and pretty much housebound. He’d been a musician in his day, though mental infirmity meant the clavichord no longer sang under his fingers. But he’d been successful enough to accumulate modest wealth, and afford a two-storey town-hab in an inner formal, and a private nurse.

Maud was his only living relative, and she’d come to live with him when she started her work with the Magistratum. Valeryn hadn’t really approved of his niece’s occupation, though nowadays he often couldn’t remember what it was she did.

“Can I borrow the Bergman, Uncle Vally?” she’d asked that morning, drinking a caff over the sink, clad in her full uniform. It was early still, dark outside, but her uncle had been up for hours, sitting at the spinet as if wondering what the ebony keys were meant to do.

He hadn’t driven the Bergman since ’89, when the Administratum had cancelled his permit on health grounds. But he kept it garaged in the private bunkers under the hab block, and once in a while allowed Ply-ton to drive him out to the Stairtown Parks on her day off.

“Are we going to the parks?” he asked.

“Not today, Vally. But I need to get into the A. Work. It’s important.”

He looked at her, in her full Magistratum harness, body-plate, helmet hooked at her waist, and said, “What is it you do, Maud?”

“I work, Vally. Can I use the Bergman?”

He shrugged. “I suppose.” He turned away, and started to plink at middle C.

She let herself out quietly, taking the keys from the jar on the shelf above the hall heater.

The Bergman Amity Veluxe was a four-litre carbide coupe with slate-green bodywork and extravagant chrome. Plyton adored it, adored its leather and linseed smell, its rumbling under note. On her salary, even allowing for promotion, she’d never afford a private transporter like the Bergman herself. The story went her uncle had been given it as a gift by a conductor who had been brought to tears by the way Valeryn had played a particular work.

As she drove up through the expressways and interlinks of the inner formals, the traffic grew denser. Thick clouds of acid fog had draped the streets with a yellow mist. She saw rail transit stations closed and guarded, and PDF detachments manning unshrouded weapon emplacements on the buttresses of high stacks. The hive had armed itself.

Regular roadblocks hemmed in the choking traffic, Magistratum officers in rain-slickers checking permits and idents. Plyton began to wonder if she’d have been better off staying at home.

She began to wonder what the hell had happened at the diplomatic palace.

She risked a down-ramp, and used her knowledge of the sink-level street-grid to pull ahead of the blocked arterials. At Whiskane Circus, she took a surface ramp and tried to join the Formal A South Express.

Another impasse. A vast multitude of Administratum workers had attempted to meet the start of their shifts by walking in along the pavements and overpasses. Now the foot traffic was also bound up, as the Magistratum checked IDs and gradually let them into the inner formal walks a few at a time.

She waited patiently until the crawling line of traffic brought her up to a checkpoint.

An officer approached.

Plyton opened the cab window and flashed her warrant. "Special Crime Department. I'm trying to get to work."

"Not this way, marshal," the officer said. "Sorry. No road access to A along here."

"What do I do?"

The officer waved with his lumin baton in the fog. "Turn east. We're allowing Magistratum personnel into the formal along Parsonage Avenue." He turned. "Magistratum! Let it through!"

Plyton yanked on the anchor-shaped wheel, and pulled through the gap he had indicated as other officers lifted aside a sawhorse barrier. Other traffic— omnibuses and private cargoes — hooted in disgust as they watched her slip through.

Plyton edged the Bergman along through packs of pedestrians slow to give way. Through the rain and the stroking wipers, she glimpsed a familiar face and thumped the horn.

Grim, weary faces turned to scowl at her.

She leaned out of her window. "Limbwall! Hey, Limbwall!"

In the crowd, the department's skinny secretary officer, laden down with an armful of files, turned and saw her.

"Get in!"

Perplexed, he clambered in the passenger side, and Plyton moved off through the crowd.

"Morning," she said.

"Is this yours?" he asked, trying to wipe the sudden condensation off the fat lenses of his augmetic optics.

"I borrowed it."

"Who from?"

"My uncle."

"And he's what? The playboy nephew of the lord governor sub?"

"I know. Nice, isn't it?"

"Doesn't even begin to cover it. Throne, what a morning! Like a fool, I tried to walk in. Rail was closed."

"You walked from Formal E?"

He looked at her. "I serve the aquila. What else was I supposed to do? I mean, what in the name of Terra happened here last night?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that."

Limbwall shrugged. "I don't know much. I heard rumours that an attempt had been made on the chief provost's life last night."

"Where? At the palace? Someone tried to kill Trice?"

"That's what I heard."

"From?"

"People in the crowd."

"Not a great source, Limbwall. Stick to your clerking. No one's crazy or powerful enough to try for Trice."

Limbwall glanced out of the window. “You got a better explanation?”

She hadn’t. The clogging tides of pedestrians had thinned out now, and they were making better time through almost deserted streets and sink-routes that the barricades had closed off. Even so, they had to stop twice to allow unfriendly squads of PDF to check their authority.

“You realise that we’re going to have to go all the way round the inner circle to get to mag central.”

Plyton nodded. “Better that than wait in a queue. Besides, this way we can stop in at the sacristy en route. I was going to have to go there this morning anyway. This saves me a trip. If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Limbwall said. He was clearly enjoying his ride in the ornate roadster. “By the way, speaking of the sacristy case, I pulled that file for you.”

“Yeah? From home?”

Limbwall blushed slightly. “Yes. Throne, please don’t tell Rickens. He’ll have my guts. I’ve enhanced the cogitator in my hab with department codes so I can keep up with the workload after hours. I’d never manage otherwise.”

“Limbwall, you know that after hours is meant for recreation? A relaxed meal, a drink or two with friends, maybe even a relationship?”

“If I didn’t take the work home, I’d never meet the deputy’s needs. Six hours, maybe seven, I work off-duty. Don’t tell me you never take work home.”

“Well...”

“Yeah. Since when did you have a relationship?”

Plyton scowled and said nothing.

Limbwall pulled a file from his armful. “Here. I processed it last night. Basic stuff, like you said.”

“Early drawings? Templates? Street plans?”

“Uh huh. Even records about the pioneer builders, pulled from the archives of Scholam Architectus. You ever hear of a man called Cadizky?”

“Uh, there’s a Cadizky Square in Formal B.”

“Named after Theodor Cadizky. Thanks to him, the original city plan was what it was.”

“Bio?”

“It’s all in there.”

Plyton reached one hand off the wheel, took the folder Limbwall offered and stuffed it into the driver’s door pocket.

“That’s great. Thanks. I think location is everything with the Aulsman case. I mean, that hidden roof. It’s got to be significant.”

“Well, just be careful. That data took a lot of... digging out.”

“Unauthorised? You mean... you stole it?”

“Let’s just say I bypassed some meanings of the word ‘legitimate’, Emperor forgive me?”

Plyton grinned. She pulled them to a halt in Templum Square. The towering facade of the grand templum rose above them. The place was quiet in the rain. In front of the templum arch, a few Magistratum vehicles were parked. The place was still cordoned off.

“Wait here,” she told him. “I won’t be long. Just a few more pics for the record. I promised Rickens.”

She got out of the Bergman, and hurried into the cover of the portico. A pair of Magistratum officers approached.

“Mamzel, you can’t—”

“Relax. Special Crime,” she grinned, flashing her shield. “This is my case.”

She hurried in through the vast dome of the templum, along the cloister and into the old sacristy. She was checking the magnetic charge of her hand picter when she realised a service-issue blunt was being aimed at her face.

“That’s about far enough,” a man’s voice said.

“What the Throne?” she began.

“Really slow now. Hand me the picter.”

Plyton looked up, arms up. Two men stood before her, blocking the entrance. Both wore Magistratum armour, but armour which entirely lacked any ident or badge. Their visors were down. Their handguns were threatening.

“Easy,” she said. “I’m going to reach for my badge right now, okay?”

One of them nodded.

She hooked out her shield. “Maud Plyton, junior marshal. This is my case.”

One of the men took her warrant, studied it, then tossed it back to her. “Not anymore,” he said.

“What?”

“Interior Cases is taking over, marshal. Walk away.”

“Wait a minute...”

“Leave. Now,” the other said. “This belongs to Interior Cases now.”

“Why?”

“We don’t have to tell you anything,” said the first officer. “Report back to your department.”

“You have to tell me one thing,” Plyton stated.

“Yeah? What?”

“Magistratum dictate one-seven-eighty. Identity of officers. Who are you?”

“I told you. Interior Cases.”

“Names?”

“Marshals Whygott and Coober. All right? Are we done?”

“We’re done,” Plyton said, and walked back to the Bergman.

She parked the old roadster in the depths of the rockcrete bay under the central tower, left her permit on the dash, and went upstairs with Limbwall.

The Department of Special Crime was ominously silent. There was no one around, not even Mamzel Lotilla. Under the cream-shaded electro lamps of the wooden mezzanine, the desks were silent and unoccupied, the teetering towers of files and folders stirring in the processed breeze.

Plyton and Limbwall looked at each other. They could hear voices raised in the deputy magistratum’s private office.

Plyton sat down at her desk and code-entered her cogitator’s data-function along with the Canticle of Awakening. Surface data fluttered up, but nothing deep. All her precious records of the Aulsman case, including the first round of picts she’d taken of the secret ceiling, were inaccessible. Blanked. Gone.

That had never happened before.

Well, that wasn’t actually true. A year or so earlier, there had been a case, a street-crime woman who had claimed she was an Imperial inquisitor. Gideon something. Two men had come to see Rickens, and shortly afterwards the file trace had been erased. She queried, and Rickens had told her to forget it. “No good will come of it,” he’d said.

Plyton had tried to forget about it, but it wasn’t easy. She’d always assumed the affair had really concerned an Imperial inquisitor. Why else would Rickens have erased the file? It made her feel better about it to think she was secretly serving the holy ordos of the God-Emperor.

But this?

What was the excuse this time?

The main elevator hatch swished open, loud in the quiet office space. The breeze ruffled the stacked paper files. A squad of cogitator adepts from Technician, escorted by a phalanx of Magistratum marshals, entered the Special Crime department.

The adepts set to work at once, dismantling the department's cogitators.

"What the hell is this?" Limbwall cried.

The marshals slammed him against a wall and began to beat him. Plyton rose from her seat slowly. Weapons were aimed at her.

The marshals were wearing the bright orange flame-badges of Interior Cases.

"Stop it," Plyton said. "Stop hitting him."

The visored marshals carried on punching and kicking Limbwall until he fell down on the floor, one optic unit cracked.

"I want to know where in the name of the Emperor you find the authority to do this," Plyton said.

The door of Rickens' office flew open and a large man strode out. Plyton recognised him immediately. Senior Magistratum Sankels, the head of the Interior Cases Division, the wing of the Magistratum that investigated the Magistratum itself.

Sankels turned and yelled back into Rickens' office. "Today, you hear me? Today!"

Walking past Plyton, Sankels glared at her.

Then he was gone.

"Maud?" Rickens called from the door of his office. She hurried over to him, and he drew her inside and closed the door.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Rickens looked pale, as if in shock, and sat down in his ornate cathedra. "Something," he said.

"Sir?"

He looked up at her. "Maud," he said. "I'm going to hate myself for asking this, but did you knowingly break procedure when you investigated the Aulsman death?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't think so. You recorded every particular of your crime scene entry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Every particular?"

"By the book, sir. What's going on?"

Rickens set his hands down on the console before him. His hands were shaking. "As of ninety-two this morning, the Department of Special Crime was suspended pending investigation."

"What?"

"Suspended. Interior Cases is taking over. There has been a submission that we have mishandled the Aulsman case. A lack of procedure. A cover-up."

"Not at all, sir..."

"I know. I believe that, Maud. But Sankels has other ideas. We've been told to stand down, confined to domestic habs, while the investigation proceeds. Apparently there are strong links between our handling of the Aulsman death and the attempt on Chief Provost Trice's life last night."

"Oh my Throne! They tried to kill him?"

"Who?"

"Sir, I have no idea! I heard rumours..."

"The rumours were true. And here we stand. I need your shield and your weapon, Maud."

"What? Why?"

"Because as of now you are relieved of duty. Interior Cases will want to question you. You are required to return to your hab and wait there until they come."

"I did nothing wrong!"

“I know, Maud. But still...”

Plyton unhooked her token and unfastened her holster. She placed the shield and her weapon on Rickens’ desk.

“Go home and wait.” Rickens told her. “I’ll try to get this affair straight as best I can.”

THIRTEEN

In its sleep, the *Arethusa* groaned gently. The layover at Eustis Majoris high anchor meant there was time to afford a general system shutdown and a proper overhaul. Inert and slumbering, the old ship settled, its superstructure groaning and creaking as the stresses of the voyage were soothed away by the unexpected rest.

Wandering the half-lit sub-tunnels and lower decks, Sholto Unwerth was pleasantly reassured by the creaking and sighing of the metal hulk around him. The sounds made him think of the ship as alive. Besides, he'd sent the twenty men of his crew ashore for relaxation at the harbour taverns, and total silence would have been unnerving.

Unwerth was assessing the general repair of the ship. Three small servitors clattered after him obediently. Two were basic maintenance units. The third carried a massive, leather-cased book in its upper limbs, supporting it open as if its arms were a lectern. The book was the *Arethusa's* repair ledger. At every inspection point, Unwerth would make some observations then walk over to the book the servitor held for him. With an ink pen, Unwerth carefully added any work needed to the manifest list, which the crew would consult later as they rostered for repair duties. A simple data-slate would have done the job, but Unwerth had a particular devotion to the sheer material substance of paper.

The shipmaster's penmanship, like the shipmaster himself, was small and intricate.

"Sub-duct one-three-four-one, lower service deck, renew insulation on power trunking and replace digita valves two-six-two through two-six-nine," he murmured to himself as he wrote, timing the words to the speed of his pen, so they came out with an odd, halting cadence. He screwed the lid back on the pen. "There. That is a sufficiency in this venue. Let us constitute ourselves to the next juncture." He set off. The three servitors twitched and abruptly rattled along in his wake. He stopped suddenly and examined part of the dingy hallway's wall. "Oh dear. Bless me, no. That's unacceptable. See, this formentable rustication?"

The three servitors cocked their metal skulls. "Rustication of this magnetism is unacceptable, as it underwhelms the integrated solidnessity of the vessel." Unwerth unscrewed his pen and made some more fastidious notes.

"Lower service deck, treat rusticated wall patches with sealant. Also buff theresaid."

They continued with their tour and entered the gloomy cave of the ship's rear hold. It was a poor twilight in here, half the overhead lumins out of action (Unwerth noted this carefully). There was also some buckling to several of the deck plates. Unwerth had the two repair units hold up their photovoltaic lamps and aim the beams at the floor while he hunched down to inspect it.

There was another creak of metal, but Unwerth ignored it. He ran his fingers over the damaged deck-section and tutted quietly. Then something blocked out the light of the lamps.

"Arise them gainfully, you defuncts!" he called out. He was still in shadow.

"You," said a voice. It was low, so very, very deep.

Sholto Unwerth turned and gazed up at the titanic figure behind him. He blinked. He knew all too well who this man was, and what line of business he was in.

"I do not have a remembrance of inviting you aboard my ship, Master Worna," he said, trying and, for the most part, failing to keep the note of anxiety out of his voice.

"That's because you didn't, Unwerth," replied Lucius Worna.

"You know m-my name?"

“Sholto Unwerth, shipmaster of the *Arethusa*. It’s my business to know facts like that. Particularly as I’ve been looking for you.”

“L-looking? For me? W-why? Why? Why for have you been looking for me?”

“Because we’re going to have a conversation.”

“I have nothing to converse with you, sir. My lips are soiled.”

“I heard you usually had plenty to say Unwerth. A babbler, that’s what I’ve heard. Plenty to say and ninety per cent of it crap. I’m interested in the ten per cent of sense you sometimes manage.”

Unwerth drew himself up to his full height — which put his eyes on a level with Worna’s navel — and said, “I would be most ingratiutious if you were kindly permissive and removed your personable from my ship.”

Lucius Worna turned casually and struck one of the repair servitors with the back of his hand. The force of the brutal slap sent the delicate machine tumbling across the deck, dented and cracked, sparks fizzling from torn hoses and servo-meshes. “A conversation,” he rumbled. “End of story.”

Worna took the shipmaster up to the small retiring lounge behind the bridge. En route, Unwerth saw other intruders aboard his ship, rough-looking crew-types, all of them armed with handguns. They were standing watch at hatches and junctions, ready to greet any of Unwerth’s own crew who came back. Several more were on the bridge itself, searching through the database and the paper records.

Unwerth would have been bristling with outrage, if total fear hadn’t been eclipsing every other emotion and thought. He was not a brave man, and avoided confrontation at all costs. In a quiet life of trading, he’d never been boarded, never been attacked, and never had his life and welfare threatened so comprehensively.

He said nothing, just did what he was told. Worna indicated he should sit down on the leather bench built into the retiring cabin’s end wall.

Worna remained standing. The bounty hunter idly began to unclasp and remove the armoured gauntlets of his carapace armour, and set them on a side table. His big hands were as scarred and gnarled as his head.

“You were at Bonner’s Reach, for Firetide.”

Unwerth shrugged, not sure if it was a question, and not at all certain he wanted to answer it if it was.

“Then you came down the sub-lane during the course of the season, via Encage, Bostol, that route. And ended up here, six days ago.”

Unwerth shrugged again.

“Good trip, was it? Good trade? You carry cargo?”

“Some pulchritude of an amount. It has been a poor season.”

“Gonna get worse yet,” Worna said. “What about passengers?”

Unwerth said nothing.

Worna smiled. “You’re afraid of me, aren’t you?”

“I cannot receive of a notion why I shouldn’t be.”

“Damn right. I’m a scary man. And maybe that’s what’s gluing up your famous blabbermouth. Maybe you’d be happier talking to a kindred soul?”

Worna went to the cabin door and beckoned for someone. A red-haired man in a jacket of Vitrian glass entered the room.

“Hello, Unwerth,” he said. “You know who I am?”

Unwerth nodded. “Master Siskind of the *Allure*.”

“Now don’t mind Lucius here. He’s working for me. Help me out, and I won’t pay him to damage you.”

“I am most revived to hear so, Master Siskind. In what fashionable way can I help you?”

“Let me start by apologising, Unwerth,” Siskind said. “Boarding your ship like this, taking control. No master likes to be treated like that.”

“Indeed not.”

“But understand, until I get what I want, my men will remain in control. And any of your crew who tries to alter that fact will regret it. I’m looking for the *Oktober Country*, Unwerth. I’m looking for the *Oktober Country* and its master, Kizary Thekla.”

Unwerth cleared his throat. “Then you have importuned your radiation in the unrequisite direction, Master Siskind. I am not he, nor is he here, in manner of fact. When last I left my eyes on him, he was at the Reach, during Firetide.”

“You saw him there?” Siskind said, picking up an astrolabe from a shelf and toying with it.

“In consideration, yes. I spoke at him. He was deferably present, as was Master Akunin, and other worthied eminencies of their cartel.”

“All of whom had left the Reach by the time I put in.” Siskind told Worna. He looked back at Unwerth. “What did you talk to Thekla about?”

“I took a meeting with the beneficial master, and extravagated about mercantile dealings that might arise, perspicaciously, between our two selves.”

Siskind burst out laughing. “Unwerth, Unwerth... the cartel Thekla and Akunin belong to is out of my league, let alone yours. How do you deal with the shame, trying to broker deals with men like that? Throne, you’re a nothing. A nobody midget in a tramp ship.”

Blinking hard, Unwerth looked aside.

“Listen to me, Unwerth,” Siskind said. “I was supposed to meet Thekla at the Reach, but I was delayed. By the time I’d got there, he’d gone. Under normal circumstances, he would have left a message for me, but he didn’t. Naturally, I was worried. So I hired Master Worna to do some hunting around. Guess what he turned up?”

“I have no ideology of that answer,” Unwerth said.

“Just after Firetide, a bulk lifter, registered — according to its transponder codes — to the *Oktober Country*, docked at Bonner’s Reach. Its occupants were not identified. In fact, the Vigilants’ records show the lifter’s occupants chose anonymity. But there’s one thing the records do show. Those people, whoever they were, took a private meeting with you. Shortly after, this heap of junk left the Reach and began its journey here.”

“Who were those people?” Worna asked.

“I can’t quite reminisce...” Unwerth began.

“Don’t give me that!” Siskind spat. “We saw the records. Facts, Unwerth. Don’t embarrass yourself with a lie. Either you met with Thekla, or with representatives of his ship, or you met with people who had somehow acquired a lifter belonging to the *Oktober Country*. Which was it?”

Sholto Unwerth, so small his feet swung off the bench seat and didn’t reach the ground, bravely shook his head.

“You carried passengers on this run, didn’t you?” Worna growled. “All the way from the Reach to Eustis.”

“Just cargo,” Unwerth said.

“Ornales?” Siskind called. Another man came into the cabin, and handed Siskind one of the *Arethusa*’s leather-bound manifests. Siskind skimmed through the pages to the last entry.

“Here, in your own hand, Unwerth. Passage arranged from Bonner’s Reach to Eustis Majoris. Eight persons. Price agreed. No names recorded.”

Unwerth knew when lying was hopeless. “I was pertained by those persons to act as conveyance. They have quit the ship now.”

“Who were they?”

“Traders, I conceive. I asked no query of them.”

“Come on, you little bastard!”

"If I knew names." Unwerth blurted, "I would not obligate you with them! A shipmaster and his clients enrapture the principles of privatisation and confidence! As a master yourself, you know that!"

"You know," grinned Siskind, handing the manifest back to his first officer, "I admire your professionalism, Unwerth, I really do. Client confidentiality. That's something I try to uphold in every circumstance. But I'd waive the privilege like a shot if my ship was being held by force and I was in the same room as Lucius Worna. So... give me the damn names."

"No," said Unwerth.

"All right, answer this. What do you know of a man named Gideon Ravenor?"

"Nothing," said Sholto Unwerth flatly.

Siskind turned to Worna. "Your witness," he said.

Lucius Worna reached into a belt pouch and took something out that began to chitter and vibrate.

"Know what a cisor is?" he asked.

Unwerth shook his head and slowly shrank back into the couch until he could go no further.

"Well," said Worna. "You're going to find out. Unless you answer the questions. Do you know Gideon Ravenor?"

"Yes," said Unwerth.

"He was your passenger? Him and his team?"

"Yes," Unwerth said in a tiny, tiny voice.

"Now we're getting somewhere. What happened to Thekla and his ship?"

"I don't know! In absolution, I do not! They did not tell me!"

"Maybe they didn't. All right, here's another. Where is Ravenor and his crew now?"

"I don't know. On the surface. That's all I can explicate, to the best margin of my knowing."

"On the surface. Uh huh. And how do you contact them?"

"I don't! Our arrangementage is finished!"

"You must know where they are, what they're doing?"

"I applore you, I don't! They made a special immensity of not telling me the pertinence of their business! They said I shouldn't know for the good of my health!"

Lucius Worna slowly raised the sawing cisor.

"How wrong they were," he said.

FOURTEEN

Piece by piece, Carl Thonius was extracting the secrets of Tchaikov's riddle box. He'd been deciphering for two days. He wrote every scrap of data down on index cards and soft-gummed them to the wall of the east bedroom, rearranging them as more details fitted in. The entire wall was speckled with cards. Every once in a while Carl went to his cogitators, and checked a fact via his link to the Informium, or ran details through his arithmometer.

The sheer scale of the Contract Thirteen operation was becoming evident. It had been going on for years. I had suspected that thousands of tainted devices had been smuggled into Petropolis, but the actual figure was currently close to five million.

Five million! If that were true, vast substrates of the Administratum in the hive were currently using warp-infected engines on a daily basis. And the Contract Thirteen cartel had become very rich indeed. It was evident from the funds Tchaikov had been laundering for them. The Contract itself had paid out well, regularly, and it had been fearsomely supplemented by the trade in flects.

The foolish trade in flects. The greedy side-order they hadn't been able to resist, the very reason I had discovered their vile dealings in the first place. Their own greed had betrayed them.

I was still troubled by the deeper connections. The vein of *Cogitae* that ran through the players in this game. Thekla, Tchaikov, Siskind, though I didn't think that last fool was a player anymore. Trice intrigued me, given his power and status, and Carl had been unable to draw up any background on the man. But I knew he employed powerful psykers. Kinsky, for one, and the unidentified fellow at the diplomatic palace. Then, of course, there had been the assassination attempt itself. Trice had other enemies. Enemies who could conjure an incunabula. My gut feeling was the Divine Fraternity. Carl's initial findings showed they had cells operating on Eustis. That made me especially wary.

I was locked into their future predictions, their prospects. If they were attacking Trice, that meant my struggle with the cartel was somehow interfering with the fearful event that they were so keen to see happen.

So many pieces, like a vast game of regicide. At the centre of it all, I worried, was the mysterious, prophesied figure known as Slyte. The Divine Fraternity's messiah. What was he, what was it?

Zael's true name was Sleet. He was a mirror farseer, and so, by Eisenhower's definition, especially luminous to the fraters. Had I really been so gullible as to accept a daemon into my midst? Was my sympathy for Zael my undoing, and the undoing of a subsector besides?

I prayed not. I was a man of careful, considered ambition. Though everything pointed to Zael, that seemed too easy. From experience, I know the universe is a far, far more complex mechanism.

I hovered behind Carl as he continued his work. He seemed to me to be edgy and restless. When he mis-struck a key on the board of his cogitator, he cursed and oathed.

+Gently.+

"So much data," he murmured. "So much to co-ordinate. It gets me worked up."

One thing we had fathomed from the riddle box: some of the cartel members had grown so rich on their profits that they had already quit and retired. That was virtually unheard of, a rogue trader selling up his ship and retiring to a life of luxury. But such were the vast earnings of these men. Marebos had purchased an entire island on Messina. Braeden had retreated to a castellated abbey above the Great Falls on Mirepoix. Counting their money, no doubt, rolling in it.

Athen Strykson had sold his ship and, combining that huge fund with his cartel earnings, had bought a retreat in a private canton of his homeworld.

Athen Strykson came from Eustis Majoris. The place he had purchased was in Farthingale, a rural seat fifteen hundred kilometres inland from Petropolis hive. For the first time in our investigation, we had an opportunity to meet with a cartel member face to face.

Nayl, Kys and Mathuin were en route right now. They were going to ask the ex-shipmaster a few pointed questions.

“So much data.” Carl complained again, pasting another card on the wall. “Couldn’t Zael help?”

“No.” I transponded. “I sent him to the kitchen to brew you some caff.” Truth was, I wanted Zael as far away from this as possible. If he *was* Slyte...

There was a chime alarm. I heard Frauka go to the front door. He came back and leaned in to see me. “It’s the physician,” he said.

I left Carl to his work and hovered down to greet Belknap. True to his promise, he’d come back to check on Kara.

He stood in the doorway, his bag in his hand.

“Medicae.”

“Inquisitor.”

“I appreciate this.”

“Good.”

“Come up.”

He followed me up the stairs. He was a good man, a very principled man, I could feel that now, just as Kys had told me.

We went down the upper corridor towards Kara’s room. A cry stopped him in his tracks.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Nothing that needs to concern you, doctor.” I replied.

Another cry.

“You want me to trust you, don’t you?” Belknap said, turning to face me. “What the Throne was that?”

“Our guest.” I replied. “He does that from time to time.”

“Let me see him.”

“No.”

“Then I’m leaving Ravenor.”

“Very well.”

I led Belknap down the hall and nudged open the door of Skoh’s room. Pulling at his shackles, Skoh screamed again for effect.

“Holy Throne...” Belknap said, gazing into the room.

“They’re chafing me!” Skoh cried. “They’re chafing my wrists so sore!” He held up the manacles to show us.

“This is disgraceful,” Belknap said.

“Skoh is my prisoner. A dangerous man. Don’t pity him, whatever you do.” I said.

Belknap glowered at me. “He’s a man even so, stricken in health. My oath as a medicae means I have to see to him.”

“Very well.”

Belknap walked over to Skoh and examined his manacles.

“You have to release him. The binders are rubbing him raw and the sores are infected.”

“He is an enemy of the Imperium, doctor,” I said. “The binders stay on.”

“Then I have to take him to the local medicae facility...”

“No,” I said. “I told you that secrecy was our only power here. Take Skoh to the local infirmary and he’ll blow our cover. He knows too much.”

“Then what would you have me do, inquisitor?”

“Treat him.”

Belknap produced a liniment from his bag and began to smooth the cream into Skoh’s wrists. “It’s a start,” he said. “But I’m still not happy.”

Kara Swole was asleep when we went in. The medical apparatus Belknap had ordered was set up around her bed, pulsing and blinking.

“Glory,” Belknap said, looking at the equipment. “I made a list of things that would be useful and you went out and bought them all?”

“I value Kara very much.”

“All this stuff,” Belknap said. “You don’t blink at the price. I could have equipped an entire low-stack surgery with this. What kind of people are you?”

“The kind that will donate all of this to your practice, once we’re done.” I said.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and started to examine Kara’s belly wound.

She rolled in her sleep and mumbled.

I went out of the room.

“Vox from Nayl,” Frauka said. “They’re in position and await your pleasure.”

“Understood,” I said. “Listen, Wystan, things are going to be quiet around her for a few hours. Why don’t you take Zael to a gallery? Maybe a museum. With so few of us around, I’d rather not leave him here to his own devices. Given what you told me.”

“I understand,” he said. “You want him kept away from anything sensitive when there’s no one around. No problem.”

He went off to find the boy. I slid into Carl’s room. “I’m going bodiless to work with Harlon. Wystan’s taking Zael on an excursion so you’ll be able to concentrate on the work.”

“Good,” he said.

“Don’t forget to check on Skoh.”

“Of course not.”

I went back into my private room, locked off my chair’s mobilisers, and sent my mind into the sky.

Waring Zeph Mathuin, I walked up the gravel path to join Kys and Harlon. Farthingale was a quiet interior town of broad avenues and pollarded trees. The sky was cloudy and morose. Athen Strykson’s mansion lay before us.

“Let’s go and present ourselves,” I said. We walked down to the gatehouse. Through the locked iron gates, we could see a dark space of lawn, and a path lined with enamel obelisks that led up to the mansion’s main doors.

Kys rang the bell-pull. The three of us were wearing simple black suits and long coats of grey wool.

“Who visits?” the vox speaker on the gatehouse wall crackled.

Kys leaned close to the speaking cone. “Department of Tithe and Tariff,” she replied.

“You said your name was Belknap?” Kara asked. She was sitting in the chair beside her bed. Her cheeks were pale and drawn.

“That’s right,” he said, adjusting the dials of one of the machines.

“What you’re doing, all these tests. It’s very thorough.”

"I'm a thorough person, Mamzel Swole."

"Even so..."

"You were injured by a so-called vampire blade," Belknap said. "The injury is more than a stab wound. I need to run a complete biological audit to make sure there are no... secondary problems."

"You've stabilised the blade wound. It's no longer a threat."

"Yes, but as I said, I need to—"

Kara looked at Belknap. "There's no need for the cover story, doctor. The fact you want to run more tests has nothing to do with the blade injury. You picked up on something else while you were treating that. I know."

"I see."

"So, go on." Kara stared at him, smiling.

Belknap took a deep breath and handed her a display slate. "The expensive instruments your master has brought in don't lie. You know what this is?"

"I knew before the blade bit me," Kara said flatly.

"Did you?"

"Of course. I checked myself on a weekly basis using Unwerth's autodoc."

"Who's Unwerth?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter," she replied quickly. "What matters is I know what this is. Astroblastoma. Last year, I took a leap off a docking bay in a vacc-suit. Exposed myself to megawatts of rad. I hoped the suit was shielded."

"I don't think it was."

"Seems so. How long have I got?"

Belknap looked at the floor. "No more than six months, Mamzel Swole. I'm sorry."

"Why, it's not your fault. Treatments?"

"The condition is terminal. You understand that? There are certain palliatives that can make you more comfortable. And angiogenesis inhibitors that buy you a little more time, although carcinomatosis has begun."

"The cancer's spreading to other parts of my body, you mean?"

"Yes. Or you were so comprehensively irradiated you are developing multiple oncological responses."

"How long will I remain... active?"

"With good fortune and the proper care, three or four months." Belknap replied. "Look, you need some rest now. I'll come back tomorrow and we can discuss how we're going to approach your treatment."

"We?" Kara asked.

"You're my patient now," he said.

Kara reached out a hand and caught him gently by the sleeve. "One thing, Master Belknap, more important than anything else. Please don't tell anyone about this yet. Not my friends. Not Ravenor. Especially not Ravenor. All right?"

Belknap nodded.

FIFTEEN

“You’re who?” asked the housekeeper warily.

“Department of Tithe and Tariff.” Kys repeated politely. She showed the man her permit, and Harlon and I did the same. The man looked at them with some alarm, but seemed convinced. He ought to be. The permits were authentic. Carl had got them for us from the Informium itself.

We had been let into the vestibule of Strykson’s home. It was gloomy and cold: though the day was grey and overcast, no interior lights had been switched on. There wasn’t any sound except the ticking of a longcase chron and the clack of rooks cawing reedily out in the damp gardens.

“What is this about?” the housekeeper said. In my opinion, he was the least convincing thing around. A hard bodied man in early middle-age, he seemed more like a guard than a housekeeper. His voice and gestures certainly lacked the poise and polish that might have been expected of a senior servant or butler.

“We’ve been sent to undertake a surprise inspection of Master Strykson’s financial records,” Kys said.

“What? Why?” asked the man.

“We should discuss that with Master Strykson himself, or with a clerk who can legally speak on his behalf.”

As Kys spoke with him, I looked into his mind and learned some basic facts. His name was Geren Felt and he was a member of Strykson’s house security. A few days earlier, following some incident in the hive — news of which had greatly distressed Strykson — the house staff had been scaled down to security personnel only. Felt had been ordered to act as housekeeper and answer any calls. Things were afoot, but Felt was too junior to be privy to what. All he was sure of was that he had to check the sudden arrival of Imperial tax inspectors with his superiors.

“Wait here, please,” he said and hurried off. He took our permits with him.

+Strykson’s expecting trouble.+ I sent as we waited.

+Figures.+ Kys answered. +He must’ve heard that Tchaikov’s dead by now, so he knows the cartel is potentially under threat. And he’s the most visible member.+

I gently scanned the building. +There are eight people here with us. No, nine. A general sense of anxiety and suspicion directed at us. Tension.+

I sensed Nayl about to place a hand under his coat.

+No. I told you how we’d play this.+

Nayl’s hand slid out.

Felt returned. He didn’t have our permits, nor did he pass any comment on their absence. “This way, if you please.”

He led us out of the vestibule, into a wide hall where a grand staircase rose above us, along another stretch of corridor, under an arch and into a large salon intended for the entertainment of guests. The short trip was illuminating to me. I sensed the primed sentry gunpods concealed behind the vestibule doors, auto-tracking our heat as we went by. I sensed the guard with the hellgun poised behind the side arch of the hall, and the other two guards, both armed with lasrifles, up on the staircase landing out of sight. I felt the heartbeats of the men concealed behind the salon doors, weapons drawn, ready to enter. I touched the hard metal shapes of remote-operated plasma beamers in the false wall behind the salon’s wood panelling, their focus-nozzles aimed at us. I saw the

electromagnetic shimmer of the multiple security picters tracking us as we walked, and gently psy-blurred our features so they wouldn't read cleanly.

And I sensed the aide in an adjoining chamber, frantically checking our permits via a secure vox-link to Petropolis.

+The house staff are all around us, armed and ready to spring. Automated weapons systems too, the house is wired. Be wary but show no sign. Let's see how this plays.+

"Uh, tea? Caffeine perhaps?" Felt said awkwardly. From his agitated surface thoughts, I knew he had a sting-blunt tucked into the waistband of his trousers, though he wasn't thinking about how quickly he could draw it. He was calculating which item of furniture in the room he should throw himself behind if things went awry.

"No, thank you," said Kys.

We stood, waiting. I felt the tension swell to bursting point, the men hidden around us on a hair-trigger. I sent my mind back to the aide in the nearby chamber, watched as he spoke on the vox, read out our permit numbers, waited, and finally nodded.

"They're clear. Genuine," he called.

The automated weapon systems switched to "safety" and depowered. The waiting men stood down and retreated.

+We're fine.+

Athen Strykson came into the salon.

He was a tall, long-faced man with thin black hair and quick, intelligent eyes. He wore a well-tailored suit of selpic tarsh, and nodded to us politely.

"I wasn't told to expect a visit," he said. He had our permits in his hand. He waved Felt out of the room.

"The department makes special visits from time to time. Unannounced. In our experience, notification of a visit sometimes gives a citizen undue opportunity for concealment." Kys smiled at him. "I'm sorry if this is inconvenient. You are Athen Strykson?"

"Yes, I am. Can you tell me what this is about?"

"You've recently taken up residence here on Eustis Majoris?" Nayl asked.

"I have. I'm retired. I bought this place nine months ago."

"Your previous employment was as a shipmaster?" Kys said.

"I was an owner-master. Seventy-nine years. Made my fortune, as they say, and came here to enjoy it. Look, my financial agents logged all my records with your department for the purposes of disclosure and estimation of tariff burden. Everything is in order."

"Indeed," said Nayl. He opened the small black case he was carrying and took out a data-slate. "The finance agency you retain has been very forthcoming and thorough. However, we have found a discrepancy that they are unable to account for."

Strykson's face darkened. "I do hope not. It cost me a significant sum to set up residency on this world. I did everything by the book, under advice. Paid what seemed like extravagant sums to the taxation department in recognition of my base worth. There were additional tariffs, settlement clauses, exchange considerations. Adopting the life of — aha — a simple citizen of this fine world cost me an exorbitant amount. Which I gave freely. I did not expect further swingeing demands to be made."

"Of course not," Kys said.

"Though that is perhaps a matter you should take up with your finance agents." Nayl added.

"We're just doing our job," Kys said.

"I know, I know," Strykson said, half-smiling and raising his hand. I had been probing him gently while the discourse distracted him. He was wearing a psy-blocker in a silver charm around his neck, a fairly powerful device, but nothing like strong enough to keep me out. By the time he was half-smiling and raising his hand, I had deactivated it and moved into his mind.

What I found there was a curious mixture of annoyance and relief. Strykson had indeed been told about Tchaikov's demise. He'd had a call from Akunin, warning him. Akunin had been furious, complaining that Trice had refused to meet with him to discuss the matter.

"The bastard won't take it seriously." Akunin had told Strykson. "He thinks Tchaikov fell foul of a black market rival."

"That's possible, isn't it?" Strykson had said.

"We chose her in the first place because she was a genuine player." Akunin had said. "No underworld rival would dare go up against her. Just watch yourself, Athen. If someone's on to us, you will be next. You're the easiest one of us to find."

Scared, Strykson had sealed his house and waited for the worst. Our knock on the door had jarred his nerves. He'd come very close to panic. Now, as it seemed, he had an impertinent but authentic visit from the tithe department to deal with. His relief was considerable. He'd thought for a moment some nemesis - the sort of force that had slaughtered Tchaikov and her retinue — had found him. All the same, he was exasperated. He'd been assured, by the Ministry operatives who had overseen his settlement, that his tax affairs would not be subject to scrutiny by the Department of Tithe and Tariff. One more perk of Contract Thirteen.

From his surface thoughts, I could read all the things that he thought had been covered up, all the things he was afraid might come out. Undeclared funds, sequestered shares, false business accounts, unpaid duty on—

There we go. I didn't want to rip into his mind and strip it. I didn't want him to even know what I was doing. This form of telepathic manipulation was akin to hypnotism, to gentle persuasion, to suggestion. His brain whirling with financial concerns, he was ripe and ready to give everything up.

"Master Strykson," I said, speaking for the first time. "There is the matter of mercantile process duty." I spoke the words, forming Mathuin's voice into a smooth tone that would play mesmerically with a susceptible mind, but I also cast them, a telepathic echo to the speech. The echo was what really got under his skin.

"Process duty?"

"On the sale of your vessel, the *Bucentaur*. If the affidavits of fiscal gain and letters of dispensation signed by the agents are accurate, then the figures for anchorage tax and mercantile process duty are out by a factor of thirty-two per cent."

The true figure was twenty-six, but I wanted him to be alarmed. A startled mind is even easier to control.

"Thirty-two?"

"In wharfinger revenues alone, it is off by a margin of point nine. But mercantile process is our main concern, the department's key area of discrepancy. The freight stamps are overdue by..."

+Eight years.+

"Eight years," said Nayl, pretending to consult his slate.

"Eight years?" Strykson said, sitting down.

+And the tonnage band is wrongly declared.+

"And the tonnage band is wrongly declared," Kys said.

+The *Bucentaur* was a class seven.+

"Because the *Bucentaur* was a class seven," she finished.

"Throne." Strykson whispered. "What is the duty remaining?"

"The duty outstanding at this time," I said, "allowing for interest, is..."

+Is this, Athen. How long were you working for the cartel?+

Still caught up in his financial worries, Strykson shrugged. "No more than four years." He thought he was telling us about freight stamps.

+Who brought you in?+

"Akunin and Vygold."

+How many runs did you make to the Mergent Worlds?+

“Nine.” Strykson murmured, believing he had just explained how hard it was to get the fiscal reserve to advance mortgage on a ship sale.

“Yes, that is always a difficulty,” I said aloud.

“The sale was handled by the brokers of the Navis Nobilite,” Strykson said. “Gods, this is terrible. I need caffeine. Do you need caffeine?”

+You don’t need caffeine.+

“I don’t need caffeine,” he said, sitting down again, shaking his head. “Sorry, what did you just ask me?”

+Why did you leave the cartel?+

“I’d earned enough. I mean, more than I’d ever dreamed. I was tired of the void. It seemed like a good opportunity.” He paused and looked up, puzzled. “Was I... was I just talking about why I retired?” he said.

I tightened my mental hold slightly, like a wrestler changing grips.

+No, Athen. You were telling me who you worked for. Who organised Contract Thirteen.+

“Oh well, it was Akunin’s show. Him and Thekla, to begin with. They brought the rest of us in. Akunin liked to boast that his orders came from Jader Trice. But Thekla once told me that was just what Akunin liked to say. Pretending he had a direct line to the chief provost. The actual orders came via the Secretists.”

+Who are the Secretists?+

Strykson looked up and smiled. In his mind, he was gleefully telling me how the Navis Nobilite brokers couldn’t be trusted with a decent ship-sale if their eyes depended on it. His mouth was saying, “I don’t know. That’s the point. The Secretists are secret. They enforce the will of the Diadochoi. They cover up and protect his actions. And they’re bloody good at it too. Throne, I wouldn’t want to cross one of them! I met one once, at a dinner. Revoke, his name was. Akunin’s chief contact. The man was a monster. A stone killer.”

+What else can you tell me about this Revoke?+

“Nothing, not much. Yellow eyes, that’s what I remember. Yellow frigging eyes...” Strykson’s voice trailed off. As far as he would remember, he’d just said, “Never trust a broker. They don’t include windfall tariff in their estimates, and they try to claw thirteen per cent back at the sale.”

+What is the Diadochoi?+

“The heir. The successor. The one that shall be.”

+Is Jader Trice the Diadochoi?+

Strykson laughed out loud and stood up. “Of course not! He’s just the chief facilitator! The Diadochoi’s right-hand man.”

+Sit back down.+

He sat, subdued suddenly.

+The Diadochoi is someone more senior than the chief provost?+

“Yes. Of course,” Strykson said quietly.

With Zeph’s eyes, I glanced at Kys and Harlon.

+What is the purpose of Contract Thirteen?+ Kys sent seductively.

Strykson looked up. “To obtain data engines from the Mergent Worlds, Spica Maximal particularly, and supply them to the Ministries here on Eustis Majoris.”

+For what purpose?+

Strykson blinked. “I honestly have no idea,” he said.

He wasn’t lying.

“Let us consider your duty claims and compensatories,” I said.

“Oh, all right...” sighed Athen Strykson.

SIXTEEN

Late afternoon, the city blurred by rain outside the windows. The Special Crime office should have been bustling at this hour. But Interior Cases had suspended everyone the morning before, and technicians had dismantled all the cogitators and taken them away, along with the mountains of paperwork and file cartons.

The quiet was funereal. Even the air systems had been turned off. Rickens wandered the length of the main office space, his cane tapping. This was so wrong. In all his years of devoted service, he'd never...

He heard a hatch open behind him, and turned. Sankels, big and barrel-chested in his service uniform, strode up between the empty desks until he was face to face with Rickens. Straight-backed compared to Rickens' hunched posture, Sankels was significantly younger, taller and more massive than the deputy magistratum. He looked down at Rickens with hooded eyes.

"You got my message?"

"Yes," said Rickens.

"It's for the best," Sankels said. "A man with your career record and good reputation, with retirement prospects. It makes sense. This is a dreadful mess, Rickens, and there's no need to be dragged down with it. A quiet resignation, retirement on non-specific health grounds. Your pension will be secure. You'll be clear of anything that transpires."

"And you come in and clean house once I'm gone?"

"Simply put," said Sankels. He held out his hand, palm up. "So?"

"So?"

"Your resignation, Deputy Rickens?"

"You honestly thought I'd fold and make it that easy for you, Sankels?" Rickens said.

The head of Interior Cases coloured slightly and withdrew his hand. "Don't do this," he breathed through clenched teeth. "Don't even begin to—"

"I am an officer of the Imperial Magistratum," Rickens said. "Sworn to uphold civic law and the justice of the Emperor of Mankind. I protect the codes and practices that make our common freedom possible. I am not going to stand aside and make things easy for you."

Sankels turned away and then snapped back round again, aiming a finger at Rickens' face. Rickens didn't flinch. "You don't even begin to comprehend what you're dealing with!" Sankels shouted.

"No, I don't." Rickens agreed calmly. "I have absolutely no idea what is going on, what great darkness Interior Cases is closing ranks to conceal, except that my department has clearly stumbled on something important and has therefore been selected to take the fall."

"You—"

"I'll finish what I'm saying, Sankels. I know your department's close connection to the Ministry of Subsector Trade, I know your close co-operative relationship with the chief provost. I don't question that the attempt on Provost Trice's life the other night was an act to be deplored by us all. I accept there may be matters of confidence, state secrets that I cannot be party to. But I will not allow my department to be sacrificed. If I resign, there will be no process of inquiry. No impediment to the swift and total disintegration of Special Crime."

Rickens took a sheaf of papers from his coat pocket. "I have been in correspondence today, sir, with the Justiciary, the Advocate's department, and the office of the Subsector Arbites. I have consulted with legal counsel. If I refuse to resign, you'll have to impeach me or charge me. Either way, there will be a thorough legal examination of this matter. No cover up. No conspiracy. If the accusations levelled against this department, and the men and women who serve it, are true, you will have to evidence those facts and develop a case that the Justiciary can try. If we're guilty, let us be found guilty. I will not be party to a backroom coup and the indiscriminate usurpation of constitutional process by a department that, in my opinion, is too powerful already. Interior Cases is part of the law, Sankels, not above it."

"And you'll refuse to resign quietly, just to prove that point?"

"I won't budge, Sankels. I see it as my duty to the Throne itself."

Sankels looked Rickens up and down slowly. "Investigation and trial will destroy you, Rickens. Your reputation, your good name. I was trying to spare you the shame and ignominy."

"I don't think that's what you were doing at all," Rickens said. He walked past Sankels and headed for the door. "I'm going home now. Tomorrow morning, I have the first of what I imagine will be a considerable number of meetings with Justiciary counsel in preparation for your investigation. They will of course require access to all the files and digital documents you removed from this office. And I'm sure that one of their first recommendations will be for me to contact the Officio Inquisitoras Planetia to inform them of the impending legal action." Sankels started to say something, then closed his mouth. "Good night to you, sir," said Rickens, and left the room.

Sankels stood alone for a moment, then took his hand-vox from its belt pouch. He selected a secure channel.

"This is Sankels. I'm going to need a meeting with the chief provost at his earliest convenience."

Orfeo Culzean was sipping nettle tea and reading when the fraters called upon him unannounced. It was early evening, and the climate in the Regency Viceroy suite had been notched up to counter the inclement weather outside. Culzean sat at a desk, surrounded by old manuscripts, ancient documents recorded in slate-form and crumbling books. The current volume under inspection was written in a xeno script, and he was having to hold up a bulky brass translation viewer in front of his eyes like opera glasses. The simivulpa was playing under his chair.

Orfeo Culzean had almost filled the memory of a data-slate with notes from his reading. Enuncia. He wondered if it could possibly be true.

"The fraters have come to see you," Leyla Slade said.

Culzean lowered his viewer. "Now?"

"Shall I tell them you're not available?"

"No, I am in their employ. Show them in. But, Leyla?"

"Sir?"

"Lurk, please."

She nodded. She showed the fraters in.

"Frater Arthous. Frater Stefoy," Culzean said as he rose to his feet.

The men bowed. Not so much respect today, Culzean thought. Their real eyes were patched.

"We look upon you, Orfeo Culzean," said Stefoy.

"I wasn't expecting you," Culzean said. "Would you care for refreshment?"

"No, thank you," said Arthous. He took a small piece of folded silk out of his pocket with his scarred fingers and unwrapped it. In the centre was the buckled piece of focus ring.

"For your collection, as requested."

Culzean took it and examined it. "Wonderful. Thank you. But I can't believe the two of you came here just to give me this."

“No,” said Stefoy. “The magus-clancular asked us to attend you and update you on the prospect.”

“As per your advice,” Arthous said, “the Fraternity has been examining the meniscus to see what determiners may have changed, and how this may effect the likelihood of the prospect.”

“You’ll be pleased to know that the percentage likelihood has not declined. Indeed,” said Stefoy, “it may have increased. Though still living, Trice may have been altered as a determiner.”

“I expected as much. Trice will be fearful, and cautious. That will stay his hand, and to our advantage. Good. I’m pleased.”

Arthous took out a piece of paper. “Also one of the newer determiners has been read as becoming significantly more important during the last ten hours.”

“Indeed. A negative?” asked Culzean.

“No, a positive,” replied Arthous.

Culzean took the paper and read it. This name again. “Do we know who it is? Who it means?”

“We’re looking into that now,” replied Stefoy. “Belknap,” Culzean murmured to himself. “Belknap...”

The good doctor had gone for the day, Kara was asleep, and Miserimus was quiet. Carl Thonius left his whirring cogitators and the wall of pasted index cards for a moment and walked about the halls and landings of the house to clear his head and loosen his limbs.

He felt ill, and he knew why. He tried to put it out of his mind, but it nagged. The need, pecking at the shell of his resolve. It should never have got like this, he thought to himself. Never. He was a fool and if he didn’t stop he would be found out and everything would—

Everything would be bad.

Carl paused in front of a full-length mirror in the hallway. He saw himself, looking tired, sort of ill. His skin was pale and dry, his eyes shadowed. But still, he thought, I cut quite a dash. The black tunic coat and trousers, the black boots, a subtle look today, though that subtlety was perfectly counterpointed by the cazurite brooch on his lapel.

Then he thought about what he was doing. Looking in a mirror. Looking in a mirror, in a mirror, in—

He tried to look away, but the feeling had dug too deep already. He walked into his room, opened a locked compartment in his trunk, and took out one of the parcels wrapped in red tissue paper.

He unwrapped it, his hands shaking, drew a deep breath, and looked down into the flect. What marvels this time? What rapture would—

He went blind. No, not blind. Deaf. No, not deaf—

Falling. He was falling. There was a pit filled with the darkest smoke of Old Night, and the flicker of forgotten suns, spinning into oblivion, and an ochone moaning that crackled like an untuned vox.

And there was something there in the darkness, swooping around him as he fell into the infinite, his mouth screaming but making no sound.

Something pale and cold, yet burning, something anguished and spavined, something old.

Something so dreadful. Sheer, inarticulate terror infected Carl Thonius like a disease and snorted like a beast behind his eyes.

His blood froze solid, crackling in his veins. His heart seized, a dead, leaden weight in his chest. His eyes caught fire.

And he died.

SEVENTEEN

A terrible, stunning blow struck the back of his head. It was the floor. He lay on his back, twitching, gurgling, then went still.

Seconds passed with glacial slowness. The cogitators clicked and hummed, auto-processing. Lamplight glinted off the open riddle box and the shattered flect on the floor.

With a sudden gasp, Carl sat up. He panted furiously, blinking. He tried to remember where he was. Who he was. There was a terrible taste in his mouth.

He looked around, and began to remember. There on the floor beside him, the broken flect.

“Oh, gods...” Thonius mumbled. Stupid, stupid, stupid...

He pulled himself to his feet. His skin was gooseflesh, his clothes cold and lank with sweat. He tried not to think of the things he’d witnessed in that moment. Stupid! STUPID!

“Bad trip,” he said out loud in a shaky voice. “That’s all it was. Bad trip. Your own stupid fault...”

He bent down and collected up the pieces of the broken flect, wrapped them in the tissue paper and hid them in his luggage.

Suddenly, he snapped round. How long had he been out? He looked at the chron on the desk. An hour. He’d lost an entire hour at least.

Something cried out and made him jump. For a second he thought it was the lamenting moan that had called out to him as he’d fallen into the pit and—

There was no pit. No darkness. No moaning. He breathed hard to control his panic. That had all been a dream, just a spasm in his mind. Everything was okay.

The cry came again. From along the hall.

“Shit!” Carl said. “Skoh!”

Thonius unlocked the door and looked in. Skoh sat on the chair staring at him.

“About time,” he said. “I’ve been calling. Calling for ages.”

“Well, I’m here now. What’s the problem?”

Skoh raised his manacled hands. “Same as usual. Cramps.”

“I thought the doctor gave you a liniment?” said Carl.

“For my skin, not the cramps,” said Skoh.

“All right.” Carl walked into the room until he was just beyond the reach of the floor chain. “You know the drill. Show me.”

Skoh raised his hands, to show that both of the heavy steel manacles were locked tight around his wrists.

Carl took the key from his pocket and tossed it to Skoh. The hunter caught it, undid his cuffs and began to rub his wrists.

“That’s enough,” said Carl.

“Give me a minute.” Skoh replied, flexing his aching joints.

“Now,” said Carl.

With a glare, Skoh locked the manacles back in place again. He tossed the key back to Carl.

“Show me.”

“What the hell’s wrong with your nose?” Skoh asked.

“What?”

“You’re bleeding,” Skoh said, nodding his head at Thonius. Carl felt at his face, saw the red on his fingertips.

“Damn it!” he said and went out, slamming the door and locking it. He hurried to the hall mirror. His nose was bleeding freely, and his eyes were hideously bloodshot. “Oh, Throne...” he whispered.

Feaver Skoh waited a few seconds, then slipped his hands out of the cuffs. He had re-locked them loose, but even so it skinned his knuckles pulling them off. The doctor’s greasy liniment helped. Without that lubrication...

He went to the door, knowing it was locked. No time for caution now. This was the chance, the fleeting chance.

Skoh was a strong man, and desperation made him stronger. One kick smashed the door out of its frame.

Carl turned at the crash. Skoh was already moving, charging him like a bull. The hunter body-slammed into Carl and drove him back into the wall, shattering the mirror. Carl tried to fight Skoh off, but the other man was much more powerful. He slammed Carl into the wall again, then punched him in the face. Carl flew backwards, hit the jamb of the doorway opposite and fell to the floor, unconscious.

Skoh thought for a second about finishing the job. It would be a pleasure to kill the bastard interrogator. But he knew there wasn’t time. If the others were about, they’d have heard all this. He ran for the stairs, flying down them.

In pyjama pants and a singlet, Kara emerged from her room. “Carl? What the hell’s going—”

She saw Skoh leaping down the staircase.

“Damn it, no!” she yelled, and ran after him, ignoring the pain in her belly. Skoh had a good lead. He was in the hall before she was even halfway down the stairs. Seeing her, he turned and hurled a hall chair at her. She ducked, and it broke against the heavy banister.

Skoh was at the front door, throwing the deadbolts, and then he was out, onto the path, into the cold grey evening.

Barefoot, in agony, Kara pursued him. Onto the street, the wide, quiet avenue. No traffic, no pedestrians. Just the high, ivy-clad walls of the neighbouring mansions, streetlamps, alarm posts.

Even hurt, she was fast. Sprinting furiously, she began to close the distance on the fleeing man. He couldn’t escape. He simply couldn’t. It would blow everything.

They reached the street corner. Kara was close enough to grab him now, but as she clawed out, her foot slipped on wet leaves and she fell sideways against a wall.

Kara howled. Something had torn — Belknap’s perfect stitching, probably. She tried to rise, but she couldn’t. The pain was awful. Blood was soaking the front of her singlet.

Skoh was disappearing down the street.

Carl Thonius leapt past her. Still running, he looked back. His face was a bloody mess. “Get back!” he yelled. “Get back and secure the house! Call the others!”

“Carl!”

“Do it! I’ll get Skoh!”

One hand on the wall, the other wrapped around her belly, Kara hobbled slowly back towards Miserimus.

As per his habit, Dersk Rickens got off the rail transit a stop early, and walked the last two kilometres to his home. He’d done it for years, mainly to ensure he maintained a modicum of exercise in his life. But he also liked the surface level streets of Formal E at night. The busy cafes, the dining houses, the music halls along the Griselda Wall.

It was dark now, the city lit up with yellow lamps, and there was a threat of rain in the air. Even so, he waved off the boy gampers who approached him as he came down Eisel Stack underwalk and limped up the steps onto the ironwork footbridge over the yawning hydroelectric canyon. There was no one on the bridge. A few spots of rain struck against the bridge's tintglass roof. A cold night wind, scented with nitric acid, blew in through the sides of the bridge's open framework.

Rickens tapped his cane along the bridge deck.

A figure appeared at the far end of the bridge and started to walk to meet him. The man was lean, well-dressed, and smoked a lho-stick in a long holder. His eyes, in the yellow cast of the street lanterns, seemed colourless.

Rickens had been on the force long enough to be wary. His left hand closed on the snub he carried in his coat pocket. A mugging. Now that would be a perfect end to this particularly crappy day. Though the man looked too well dressed to be a mugger. Not the usual moody vermin.

Walking, they came close, almost eye to eye, then passed each other.

Rickens relaxed slightly. False alarm.

The man suddenly stopped and turned. He called out, "Excuse me. Sir?"

Rickens halted, and turned back. "Yes?"

The man was coming back to him, his expression one of curiosity. "Dersk Rickens? Am I right?"

Rickens stiffened. "Well, this is more than chance. In a hive this size. A random meeting on an empty bridge. With someone who knows my name."

"I suppose so," said the stranger. "Nice to see the old instincts are still there. And thank you for confirming that your name is Dersk Rickens."

"I'm not smiling, son," said Rickens, sliding the safety off the weapon in his pocket. "Who sent you? Sankels?"

"He put in a call, but he doesn't have that kind of clout. Not even nearly. Only one man in this hive gives orders to the Secretists."

Rickens sniggered. "Well, that's the stupidest name I've heard in a while. What, am I supposed to be afraid?"

"Your choice," said Toros Revoke.

"Relax, son," Rickens said. "I know what this is. A little scare tactic to make me change my mind and resign after all. I've been expecting it. Let's get it over with. Make your threats, hit me if you intend to. I imagine your boss will want you to do that and I don't want to get you into trouble. I just want to get home. So, come on."

Revoke smiled. "You think I'm here to put the frighteners on you? Dish out some intimidation to get you to be nice and play along?"

"Something like that."

"Sorry, that moment's long passed." Revoke clicked his fingers.

Rickens heard a humming sound behind him. He turned. At the far end of the bridge, silhouetted against the lamplight, a tall, hunched man with long, straggly hair was spinning what looked like a bull-roarer.

"All right," Rickens said. "If this is how you want it."

He pulled the gun, and raised it, but the man with yellow eyes had vanished. Rickens turned, aiming his weapon at the other figure, and advanced towards him.

That damn thing in the man's hand was still circling and humming.

"Magistratum!" Rickens cried out. "Drop that and assume the position! This is your first and only warning!"

There was a sound, suddenly, like metal whisks churning milk. For a second, Rickens thought the rain had begun. He glanced around.

Wings beating, the sheen birds mobbed in through the open side of the bridge frame. Hundreds of them, chrome and steel and silver, like a snowstorm fury driven by the wind.

Rickens cried out. He fired once, twice, three times, his gun-flash lighting the dark and glittering off the swirling metal wings of the flock.

Then the Unkindness enveloped him, jabbing and pecking, and he staggered backwards. The force of them drove him back over the rail. As Rickens fell into the vast hydroelectric canyon, he was already dead, his skin flayed off.

Drax stopped swinging the lure. Toros Revoke came out of the shadows, picked up the steel-shod walking cane, and threw it off the bridge into the night.

EIGHTEEN

Skoh vaulted the wall at the end of Parnassus, and dropped onto the metal walkway. He found the stairwell and thundered down-stack towards the arterial.

Carl Thonius was about twenty paces behind him.

They were moving through pedestrians now, thickets of citizens, tradesmen and gampers who leapt aside and turned to stare at the two racing men. Carl could hear the noise of the traffic from the four-lane arterial. He knew Skoh was blocked. There wasn't a crossbridge for nine stacks. Skoh could either go along, or down again, into the sinks.

Carl saw Skoh up ahead, slamming through the crowd, knocking people down. He was heading towards the lower pavements.

Carl wasn't entirely sure how he was managing to keep up with the hunter. Lactic acid burned in his muscles, and his face hurt like hell. He realised it was simple. He absolutely didn't want to let Ravenor down.

Skoh couldn't be allowed to get away. He couldn't be allowed to contact his co-conspirators. It was a mortal lock. Carl simply had to catch him and stop him.

If only he'd brought a weapon. The Hecuter 6 would have made this so much simpler.

Carl lost sight of Skoh. The man had ducked left into a crosswalk between two interlocked stack towers. Carl followed, and slewed to a halt. The crosswalk was empty. Where the hell had Skoh g—

Feaver Skoh, equally weary, was tired of running. He came out of the shadows like a pouncing carnodon.

But Carl Thonius was caught up in a rush now. He turned, met the attack, and drove his fist into Skoh's nose. The hunter reeled away, then lunged back with a potentially backbreaking punch that Carl sidestepped.

Carl was a slight, slender man, but he was quick, and he had been trained by the Inquisition's best. You didn't make interrogator without learning certain skills. The fact that Carl Thonius avoided physical combat didn't mean he wasn't capable of it.

The fight lasted ten seconds. In that brief time, the two men traded almost fifty strikes and counter strikes, whip-snake fast, the precise martial skills of the Throne agent pitted against the brute force and cunning of a game hunter who had survived the dangers of countless bar-fights and rip worlds.

Passers-by from the main street gawped at what they saw occurring down the alleyway. Two men, blurs, engaged in a level of physical war that was seldom seen, even in a city that boasted the Carnivora. Every punch, every kick, was a potential killer, every block, every smash, bone-breaking.

Carl dodged, cracked Skoh's ribs with an under-punch, then chopped wide at his exposed neck, but Skoh lurched aside, caught the chopping hand, and viced to snap it. Carl had to somersault out of the hold, and kicked out Skoh's right leg from behind as he landed.

Skoh stumbled, but turned the fall into a sweep with his feet that Carl was forced to leap over.

Skoh came up, broke Carl's nose for the second time that night, and crushed his left ear, but Carl blocked the third punch, broke another of Skoh's ribs with a sidekick, and burst Skoh's right eye with a hammer-claw.

Skoh staggered backwards. Carl leapt at him, but had underestimated the hunter's burning resolve. Skoh threw a punch that hit Carl in the throat and dropped him onto his knees, choking.

Skoh started to run again. The crosswalk went nowhere except the fence overlooking the roaring arterial highway. Skoh scaled the fence, shivering the chainlink, kicking off Carl's hands as they tried to grab his ankles. He went over the fence top and fell onto one of the box-girders over the rushing traffic ten metres below.

He clawed up, and began to tightrope along the girder, arms out.

Carl followed him, sliding over the chainlink and down onto the narrow footing of the girder. It was so narrow, barely the width of his feet placed side by side. Vast transporters and cargo trucks roared by below them.

Skoh saw Carl coming after him. He looked down at the racing traffic of the arterial, all four speeding lanes, and jumped.

"Holy Throne!" Carl cried.

Whether by luck or judgement, Skoh landed on the top of a cargo-10's freight container. He grabbed onto the netting before the slipstream dragged him off.

Carl jumped too.

The impact of landing punched the breath out of him, but he managed to stay on top of a parcel transporter four vehicles behind Skoh's ride.

Everything shook. The wind was in his face. Road sign displays whipped overhead, brightly lit and dangerously close.

Carl clambered up, dragged himself forward. In disbelief, he watched as Skoh jumped from the cargo-10 onto the back of a low-rider truck that was busy overtaking it.

Carl got up and threw himself into space, slamming down on the roof of a transit omnibus in the outside lane. The roof was flat metal, and Carl almost slithered right off until he got hold of the sill of the roof light.

Up ahead, there was Skoh, getting up and looking back. He saw Carl.

"Bastard..." Carl stuttered, trying to hold on.

The thundering traffic suddenly slowed down so violently that Carl was thrown flat again.

The overhead alerts announced an accident at Whitnee Circus. Abruptly, they were almost at a standstill. Carl got up, leapt off the omnibus and onto the roof of a small private transport, denting it. He heard cries of complaint. Skoh was moving too, off the low-rider onto a crawling cargo-8, and off that straight onto a limousine.

Carl followed, jumping from one slow-moving vehicle to the next, ignoring the protests of the drivers and the blaring horns. He almost missed his footing leaping for a cargo-10, almost went under its wheels.

Almost...

Skoh bounced off the roof of a sedan, and rode the windscreen down onto the bonnet. The vehicle braked hard, and the van behind rear-ended it with a brutal shunt. Horns blasted again. From where Carl was, it looked as if Skoh had been thrown off onto the highway.

But no, there he was, climbing the revetment on the far side of the arterial.

Carl threw himself into the air, rolled as he crunched onto the roof of a cab, and got up. Another vault got him onto the back end of a cargo-8, and then he was at the revetment, clambering up the wall after Skoh.

Carl was in a frenzy, not even thinking. He was finding strength from somewhere, somewhere deep inside him.

It was an ugly strength. A dark, unpleasant force. But Carl Thonius didn't even stop to think about that. Below him, the traffic had begun to speed up again, engines racing. Carl scraped his way to the top of the six-metre revetment.

He looked up.

Skoh was standing over him on the top of the wall, looking down, one eye a bloody gouge.

Skoh grinned and stamped on Carl's hands.

Yelling out, Carl lost his grip and plunged down into the speeding traffic.

Skoh jumped down off the revetment and limped along an unlit walkway, gasping for breath. There were streetlights ahead, he could see that with his remaining eye, and that meant a cab, or a transit station, maybe even a public vox post. Dazed, he tried to think. *Akunin*. How could he contact Akunin? Maybe the circus was the best bet. Or perhaps he should go straight to the top. The Ministry would protect him surely, given what he knew. Trice owed him.

He limped on.

A man came out of the shadows ahead of him. The man was smiling.

The man was Carl Thonius.

“How... the hell did you...?” Skoh began.

“Truth be told, I don’t really know,” Carl replied. Only it wasn’t his voice. It was a dry, rasping growl.

Skoh backed away. Carl’s eyes were glowing red from the inside, as if a lamp had been lit inside his skull.

“Holy of holies.” Skoh mumbled, backing away. “What are you?”

“I’m not sure yet,” the rasping voice replied, gusting like rotten air from Carl’s lips. The inner light had increased, shining out of Carl Thonius’ nostrils, mouth, eyes, and glowing through the skin of his face so that the shadows of the skull formations inside were visible like an x-ray plate.

“But I know what you are,” he said.

Carl raised his right hand. The flesh peeled back from the bones like melting wax, and the exposed finger bones extended into talons, long and thin and curved.

“What you are is dead.” Carl rasped.

NINETEEN

We were leaving Strykson's mansion when the vox chimed. We'd been in there a few hours, probing him for everything he knew. Behind us, we left a man who had no idea what secrets he had just revealed. As far as Athen Strykson and his entire staff were concerned, he'd just had a nasty visit from the tax office.

"Yes?" I answered.

"We need you here." Frauka replied.

Through Mathuin's eyes, I looked at Kys and Nayl. "Got to go. Get back safe."

They nodded. As soon as I had left him, they led the slightly woozy Mathuin up the hill to the rented flier parked behind the trees.

"What happened?" I asked, resuming control of my chair.

"There was an incident." Frauka replied lightly. "I'd taken the boy to a gallery, like you suggested. An exhibit of the later Remembrancers, quite beautiful work, if a little—"

"Wystan. The point."

He shrugged. "We got back. Skoh had escaped."

"How?"

"It seems Doctor Belknap's liniment afforded him the opportunity to slip his cuffs. He overpowered Carl. Kara went after him, but she hurt herself."

"Is she all right?"

"Belknap's with her now. Carl continued the pursuit. It would appear he killed Skoh."

I swung my chair around. "Look after Zael, please. Distract him."

"All right." Frauka answered. "How did it go with Strykson?"

"Fine. The others are on their way back now. I'll fill in the details later."

I floated down the hall and entered the front lounge. Carl was sitting there on an armchair, gazing into space. I tried briefly to read him, but his mind was impenetrable. Shock I supposed.

"Carl? What happened?"

"Skoh got out sir," he said, getting to his feet. His face was split and bruised. His clothes were torn and soaked with blood. "I gave chase. I knew we couldn't let him get away."

"That would have been bad." I conceded. "So, you killed him?"

He looked at me sharply. "No. No, no. I didn't. I chased him. We fought. He tried to climb the fence beside the arterial. And he fell. Went under the wheels of a cargo-10. It was... instantaneous."

I sighed. "Better that, I suppose..." I began. "Better that than he'd got away. Are you all right?"

"A little dinged up. That happens, right?"

"Yes. Go and get yourself cleaned up, Carl. Get Belknap to look at your face."

He nodded. "What happens next?" he asked me.

"We know what they're doing. We just don't know why. As of tomorrow, we switch to infiltration. Kys and Harlon will be going in. To find out what this is actually about."

"What they want the data engines for?"

"Exactly, Carl. Exactly that."

"I see," he said. He paused. "About Skoh, I'm really sorry—"

“Don’t be,” I said. “Our cover’s still intact. That’s the main thing. If our enemy had found out we were still alive and operating here, infiltration would be suicide. Thanks to you, we’re still covert. You should feel good about yourself.”

“I do,” he said.

“Fine.” I replied. “As long as we’re still invisible, we can do this.”

In his private suite at the Petropolitan, Shipmaster Akunin put down his glass and sat back, listening to the neotropical songbugs chirruping in their cages.

Akunin was a short, bulky man with a crown of white hair around his bald pate. He wore black robes with red buttons. Traces of digita inlay spread across his jaw.

An aide entered the room.

“Well?” Akunin asked.

“It seems that whatever happened this afternoon at Master Strykson’s house was a false alarm.”

“Really?”

“I’m waiting for details, but it seems he was visited by the tariff revenue. A legitimate visit.”

Akunin sipped his drink. “They shouldn’t be investigating him. Trice assured us that our cartel would be immune from...”

He looked at his aide. “Yet more grounds for complaint. After Tchaikov, this petty insolence. Send to Trice. Repeat that I need to see him personally. Insist, please. I won’t be brushed off anymore. This is getting out of hand.”

The aide nodded. “Also, sir, there is a Master Siskind here to see you.”

Akunin rose. “Let him in.”

Bartol Siskind walked into the grand apartment, glancing around. With his shaggy red hair and glass jacket, he looked out of place and uncomfortable amongst the trappings of high living.

“Siskind,” Akunin said, offering a hand. “This is unexpected.”

Siskind took the hand. “Master. Thank you for seeing me.”

“Will you sit?”

“Thank you.”

“I had thought to see you at the Reach last year. Your cousin suggested you might be ready to join with us.”

“I was delayed, unavoidably.”

“But you’re here now.”

“Indeed,” said Siskind. “Master Akunin, when did you last hear from my cousin, Master Thekla?”

“Not since Firetide,” Akunin said. “He was conducting a little business for us there at Bonner’s Reach. I imagine he’ll be lying low for a while, though I expect him to join me here in the next few weeks. He backs your interests, you know. He’s very keen for you to join the cartel.”

“So am I,” said Siskind.

Akunin smiled. “I take it that’s why you’re here. To buy in?”

“Yes, master. I’m here to join the cartel. The opportunity to make a lot of money. My ship is at the cartel’s disposal.”

“Glad to hear it,” Akunin said, leaning forward to feed one of the songbugs some seeds through the delicate bars of its cage. “Well, let’s get the business over with. Then I’ll treat you to dinner at Lavochey’s. It’s a ritual the cartel has. First, though. A simple matter.”

“You mean the buy-in price?” said Siskind.

“Indeed I do. Three-quarters of a million crowns. A bond will do, or a bank testament.”

“I don’t have it.”

“A bond?”

“No, I mean I don’t have three-quarters of a million to give you.”

Akunin frowned. “Then this meeting is over, Master Siskind. Thekla made you aware of the details, didn’t he?”

“When did you last see Thekla?” Siskind repeated.

“This meeting is over.” Akunin spat. “Go away and stop bothering me with your—”

“Thekla’s dead.”

Akunin dropped the last of the grains onto the table, and brushed his hands. He looked round at Siskind. “What?”

“I can’t be sure,” said Siskind, “but I believe my cousin is dead, and the *Oktober Country* lost. At Bonner’s Reach, you sent him to trap and destroy an Imperial inquisitor. Gideon Ravenor. Am I right?”

“Go on, sir.”

“Ravenor had got too close. He was sniffing around the Contract Thirteen cartel, pretty much on to you. So you lured him into Lucky Space to dispose of him out where no one would care or notice.”

“I won’t confirm or deny,” Akunin said. “But I think you’ve said enough. I thought you had come to see me to buy in to the cartel.”

“I have,” said Siskind. “I don’t have the cash, but I have something just as valuable. A place in the cartel, that’s my asking price.”

Akunin thought for a moment. “Very well. But it had better be good. If you’re trying to play me, Siskind, I’ll have you thrown from an airgate into hard vacuum.”

“Thekla always said you were a mean bastard to deal with.” Siskind got up and gestured towards the door.

Lucius Worna walked in, his armour grating as he moved. He was carrying a bundle in one hand.

“This is your price?” asked Akunin. “This bounty hunter scum?”

“No.” Worna boomed. He dropped the bundle onto the floor. “*This* is the price.”

The bundle stirred and uncoiled. Bloody, bruised and torn, Sholto Unwerth slowly raised his head and looked at Akunin.

“I know this wretch. Unwerth,” Akunin said.

“Indeed,” said Siskind. “Sholto, tell the nice man what you told me. What was the name of the passenger you brought from Bonner’s Reach and delivered here, to Eustis Majoris, about a week ago?”

Unwerth mumbled something.

“Speak up!” Worna growled, kicking him.

“In all appraisal,” whispered Sholto Unwerth, “his name was Ravenor.”

PART TWO

Interior Cases

ONE

A tide of trudging people, millions strong, flowed into the inner formals of Petropolis. From the air, they created a steady-rushing river delta in the surface level streets, a web of tributaries and streams feeding main estuaries. The tide sobbed out from rail terminals and transit stops, or welled up from lower sink levels like dark water from secret underground springs. In the open streets, the tide moved under a skin of nodding gamps and parasols. In the covered walkways; it ran like ink.

Few people spoke. There was no clamour of voices. Just the tramp of feet, the hollow booming of tannoy announcements, the cries of gampers and food-vendors touting for business.

Pale-faced, this was a multitude starved of sunlight and drained of expression. Dark eyes, tinted goggles, suits and robes of emerald, black or grey, the regulation colours of the clerical workforce. Ocular augmetics here and there, skin-plugs and neuro-link spinal ports, mechanical braces perched like brass spiders on hands deformed and crooked by carpal tunnel syndrome. Ear-jacks for transcribers and stenographers, vox-grafts in the mouths or throats of dictators and transcriptors. Wheezing quadrupedal walking frames, their stilt-legs folded, for the archivists and filing officers who worked amid the towering shelves of the index vaults. Almost four hundred thousand allergies to paper, dust, ink, or all three. Nearly two thousand undiagnosed malignancies to face, brain or throat from excessive exposure to screen radiation.

All of them moving in the same direction, into the vast towers of the Administry.

And I was watching just three of them.

The carriages jolted to a halt and the automated doors rattled open, disgorging another cohort of Administry workers to swell the tramping tide. As soon as it was empty, the rail transit would close its doors and clatter off into the airless ducts of the sink levels to pick up workers of the Administry night shift, who were currently leaking out of the tower's basement exits in equal numbers to the day workers flowing in on the surface. The various departments of the Administry never slept. The cogitators ran all day and all night, chattering and processing.

There was Patience, in the midst of the crowd, moving with the flow. I saw her glance at her own reflection in the windows of the carriage, and felt her distaste. Her hair pinned up, no make-up except for some shadowing around the eyes to give her a hollow, sleep-deprived look, a unisex suit of cheap, black linen and an emerald jacket. Just another scribe, another clerk, another Administry drone.

The swollen crowd pushed out along a dank rockcrete concourse, past black iron railings and down a wide flight of stone steps out of the transit station. The lips of the stone steps had been smoothed and worn down by decades of footsteps, so they looked soft and indented like unplumped pillows. Through the station arch, under the copper eagle suspended from the glass roof, into the

street, into the main flowing bustle. Patience was nudged several times by the press. If I stop walking, she thought, the pressure of bodies will lift me off my feet and carry me along like driftwood.

The street was covered by an ironwork rain-shield, but she could smell the raw acid wetness in the air outside. Overhead, tannoy horns were crackling out inspirational mottos. There was an unappetising odour of cooked onions and fatty meat coming from the barrow ovens of the curbside vendors. The massive ouslite tower of Administry Hall Three rose up ahead like a ziggurat, dim and hazy in the morning smog.

Patience eventually reached the mouth of the entrance hall, a yawning maw ten metres high, like the door of an ancient tomb. The graven visage of the God-Emperor glared down at the workers from the overmantle. No one looked up, but every worker raised his or her hands to make the sign of the aquila as they passed beneath.

Inside the stone hallway, the massed footsteps echoed like rain. The flow of workers began to subdivide into the warren of side corridors and passages, heading for their appointed stations and departments. More instructions rang from the ceiling speakers. Patience saw PDF guards watching over various junctions, weapons slung, but they were not checking papers. Wall-mounted optic scanners at each doorway or hall-mouth read every worker permit that passed through, marking each one with a flashbulb flicker and a tonal ping, logging them into the system.

Patience saw the brief flash as her own permit was read. She began following the indicator signs for D:G/F1.

The tide began to thin out. The hallways had once been carpeted, but the pile had been eroded back to frayed matting like the bed of a dry stream. The air smelled of dry dust and static, and the photovoltaic lamps cast everything in a tobacco-coloured stain. She passed by the doorways of large cogitation chambers, glimpsed the endless rows of clerks at stations, heard the seamless clattering sound of ten thousand fingers striking keys.

In the hallway, quill servitors scuttled past, copy boys ran through carrying despatch boxes, gaggles of scribes hurried to meetings with transliterators and cipherists, gatherers pushed their heavily-laden basket trolleys, tech adepts shuffled along, hefting tool crates, heading for the latest repair. The walls were lined with the twisting branching tubes of the pneumatic despatch system. Every few seconds, there was a burp of air as another message cylinder rushed past inside one of the tubes.

Patience arrived at the entrance to department G/F1. The optic scanner flash-pinged her again as she entered, and a hololithic sign lit up with the words *WAIT HERE*.

She waited. Beyond the doorway, she could see the huge chamber, high-ceilinged, gloomy, lit by the enormous hololithic display screen at the far end, swirling with green data-forms, and by the rows of individual desk lights on the scribe stations. There were at least a dozen rows, an aisle between each, and Patience counted something in the order of a hundred stations in each.

There was a cacophony of rattling keys. Copy boys and gatherers moved up and down the aisles, delivering and collecting files. Servo-skulls drifted down the aisles like bees hunting pollen.

+Throne. I'll go mad in a place like this.+

+The beating heart of the Imperium.+ I sent back. +But for the ceaseless work of the Administratum, civilisation as we know it would grind to a halt.+

+What, are you recruiting for them now?+

She looked round, back out into the hallway. In the wall directly opposite the department entrance was a shrine alcove where the blessed seniors of the Administratum performed the hourly rites to bless and favour the work of the scribes.

+That's odd, don't you think?+ she sent.

The alcove was dusty, as if it hadn't been used in a while. There was no water in the placatory dish, and the sheaves of herbs were limp and desiccated.

+I agree.+

“Junior Scribe Merit Yevins?”

Patience turned. An elderly female, an ordinate, approached. She was robed and hunched, her claw hands blue with ink-stain that would never wash out.

“Yes, ordinate.”

The woman held out a blue hand and took Patience’s permit-slate.

“You are transferring from division six rubrication?”

“Yes, ordinate.”

“You have manual skill in excess of eighty norm?”

“Yes, ordinate.”

Junior Scribe Merit Yevins had died in a road traffic accident three days before. Carl had scooped her records from the Informium and grafted them to provide Kys with a genuine Administry background.

“Follow me.”

The ordinate led Patience down one of the aisles. Pale-faced scribes hunched at their cogitators, gazing at their glowing yellow screens, their hands fluttering over the metal keyboards or turning the pages of the documents clamped in their articulated reading stands. Patience had to watch her step to avoid tripping on the cables and trunking that spilled out across the floor. The ordinate seemed to know where they all were without looking.

The old woman gestured to an empty cogitator station.

“Begin here,” she said. She waved a gatherer over, rifled through the alphabetised files in his cart, and took out a bulging sheaf of crumbling documents.

She handed them to Kys. “Transcription,” she said. “Destination database is K8456 decimal. What is the destination database?”

“K8456 decimal, ordinate.” Patience replied.

“Begin.”

The ordinate limped away. Patience sat down at the station and woke the cogitator. It mumbled and shuddered as it warmed up, the valve screen slowly glowing into resolution. It scrolled data noise for a moment, then opened to display an entry gate and invited her to type in her serial code and destination database.

She did so. The screen trembled again, and the optical display closed like a flower then reopened to reveal a new file ready for transcription.

By then, Patience had arranged the sheaf of papers on her reading stand, open at sheet one. She secured it around the corners with some of the old rubber bands dangling off the lip of the frame. Carl had briefed them well on basic clerical habits. She even slipped on the plastek thimble that aided page-turning.

+Here we go.+ she sent.

She started typing.

It was copying by rote. The figures in the document had no meaning she could discern.

After a few minutes, she reached her left hand into the pocket of her coat. The little analyser Carl had given her was there. With her fingers, she played out its tiny plug-wire and, with the analyser still out of sight in her pocket, brought the wire end up onto the station and plugged it into one of the spare data-ports on her cogitator.

+Getting that?+

+Carl’s getting a signal now, thank you. He says you’re operating a late model K-phyber cogitation engine with numerical reinforcement sub frames.+

+The stuff he knows.+ Kys sent back, and carried on typing.

“I thought you’d done this before?” said Gatherer Lerally with a sneer. Like all the gatherers, he was a big man with heavily muscled arms and shoulders well displayed by his black singlet.

“I have,” said Nayl. “But it was a different system in collect-distribute where I worked. We had to number the files on a docket before we put them in the cart.”

“Well, that just wastes time.” Lerally sighed. He pointed to the data-slate in Nayl’s hand. “Your numbers come up there, file and destination, and you wait for the matching serials to flick up on the boards. Then you gather from the bench, swipe each file past your cart scanner, and it’s all logged. See? Simple. I don’t know how they did things at your old place, Tulliver.”

Nayl shrugged. He had no idea how they’d done things at Bernod Tulliver’s old place either. Bernod Tulliver had been stabbed to death in an undersink mugging the month before, and, courtesy of Carl, Nayl was just borrowing his credentials.

Right now, he was standing in the bowels of Administry Hall Three. It was hot, furnace-hot, thanks to the steam from the hydraulic hoists. Queues of brawny gatherers, each one with a cart, were assembled in front of the benches, watching the overhead hololiths. As numbers flickered up, gatherers moved forward to the benches to collect their cargoes from the robed coordinators. Behind the benches, the enormous cage-lifts brought up file cartons from the basement archives in clouds of vapour.

“I’ll walk you through one,” Lerally said. He was a gatherer supervisor, and wore the medal proudly.

“Thanks,” said Nayl.

More numbers flashed up on the overhead boards.

“That’s you,” Lerally said.

Nayl pushed his cart forward. It had a twisted castor and it fought to go the other way. Nayl winced as the strain pulled at his damaged arm.

“What’s the matter with your arm?” Lerally asked.

“Nothing. Fricking wonky wheel.”

“Get used to it,” Lerally said unhelpfully. “Once you’ve been here a while, you’ll get a better cart. Perks of seniority.”

“How long is ‘a while’?”

Lerally shrugged. “Ten, maybe twelve years. Hurry up. You never keep the co-ordinators waiting.”

Nayl slewed his cart up to the bench and showed the co-ordinator his slate. The robed man turned and hefted a bulging carton of papers from the cage-lifts.

“Now swipe them off,” Lerally said.

Nayl took each file out of the carton and waved them in turn past the optical reader built into his cart. The dial kept blinking up “*unknown*”.

“Trick’s sake, Tulliver.” Lerally exclaimed. He licked his thumb and rubbed the wet end vigorously across the glass lens of the reader. “Dust builds up. It’s the static. Try it again.”

Nayl swiped the files again, and the dial snapped up code numbers. Once his cart was full, Nayl slid the empty carton back to the co-ordinator, who slung it back onto the cage-lift.

“Okay,” said Lerally. “Now you deliver. Check off the codes against your slate and use the department map. You’ll soon find your way around.”

Nayl nodded and swung his heavy cart towards the elevator bank. He glanced at his slate: P/S4. That was on the fifty-seventh floor. The way his cart was bucking and pulling wide, he’d never even reach the lifts.

“Holy Throne,” he whispered.

+Stick with it, Harlon.+

“Easy for you to say, boss. I’d rather be doing something less demanding.”

+Like what?+

“I dunno. Killing someone you don’t like?”

+Are you sure you're up to this?+

"Will you leave it alone? I'm fine. I want to do this. I want to be doing something. Belknap said I was fit, didn't he?"

+Yes. Though I got the distinct impression he wasn't telling me something.+

Kara Swole stiffened. "Like what?"

+I don't know. I didn't probe his mind. I respect doctor-patient confidentiality. I just got the impression he'd given you a clean bill of health because you'd told him to.+

"Gideon, I don't intend to sit this one out, all right? This is a serious deal, and you need all the help you can get. So I'm helping. I'd rather be doing that than sitting in that lumpy bed in Miserimus."

+Is it really that lumpy?+

"Oh, yes."

+And your wound? It's stable? It's only been a few days since you tore it open chasing Skoh.+

"It's fine. Now go away. I'm trying to blend here."

"Weena Carvort, what are you doing?"

Kara looked up at her supervisor, a dainty little man with augmetic eyes. His name was Beedron Halicut. Ordinate Ordinary Beedron Halicut.

"I'm loading the tubes," she replied. In truth, her answer should have been. "I'm perched on an uncomfortable metal stool, nursing an aching belly-wound and the grim intimations of my own mortality, jamming numbered message cylinders into the spout ends of pneumatic tubes in the sweaty basements of Adrninistry Hall Three, all the while pretending to be someone who perished from tubercolic fever in an Ecclesiarchy hospice ten days ago."

But that, naturally, would lose her the job.

"You might think you're loading the tubes," said Ordinate Ordinary Halicut, "but I believe you are inserting the cylinders upside down."

"Oh!" Kara said. She looked at the plastek cylinder in her hand and slowly upturned it. "Sorry."

"I thought you were skilled?" Halicut said sharply.

"Just confused, sir." Kara replied. "By the new system. On Caxton we loaded them plug-end first."

"Well, Carvort, you're not on Caxton now." Halicut moved away to berate another tube-loader.

The pneumatic tube despatch hall was a massive room in the sink-levels of the tower. Like stalactites, festoons of tube pipes fed down into the room, curving slightly to deliver the cylinders into rows of wire racks. They looked like inverted church organs. Schools of operators sat at the ends of the racks, sorting the cylinders that arrived with a burp of air, loading new ones into the ascender pipes. Newly-arrived cylinders were opened and their contents filed into cartons for the gatherers to wheel away. Fresh files came in to be wound into scrolls, cylindered, and sent on their upward journeys.

The air pressure in the chamber kept popping and changing as the tubes barked and spat their loads.

Kara glanced at the stack of papers she had just been given by a gatherer. It was just meaningless data, reams of figures. She wound it up tight, slid it into a tube, and pressure-fired it on its way.

In Miserimus House, I relaxed for a moment. Nearby, Frauka was playing regicide with Zael. He'd finally got the boy to understand the rudiments of the game. Zeph was prowling the grounds, checking the sensors. Carl was at his station, watching the first links show up from Kara, Kys and Nayl. "I'm getting a decent feed from Patience now," he reported. "I just..."

"What?" I asked.

Carl frowned. "I can't figure out what they've got her doing. The data she's processing makes no sense. Just random series of characters and numerals without context. Maybe it's a cipher. Give me a while, and I'll see if I can crack it."

"I have complete faith in you, Carl," I said.

We were in now, really inside the heart of the mystery. I remember thinking that, feeling the satisfaction of it.

How wrong I was.

Shipmaster Akunin had taken a late luncheon at a private club in the high-stacks of Formal C, then travelled back to the Petropolitan in a hired limousine. He was edgy, and his mood did not improve when he reached his suite.

"Anything?" he asked his aide.

"Still no response, sir," the man replied.

Akunin cursed quietly. "If there's nothing by this evening, I'll send another message."

The aide nodded. "Master Siskind is here to see you."

Pulling off his blue satin coat, Akunin went into the lounge. Siskind was sitting in one of the low armchairs.

"Siskind," Akunin said by way of hello. He crossed directly to the sideboard and poured himself an amasec. "Still nothing from Trice. Can you believe that? My messages are as emphatic as possible, and he deigns to ignore me. Drink?"

Siskind shook his head.

Akunin sipped his drink, pacing. The neotropical song-bugs, sensing his demeanour, had fallen silent. "The arrogance of the man!" Akunin spat. "Without the cartel's work, he'd be nothing!"

Siskind nodded gently.

"Another hour or two, and I'll send to him again." Akunin growled. "I've half a mind to go to him in person, see how he likes that—"

Akunin's personal hand-vox chimed and he took it out of his pocket.

"One moment," he said to Siskind, and raised the device to his ear. "Akunin?"

"Just calling to see if our employer had answered yet," said a voice.

"Who is this?" Akunin asked.

"It's Siskind. I was just—"

Akunin lowered the communicator and turned to stare at the man sitting opposite him.

"Siskind" got to his feet. He seemed to ripple, to shimmer, as if the image of Bartol Siskind was just a reflection in a disturbed pool. Then the ripple stilled itself again and Akunin was staring at a mirror image of himself.

"Oh Terra." Akunin gasped and started to run, dropping his glass and his hand-vox. His double caught up with him before he'd taken three steps, and seized him. Arms pinned, Akunin crashed forward against the sideboard.

"Please! Please!" he squealed. The grip constricting him grew tighter.

"Sire Trice is happy not," the double lisped, sliding a long, slim serrated blade out of its cuff.

"Oh no! Please!"

"Let him go, Monicker," said a voice from the doorway.

Akunin stepped back and let the real Akunin slump to his knees.

Toros Revoke padded into the room, his stale yellow eyes showing amusement.

"Get up, Akunin," he said.

Trembling, Akunin did as he was told. In all his dealings with the Secretists on behalf of the cartel, Akunin had never found Revoke anything less than terrifying.

“You seem to have taken it upon yourself to become a nuisance,” Revoke said. “What’s the matter with you, shipmaster? All these pleading demands for a meeting.”

Akunin eyed the secretist warily. “I think what I’ve got to say is important.”

“So... I’m here now. Say it.”

“Not to you. I need to speak with Trice, a personal meeting—” Akunin began.

Revoke raised a finger to his lips. “First of all, it’s *Chief Provost* Trice. Second, the remit of Contract Thirteen states clearly that you of the cartel and the chief provost should not be seen together, nor have direct dealings, nor any connection be apparent between such parties. Third, something tried to kill the chief provost the other day. We’ve been a little busy since then trying to discover what it was and who sent it. In comparison, you and your pathetic mewlings are a very, very low priority.”

“I know! Please, I know that! This—”

“I could have you killed,” Revoke said bluntly. “I could have Monicker here do it. She’s very good.”

Akunin glanced nervously at his double, but it wasn’t his double anymore. It was hardly anything. A woman, vaguely, a hazy blur in the air that light seemed to ignore.

“What is she?” Akunin asked.

“Monicker? She’s a dissembler. They’re very rare. It’s a form of albinism, an extreme mutation form. A dissembler’s pigmentation is so shockingly absent, they act as living mirrors, reflecting back likenesses. It’s very useful. Monicker observed your friend Siskind when he visited you earlier today, and mirrored him. Oh, Master Akunin, the look on your face.”

“You’ve been observing me?”

“Of course we have.” Revoke replied. “The fuss you’re making. This unseemly frenzy to meet with the chief provost. It’s just not on, Akunin. Not on at all. The provost is furious with you.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Akunin said, recovering his composure a little. “He runs a subsector. I run a ship. I am small fry. I understand that. We, the other shipmasters under contract, we are just pawns in his great theatre. We do the grunt work get paid — well paid, I’m under no illusions. We are supposed to get on with our job and be invisible.”

“Well, you seem to appreciate it quite clearly,” said Revoke. “It begs the question...”

Akunin looked Revoke in the face. “I have been insisting on a meeting because I know something that may well be directly connected to the attempt on the chief provost’s life. We have a mutual problem. The entire venture is in jeopardy.”

“Really? Why?”

“Gideon Ravenor is still alive. And I have reason to believe he is here on Eustis Majoris.”

Toros Revoke stared at Akunin for a long moment. “Do you have proof?”

“Yes.”

“Bring it with you. Now.”

TWO

It was the third time she'd called that morning. The switchboard put her through, but all she got was an autovox invitation to record a message. For the third time, she didn't.

The town-hab was quiet, just the ticking of the numerous chrons and horologs her uncle had collected over the years. Maud Plyton paced around the gloomy house, agitated and anxious.

She froze when she heard the music. A sudden, four-finger chord, then a rill and a sprightly refrain. It was coming from the drawing room.

Uncle Valeryn was seated at the spinet, playing one of Steramon's *bagatelles* from memory. Plyton stood in the doorway and watched him, her eyes welling up. Every few weeks, her uncle would do this. Like the sun passing out from behind a cloud, his lucidity would briefly return, and he'd play. Then the clouds would return. The patches of lucidity were becoming more infrequent these days.

Valeryn stopped playing. "Enid?" he called. Enid was the private nurse, and she wasn't due in until three.

"No, it's me, Uncle Vally," Plyton said, entering the room. "Don't stop playing."

Valeryn tinkled a few more notes and stopped again. He reached out and took his niece's hand, squeezing it.

"Maud. I thought you were Enid," he said.

"No, it's me," Plyton said, knowing her uncle would drift away at any moment.

"How are things with you?" he asked.

"Problems," she said.

"What sort?" Valeryn replied. "Magistratum matters, no doubt?"

She smiled sadly. "Yes, Uncle Vally. Department troubles. You don't want to hear about them."

"Don't I?" he said, and let go of her hand. He played a series of plangent chords. "It's out of tune," he said. "There, the upper D, a little flat." He struck the note repeatedly. "I don't play this very much now, do I?"

"Not as much as you used to," she said.

Valeryn looked up at her. His face was in shadow. "I know, Maud," he said.

"Vally?"

"I know. Moments like this, I know how I am. Fading. Not always there. There are blanks. These long... intermissions. I don't remember. It's very frustrating. I know you're a Magistratum officer. I know you've been living here with me for some time. But I have no idea how old you are or what happened yesterday. I know I have a nurse. Enid, right? So if I have a nurse, I must be ill."

"Uncle..."

"It's very frustrating. Very frustrating." He fell silent. Then he started and looked up at her again. "What was I just saying, Enid?"

"Maud, Uncle Vally. It's Maud."

"Oh, yes. Silly old me. Maud. My, how you've grown. How are things with you? Have you got a job, my dear? A man on the go?"

Plyton sighed. "Uncle Vally? I've got to go out for a while. Enid will be here in another hour or so. Will you be all right?"

"Enid?"

“The nurse?”

“Oh, her. Yes. Yes, I’ll be all right.”

Plyton walked back towards the door, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. The spinet behind her rang out suddenly. A Kronikar *valse*.

“Uncle Vally?”

“I remember,” he said, without looking round. “So much and so little. It’s very hard. The only thing I know for sure is that, when the moments of clarity come, use them. Like now. I don’t know if I’ll ever play again, so I better play now. Use the moment. Seize the moment. You never know how dark it’s going to get otherwise.”

“Good advice, Uncle Vally,” she said.

“I thought so,” he said. “Do what you can, while you still can. Otherwise…”

She looked back. The music had paused.

“Uncle?”

“The upper D there. A little flat, wouldn’t you say?” He tapped at it. “A little flat, isn’t it, Enid? A little flat?”

“Yes, Uncle Valeryn,” Plyton said. She could hear him striking the note over and over as she left the hab and headed for the rail transit.

“Oh. It’s you,” said Limbwall, opening the door.

“Yes. Hello,” Plyton said. “Nice gown there. Are you going to let me in?”

“What are you doing here?” Limbwall said, gathering his shabby housecoat around him self-consciously.

“I rode the transit all the way to E to see you. Can I come in?”

Limbwall hesitated, then reluctantly let her inside his cramped little hab. His face showed the ugly bruises that the fists of the Interior Cases marshals had left on it two days before. He looked scared.

“What do you want?” he asked, attempting to tidy up the clutter in his bedsit.

“Just thought I’d hang out with a work colleague,” Plyton said.

“You’ve never hung out with me.”

“No, I haven’t. Sorry, that was a lie. I wanted to talk to someone.”

“About what?” he replied.

She stared at him with a “What the hell do you think?” look.

Limbwall shrugged. “I think you should go, Plyton. I don’t think we’re meant to be speaking to each other. Rickens told us to go back to our habs and wait there to be questioned.”

“Have you been questioned, Limbwall?”

He shook his head. “No, but the Interior Cases investigation wi—”

Plyton scowled. “Screw that. Screw them. It shouldn’t work this way.” She paused. “I tried to contact Rickens.”

Limbwall blinked at her, his eyes wide. “You did?”

“Yes. At the department. I don’t have a private contact for him. He’s… unavailable.” Plyton looked back at him. “Since when was Rickens unavailable to his own staff?”

“Since we all got suspended?” Limbwall suggested archly.

“But you’ve got a link. Here. You told me.”

Limbwall sighed. “That was a secret.”

“I know. And they seem to be very popular in the city right now. You told me you’d enhanced your personal cogitator with department codes to keep up with the workload. Limbwall, I think we need to use it. We need to know what’s going on.”

"I think we should leave it the hell alone," he said. "That's what I think. I think if we start meddling, we'll end up in trouble."

"Look what they did to your face, Limbwall. We're already there."

"Start with Rickens. Blanket search."

Crouched in front of the battered second-hand cogitator set up in the corner of his hab, Limbwall thumped the keys.

"Service record. Yeah, nothing else. Says he's on extended leave and directs all enquiries to Interior Cases."

"All right, scrub that. The Aulsman Case. Call it up." Plyton read out the case file number.

"There's no such case listed. Nothing, Plyton."

"Not even as closed or restricted?"

"Seriously, nothing."

Plyton folded her arms and stared at the floor. "I opened the case file myself the day Aulsman's body was found. All my scene of crime notes, the pics I took. They've removed it all and erased the traces."

"Magistratum files don't just get erased," he scoffed.

"Yes, they do," she replied. "I've seen it before."

"That's nonsense," he replied, shaking his head. "Who has that kind of power?"

Plyton didn't answer.

"All right, try the names Whygott and Coober. Marshals, Interior Cases."

Limbwall chattered the keys and then shook his head. "Nothing. No listing on personnel. Were they the two goons who got in your face at the old sacristy?"

"Yes. Now search for Yrnwood. The limner who witnessed Aulsman's death."

Limbwall tapped at his keys.

"Mmm... nothing. Nothing in Magistratum. Nothing in civic records either. Was it a false ident?"

"No, he checked out at the time. Run it through the Informium data-core."

"I did. There's nothing."

"Holy Throne. They're hiding everything!"

Limbwall turned to look at her. "Who's 'they', Plyton?"

"Someone with real power. We're into subjects of a legitimate investigation, Limbwall. Even Interior Cases isn't as brazen as this. Last time I saw Rickens, he told me the Aulsman Case was the key. We'd mishandled it somehow, and it was all connected to that assassination attempt on the chief provost. Well, I don't think we mishandled it at all. I think we found something there in the sacristy, we just didn't realise what it was."

"This... false ceiling you told me about?"

"Maybe." She started buttoning her coat and headed for the door. "I'm going home. You pulled me that file on the old city plans. I'll go and start working through it, see if I can't find something we've missed. You stay here and stay in contact."

"Remind me: why are we doing this?"

She grinned. "Because we serve at the pleasure of the God-Emperor. And because someone I love very much told me to seize the moment because you never know how dark it's going to get."

The sky was turning to a dull undercast as night closed in. Plyton hurried along the pavement as the burn-alarms started to sing and the first spatters of rain started to fall. Too far to run in this. She ducked into the doorway arch of a town-hab to wait out the downpour, just a hundred metres from her uncle's house.

The rain began to stream down. From the cover of the sinks, the gamper-boys started to yell their trade. She waited. Her mind was ticking over, like one of her uncle's horologs.

Just a year before. In Rickens' office. The blanked case. "No good will come if it." Rickens had told her.

There was a sudden beating of wings. She looked up. A flock of sheen birds swirled up into the rain, turning like a shoal of fish, twisting east.

Something made her very uneasy suddenly.

A sixth sense. What Rickens liked to call the *Magistratum muscle*.

Ignoring the rain, Plyton ducked out of the archway and ran along the street to the hatchway of the parking garage. She knew her uncle's code and punched it in. The hatch opened. The attendant, the old man with the apron, waved at her as she walked inside. He knew her. She was the girl who came in to use the Bergman. The attendant wandered away. He was busy soaping up the bodywork of a crimson transporter owned by some local bigwig.

Plyton slipped through the rockcrete gloom, hugging the shadows. Rainwater was gnawing in between the garage's joints, pooling on the floor in pungent pools. There was the Bergman. Bay A9.

Plyton didn't have the keys. She peered in through the driver's door window. There was the folder Limbwall had given her, still tucked into the door pocket. She'd come back for that, once she'd got the keys from Uncle Vally. She walked round behind the automobile, and felt around the dank back wall of the bay for the loose bricks. She kept an eye on the old attendant. He was still washing the crimson transporter.

Plyton lifted three of the soot-black bricks out.

The Tronsvasse 9 was where she'd hidden it, in the cavity, wrapped in vizzly-cloth. She had no permit for the weapon, but every Magistratum marshal owned a back-up piece. It went with the job. Service weapon and a concealed. You never knew when.

Plyton took it out. Heavy, chromed, rubberized grip. Ten in the clip, one in the spout. She eased the slide half-back, saw the glint of the chambered round, and slipped it back. Beside the weapon, two more fat clips.

Plyton put the clips in her pocket, slid the 9 into the waistband of her trousers and put the bricks back.

She waved at the attendant as she walked out of the garage.

The front door of Uncle Valeryn's town-hab was ajar. Plyton pushed it wide. She could see immediately that something had happened here, something ghastly. It was as if an erosive force had spilled through the hallway, shredding the wall panels, abrading the carpet, demolishing all the furniture.

Plyton took the Tronsvasse out.

The door to the front parlour was half open. Plyton saw a scattered mess of red-bare bones loosely gathered in a torn blue dress. The shredded remains of a nurse's starched white headdress. Plyton swallowed hard. Uncle Vally. *Uncle Vally*.

Weapon braced, she edged along the hall. The place looked as if it had been sandblasted. The wallpaper was stripped, the floorboards scrubbed to bare, splintered wood. The oil paintings on the walls were just empty frames adorned by rags of canvas.

Plyton paused at the doorway of the drawing room and peered in.

Something bony and raw lay on the worn-down carpet in front of the spinet. The spinet itself looked furry. Its once-polished surface was chewed and splintered, the varnished wood pocked with a maelstrom of tiny chips. The curtains were in tatters. Uncle Valeryn's notation folios were shredded.

A large, slender man was hunched over Uncle Vally's reduced corpse. Broad-shouldered, with a mane of wispy grey hair, he wore a suit of leather jack with an armoured sleeve.

Drax turned as he heard a sound behind him. His curiously wide face, with its small piggy eyes and a massive underbiting jaw blinked in surprise.

He rose and started to pull out the psyber-lure.

Plyton fired. Her first shot took off the left side of Drax's face. The second went through his chest and blew out his back. Drax slammed backwards into the ruined spinet, the half-slung lure wrapping around his body. His weight toppled the keyboard instrument over beneath him onto the floor with a discordant clash of strings and keys.

Her eyes burning, Maud Plyton took one last look at her uncle. She backed out of the room. In the litter of debris in the hall, she found fragments of the jar that had always stood on the shelf above the heater. Nearby, she found the Bergman's keys.

On the pavement outside, running now, she snatched out her hand-vox. "Limball? Limbwall! It's Maud. Get out! Get out now!"

THREE

The weapon-servitor reared automatically as Revoke approached. It cycled up its gun-pods and played its pink recog-beam up and down his face. Its handler yanked at its leash and brought it to heel.

“Sorry, sir,” the handler said.

“Don’t be.” Revoke replied. “I admire vigilance. I was told he was here.”

“Yes, sir. He’s inside. Please observe the drill.”

“Of course.” Revoke stepped past the handler and his chrome-plated cannon-hound and went over to the rack of bare metal drawers screwed to the stone wall. He slid out an empty drawer, and placed inside it his weapon, his hand-vox, his wallet, his chron and every other single item about his person that was either powered or bore writing, numerals or inscriptions of any sort. Then he closed the drawer and took down one of the blunting charms that hung from the row of hooks above the rack. As Revoke put it around his neck, he felt the pendant weight of the heavy lodestone against his chest. More particularly, he felt his precious psy stutter away into temporary exile.

Then he stepped into the airgate. All of the entrances to the Encompass Room were actual starship airgates, imported as brand new units from the yards at Ur-Haven in the Antimar sub. It seemed odd to pace down the cold stone hallways of the lord governor’s palace in Formal A and then step into a vacuum lock of brushed steel and recessed lumin panels.

The outer hatch closed. Revoke felt the prickly gust of the decontamination blowers and heard the vents suck the soot and dust away. Then the inner hatch opened.

To step from ancient fortress into an airgate was one thing. To step from an airgate into this was quite another.

Toros Revoke had been in the Encompass Room more than a dozen times before, but still it impressed him. Circular, over five hundred metres in diameter, it had been constructed from the uppermost four storeys of the palace. Revoke was actually stepping out onto a steel bridge walkway that extended out across the chamber two floors up in the air. The walkway met three others like it that sprouted from hatchways at the other compass points to form a platform above the centre of the room.

Above, the roof space was black, and out of the blackness powerful stab-lamps hung down on chains, like stars in the night sky. Below, the floor of the chamber was a brilliant white expanse like the surface of a sunward moon. This entire floor was patterned with a delicate tracery of black lines and other details, all of them too fine and small to be seen clearly from the bridge. But Revoke knew what the intricate pattern represented. He peered down and saw the small figures of the many geometricians on their knees, adding details to the pattern with their consecrated quills. Only a few small portions of the overall pattern still lacked any detail.

Revoke could see the chief provost standing up on the viewing platform. He hesitated when he realised that Trice was not alone. The Diadochoi was with him.

Trice saw Revoke and nodded for him to join them. Revoke approached with unease. The Diadochoi was spending an increasing amount of time in the Encompass Room of late, eagerly anticipating the culmination of the work.

The Diadochoi was tall and slender, dressed in simple black clothes. His head was bare and, in the Encompass Room, he chose not to wear his public face.

Revoke tried not to look at the Diadochoi's true visage. The contorted pink flesh, the features fused and melted down like candlewax after a long night.

"Revoke," the Diadochoi gurgled liplessly. "Come to me, my son."

Revoke obeyed. The Diadochoi embraced him and kissed both his cheeks with the wet wound he called a mouth. Revoke could smell nidos and unguent creams.

"Jader tells me you saved him the other night," the Diadochoi lisped.

"He did, lord?" Trice said.

"Against a beast from hell, I hear," the Diadochoi said, the heat-blackened stumps of his teeth showing against the pink as he smiled. "Any clue yet as to what it was?"

"We are following some leads." Revoke replied.

"Leave all that to us, lord." Trice cut in. "Do not trouble yourself with nothings. You must concentrate your mind on the true work."

The Diadochoi nodded. He took Revoke by the arm and led him to the platform's rail. "Isn't it beautiful? Quite, quite beautiful. We have made adjustments just this last morning. Recalibrations, according to the refined axes. You see there, where the geometricians are erasing?"

Revoke looked and raised his hand to point. "You mean—"

The Diadochoi's black-gloved hand caught hold of Revoke's and squeezed it shut with nearly bone-crushing force.

"Don't point, Revoke. Not in here. Any gesture can be a signifier. You should know better."

"I'm sorry, lord."

The Diadochoi let his hand go. "Where the geometricians are erasing, that is the angle of adjustment. Fate gives even as it seems to take away, don't you think?"

"Yes, lord."

"By morning, the new axial points will be inscribed. It's all very... promising. Now, what did you want?"

"I need a word with the chief provost," Revoke said.

"A word." The Diadochoi made a wet, gurgling sound that approximated to a chuckle. "A word. In here. A word. You're a witty man, Revoke."

"Am I, lord?"

The Diadochoi turned to Trice. "See to your business, Jader. I'll be here when you return."

Trice took Revoke by the arm and walked him away along the bridge to the airgate. Behind them, the Diadochoi was still peering down from the platform at the working scribes below.

The airgate hatch closed and the air-scrubbers whirled.

"He seems in a good humour," Revoke said.

"He is. We're very close now, Toros. That chance discovery at the old sacristy the other day It's the piece we've been missing. Now we've got it, everything is falling into perfect alignment, all our calculations and projections."

"The true centre?"

"Just that. At last. It was no wonder that we couldn't make things match up. No wonder, indeed, that everything we'd tried before didn't work."

"So..." said Revoke. "We're close?"

"Just a few days." Trice looked at him. "He scares you, doesn't he?"

"A little bit." Revoke admitted.

Jader Trice smiled as the other airgate hatch opened before them. "Be thankful. He scares me an awful lot more than that. So why have you come looking for me?"

They were retrieving their possessions from the rack of drawers. As soon as he took off his blunting charm, Revoke realised the guard nearby could hear them.

"Not here. Let's walk."

“Ravenor. Empty gods, are you sure?”

Revoke nodded. “The shipmaster’s evidence is quite compelling.”

Trice sat down on one of the private suite’s sofas and wrung his hands as he thought. “Get me a drink. Amasec. Mollamot. Anything.”

Revoke went over to the cabinet and found a glass and a bottle of eighty year-old nepenthe. “If Ravenor is here, and active, it could explain the killing of the cartel’s banker.”

“Tchaikov?”

“Yes, and it could also explain the attack on you at the palace.”

“You’ve still turned up nothing on that?”

Revoke handed his master the glass. “We know it was some form of incunabula, some slaved proto-daemon. A killing tool, directed by a psyker. I’ve had the psy-adept arm of the Secretists searching covertly since the attack, but in a hive this size, without wanting to show our hand...”

“Would Ravenor use a daemon? I mean, really?”

Revoke shrugged. “We’ve studied his records through the Officio Inquisitorus Planetia. He’s known to be hardline, but his master was Eisenhorn. And you know what’s said about him.”

“Even so,” said Trice, sipping his drink. “You told me you’d killed the psyker operating that thing.”

“I did. Most surely. His name was Saul Keener, a local black market psyker with prior form. Ravenor wouldn’t have been so impetuous as to slave the thing himself. He’d employ someone. He relies on his agents. Still, right at the end there, I sensed another mind. Ravenor himself, no doubt, looking in to see if the job had been done.”

“Damn him!” Trice spat. “The Diadochoi mustn’t be told. He’ll go mad.”

“Of course.”

Jader Trice put his glass down and rose to his feet. He was agitated. “When that daemon-thing attacked us, I suspected this faction, that faction, this cult, that coven. All these years, so many accumulated enemies. The one thing I didn’t even begin to consider was Ravenor. He’s meant to be dead!”

“Akunin has proof otherwise, sir.”

“You’ve brought him here?”

Revoke nodded. “Under the circumstances, I thought I should.” He got up and waved a control wand at the end wall of the suite. The entire wall became transparent so they could see out into the adjoining ante-room where Akunin waited nervously with his companions.

“That’s Akunin there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The other man?”

“His name is Siskind. Another shipmaster. An interesting man.”

“And the big brute with him?”

“A bounty hunter called Worna. Just paid muscle.”

“What about that... that runty thing at his feet?”

“The runty thing goes by the name of Sholto Unwerth, sir. Yet another shipmaster. More particularly, the proof.”

Trice looked at Revoke. “What do you make of Akunin?”

“Scared. Scared of us, and scared that, with Thekla dead, he’s now got seniority in the cartel. I can sense he wants out, but only if he gets a massive pay-off to keep him quiet. He sees this evidence about Ravenor as his get-out clause.”

“Does he indeed? What about this other one? Siskind. You said he was interesting.”

Revoke smiled. “Master Siskind reads as ambitious. He’s an associate of Thekla’s who wanted to become part of the Contract Thirteen cartel... except that he didn’t have the funds to buy in. He’s

done all the hard work here, sir. He was the one who realised Thekla was missing. He hired Worna to track Ravenor to Eustis Majoris, and brought that proof to Akunin as collateral to buy into the cartel.”

Trice straightened his gold-hemmed robes and put on his game face. “This Siskind sounds like my kind of bastard. What about the bounty-grant?”

“Does what he does for cash.”

Trice turned to Revoke. “Let’s go and talk to them,” he said.

The men rose as Trice and Revoke entered the room, all except Unwerth, who was curled up in a bloodied ball in kicking-reach of Lucius Worna.

“Master Akunin!” Trice announced, hurrying forward and clasping the man by the hands. “A thousand apologies for ignoring your many calls! I have been so busy these last few days!”

“No apologies necessary, chief provost.” Akunin nodded.

“No, I must. Revoke here treated you most shamefully. Apologise, Revoke.”

“I beg the shipmaster’s forgiveness.”

Akunin nodded. “There’s no need, chief provost. I only wish to serve. I have brought this piece of scum to your attention. Proof that Inquisitor Ravenor moves against us both. His name is Unwerth. He brought Ravenor here.”

“Is this true? Is Ravenor here on this world?” Trice asked.

Unwerth mumbled something and then yelped as Worna kicked him.

“So, Ravenor, Ravenor.” Trice sighed, seating himself. “The cartel slipped up there, didn’t it?”

Akunin sat down facing the chief provost. “Thekla may have been overconfident, sir—”

“Overconfident? He promised to trap and kill Ravenor for me, and yet Ravenor is alive and Thekla is dead. Overconfident is hardly the word.”

Akunin cleared his throat. “Which is why I have come here with this evidence, sir.”

Trice grinned broadly. “And for that, I thank you. How will the cartel pay?”

“Pay, sir? For what?”

“For messing up. For failing to complete the task I set them?”

Akunin cleared his throat for a second time and sat forward. “I’m not sure what you mean, chief provost. Thekla failed you. Him and the agents you sent to help him. They bungled the mission. I’m just here to—”

Trice put his finger to his lips pensively and looked at the ceiling. “A moment. Thekla. Wasn’t he the senior member of the cartel?”

“Yes, he w—”

“He represented the cartel?”

“Yes, sir, b—”

“And now he’s dead, you fulfil that role?”

Akunin nodded. “Yes, chief provost.”

“So you are now the senior representative of the cartel?”

“I suppose I am.”

Trice paused. “The cartel which... entirely failed to serve me?”

“Well, put like that—”

Trice nodded to Revoke. Revoke drew his laspistol and shot Akunin though the back of the head. Akunin’s corpse slammed face down onto the low table, cracking its glass surface. Revoke snapped his aim up and found himself facing Lucius Worna’s steady bolt pistol.

“No need for any of that,” Trice said. “Put it away, Revoke. You too, Worna. Master Siskind?”

“S-sir?”

“I wish to employ fresh blood as leader of my cartel of traders. The old ones were so unreliable. I rather fancy you’d do a better job. What do you say?”

Siskind smiled. “I’d say put the bolter away, Worna.”

Worna obeyed.

“Return to your ship, and await instruction.” Trice told Siskind. “I’ll have clerks sent up to you with copies of the contracts. This is grown-up stuff now, Siskind. Are you up to it?”

Siskind nodded. “What about Unwerth?”

“Leave him here with me.”

Siskind and Worna departed. Revoke knelt down beside Unwerth.

“What do you get?” Trice asked.

“He knows little. Ravenor was careful. But he definitely brought Ravenor here. And he was paid to do it secretly.”

“If Ravenor’s here secretly, it means he knows he’s out on a limb and can’t trust anyone, not even the local ordos. Which, of course, is very wise of him. He’ll be operating on... what’s it called?”

“Special Condition, sir.”

“Just that. A virtual rogue. And therefore infernally dangerous.” Trice took a deep breath. “No more covert play, Toros. Unslip the psykers, unleash every secretist. Find Ravenor and burn him for me.”

FOUR

Zael paused with the glass of cordial halfway to his mouth, and looked upwards. The glass slid out of his fingers and smashed on the floor between his feet. He didn't seem to notice it.

"Zael?" I asked.

"Didn't you feel that?" he asked. "I mean, you must have, it was so bright."

I was about to reply when it hit me. A flash-flood of psy-power. Distant but immensely powerful, swirling across the hive. I was getting it real-time. Zael, foreseeing, had sensed it about to happen.

Masked in careful deceits, I reached my mind out. The vast psy-scape of Petropolis, to me a blur of dull colours and mind-forms, was punctuated by five specks of light that rose up over the stacks and spires, bright as super-novae.

Five psykers of great potency had just gone bodiless and were projecting themselves out over the city-hive.

They were hunting, searching for something. I saw pearls of fire spit out from some, dripping across rooftops, from others, beams like searchlights, tracking back and forth.

There was no clue to their identities, but I was sure that none of them was the pysker I had seen with Trice outside the diplomatic palace four nights earlier. I estimated I could handle any two of them, but all five together? They exuded a brute confidence and skill that reminded me of a devil called Kinsky.

I could not allow them to sense me. At my instruction, Frauka made himself untouchable, obscuring me, Zael and Miserimus House from view.

I found Carl in the kitchen. He was raiding the larder, piling a plate with cuts of meat, cheese and slices of swoter-bread from the boxes of provisions we'd brought in. He already had a goose's drumstick clamped in his mouth.

"What's going on?" he mumbled through it.

"Something big." I transponded. "I need you back at your station."

He glanced for a moment at the pile of food on his plate. "Leave that." I said. "You can come back for it."

Carl put the plate down, but kept chewing at the drumstick as he followed me down the hall. It wasn't like Carl to eat with such gusto. He normally picked at his food, and exhibited dainty table manners. He was also forever going on about careful diet and the trimness of his figure.

By the time he'd got back in front of his cogitators, he'd stripped the meat off and tossed the bone into the wastebasket. Still munching, he wiped his greasy mouth across the back of one hand and started at the screen.

"Something's going on all right," he agreed, typing at the keyboard and pulling up different displays of data.

"There are at least five psykers active right now," I said.

Swallowing the last mouthful, he code-typed his way through further digitised information. Realising both his hands were oily and slick from the drumstick, he casually wiped them on the front of his soft, cream lit-ten-silk shirt.

"Lots of Ministry activity. Magistratum too. Some kind of alert," he said. He reached up and picked a fleck of goose-meat from between his teeth with his fingernail. "Sir, this is far, far more

than the creeping backwash scans they've been running since the attack on Trice. This is all-out open season. They're looking for something, looking hard."

"Any ideas what, Carl?"

He shrugged. "The Ministry traffic is coded. Encrypted, actually. I can't break it. Throne, it's the strangest code I've ever seen. Like they're not even using words."

"All right, back down. Have they found our graft in the Informium?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Nor should they, but keep watching in case they do."

I swung my chair round to face Zeph Mathuin.

"Pack us up, Zeph," I said. "We might need to exit in a hurry."

He nodded.

"Zael can help you."

"If we do exit in a hurry," Zeph asked, "any idea where we might go?"

"Contact Doctor Belknap. He might be able to help."

Zeph paused, as if reluctant to leave the room.

"What is it?"

"What about the others? Kys, Nayl and Kara? With Frauka on, they're cut loose and on their own."

"That's just how it's going to have to be," I said.

Now in her fifth hour as a dispatcher, Kara was going numb. Her back ached thanks to the spartan stool she was obliged to perch on, and her fingers were slowly going dead from processing the cylinders, sorting them, emptying them, loading them, sending them on their way. Worse than that, her mind was weary: the constant din of the pneumatic tube despatch hall, the poor lighting, the remorseless pace of work, the *rattle-rattle-rattle* of the multigraphing pool next door. Documents arrived coded or labelled with numerals she had to struggle to read before she could assign them. She felt almost overwhelmed, moving back and forth between repetitive physical action and lines of meaningless digits.

And they really were meaningless. In the first hour or so of the shift, Kara had assumed the sheaves of data she was being given to route were incomprehensible because she was new, and didn't understand the complex workings of Administry filing and language. But that wasn't true, she was sure of that now. Every file coming in or going out was just nonsense.

A gatherer arrived at her station with the latest load. He didn't speak, didn't even look at her as he dropped the bundle of brown-sleeved files into her processing basket. She picked up the top one, read the department code off the cover, then sneaked a quick peek inside.

Just like before. The files and documents had a sort code for identification purposes, usually a marker that meant they had to be sent from an anagramist department to a cipherist hall or vice versa. But the actual document was gibberish. No text that could be read, no headings or paragraphs or tables of contents, no graphs or results or minutes of discussion, no punctuation or syntax. Just oddly spaced columns of letters or numerals, sometimes one or the other, sometimes a mix of both. It wasn't even as if they were written in a language she didn't know. She was processing raw data in discrete chunks.

Just looking at it made her giddy.

A clatter beside her made her jump and she closed the file quickly. A servitor had just dropped a load of empty cylinders into the cage that sat at her feet like an ammunition hopper full of heavy stub-shells. She hooked one out, packed the file inside, and fired it on its way up the appropriate tube.

Kara knew she'd be feeling better about things if Ravenor had been looking through her eyes and scrutinising things too. But he'd suddenly gone quiet almost an hour earlier, and she hadn't heard a thing since.

"Boss?" Nayl whispered into his sleeve, pretending to cough. Still nothing. That was the worst thing about having a little voice in your head: you missed it when it was gone.

He was pushing his laden cart down one of the main hallways, just another gatherer in the dense bustle of two-way traffic, following the signs to his next delivery point. No one spoke, but there was a constant noise: footsteps, squeaking wheels, rattling servitors, popping tubes, the occasional buzzer or call-chime. It felt like being buried deep in the workings of a giant clock, the springs and screws and gears moving all around.

Except, Nayl thought, there would be some regulated order to a clock, no matter how complex its design. The systems and motions and processes of this place felt more like the inner guts of some baffling engine, designed by insanity or genius or both, labouring away towards some final, unguessable, esoteric product.

You're getting jumpy, Harlon, he told himself.

His current destination was a processing hall on level nineteen. When he got there, he had to join the end of a queue of gatherers waiting to enter. He took a rest, leaning on the handle of his cart as the line slowly edged forward.

"Long day, huh?" he said to the gatherer waiting in front of him. The man stared at him blankly then looked away.

Nayl shrugged and turned to regard the flow of workers passing by down the corridor. Other gatherers rolled up to join the queue behind him. He turned to face his cart, and idly reached down and opened the crinkled, rubber-stamped cover of the uppermost document. Inside, another stack of printout pages, covered in columns of characters and numerals that made no sense. Every document he'd managed to sneak a look at that day had been the same.

Maybe they *do* mean nothing, he thought. Maybe there is no more data in the Imperium to be processed, so the Administratum is just circulating random material through its systems in order to justify its continued existence. In a place as soulless and unending as this, he could well believe it.

A hand reached in and firmly pressed the file cover shut. Nayl looked up and found himself eye-to-eye with a frowning ordinate.

"This is not reading material, gatherer," the ordinate said in a reedy voice. Instead of replying, Nayl took a cue from the gatherer in front of him and simply stared back blankly.

"Deliver. Collect. Never tamper," the ordinate said, and moved on down the line.

Nayl's part of the queue finally moved into the processing hall. It was the largest one he'd seen yet, the size of a mass conveyance's main hold. It was impossible to guess how many scribes and processors manned the long rows of chattering data engines and arithmometers. The dry air was filled with the constant tympani of their fingers. There was the usual activity in the aisles: gatherers distributing or collecting, supervising ordinates, despatch runners, the occasional drifting servo-skull.

One dipped down and hovered towards him. Lights in its sockets glowed dull green, and small manipulator limbs equipped with quills dangled either side of its vox grille like the mandibles of a beetle. The drone extended a quick, bright bar of hard light and read Nayl's slate.

"Aisle forty-two," it told him in a buzzing voice that was entirely synthesised. Nayl rolled his cart towards the forty-second aisle and then proceeded down it between the lines of typing scribes at their stations until he found the first cogitator that matched his transfer codes. He put the file into the scribe's basket. The scribe didn't look up. Bathed in the screen glow, the man's bloodshot, unblinking eyes reflected back the steadily scrolling digitised display.

Nayl continued down the line, distributing the folders into pending trays. Overhead, a tannoy announcement blared out, extolling the virtues of a fast, fluid work rate.

Nayl's cart was almost empty. As soon as he'd finished, a drone or an ordinate would direct him to another aisle for collection.

He heard a sharp, sudden cry and looked up. Three aisles away, thirty metres or so from where he stood, the scribe at one particular cogitator had rocked back from his screen and was beginning to convulse. A fierce seizure gripped the man's body, shaking him so hard several of his spinal data-plugs tore out.

Instinct told Nayl to go and help the man, but he stayed where he was. Not a single scribe in the room had even looked up, and most of the gatherers were simply carrying on with their rounds. A few, like Nayl, had paused to look up with vague, canine curiosity.

Two ordinates shuffled down the aisle and reached the stricken scribe just before he gave a final, violent spasm and slumped head first against his screen. There was an audible crack. The man's pale forehead had butted the screen with enough force to craze the glass. The ordinates rolled him back. Even from where he was standing, Nayl could tell the man was dead. Blood dribbled from the dent on his brow.

One of the ordinates turned to the nearest gatherers, Nayl included. "You. Assistance here."

Nayl and two other men pushed forward obediently, and helped lift the dead scribe out of his seat. Nayl could smell sour sweat, blood and a corrupted odour that suggested the man had developed sores from too many hours in his seat. Such gross physical ailments were common amongst the Administry workers.

A junior clerk arrived, pushing a metal trolley. Nayl expected to move the scribe's body onto it, but the gatherers put the corpse on the floor. The trolley was for the cogitator.

The ordinates uncoupled the machine's data trunks and cables, unscrewed the floor brace and then had the gatherers lift the unit onto the trolley. It was quickly wheeled away.

"Resume your tasks," one of the ordinates told the gatherers.

Five minutes later, as Nayl was reaching the end of his aisle, he saw a small team of tech adepts arriving to connect up a new cogitator.

Twenty minutes after that, as he made his way out of the hall with a reloaded cart, Nayl saw that the cogitator was now in operation, a replacement scribe at its seat.

The body of the dead scribe still lay in the aisle, ignored, awaiting collection.

Patience Kys blinked. She thought for a moment that she had actually been asleep, but her fingers were still striking the keys and the bright screen display was still scrolling.

She swallowed, recovering her wits, horrified to realise that she had zoned out for a moment. The repetitive function, the noise, the screen flicker had combined to swallow her into a sort of trance. She glanced around at the operators around her, saw their glazed eyes and slack expressions, and knew that, for a moment at least, she had been just like them.

According to her chron, almost an hour had passed since she'd last looked at it.

In that time, Ravenor had gone. She could no longer feel him. Something must have happened to make him—

She suddenly realised she felt sick. Her head was throbbing and the glow of the screen was making her nauseous.

She started to type again, but just glanced between her screen and the file she was meant to be transcribing made her gorge rise again. She put both hands to her mouth and closed her eyes.

"Scribe Yevins, why has your process rate dropped to below twenty norm?"

Kys looked up. A male ordinate, so old that the augmetic implants in his withered face were starting to rust, gazed down at her.

"I feel... unwell," she murmured.

The ordinate bent down at once, not to assist her but to inspect the information displayed on her screen. As he looked away from her, Kys desperately detached the plug-wire from the analyser Carl had given her and coiled it away into her jacket pocket before he noticed it.

“Get up,” the ordinate instructed her. He picked up the file she was working from, noted the page she was on, and tucked it under his arm. “Follow me.”

She walked after him down the aisle, unsteady on legs tingling with cramp, nausea swilling through her again.

Ahead of her, she heard the ordinate speak into a hand-vox. “G/Fl. Suspected subliminal. Please attend.”

The ordinate led her out of the department hall, along the busy corridor and through a heavy side door into what Kys thought looked like a holding cell. Bare metal walls, tiled floor, a ceiling covered with acoustic baffles. There was a simple wooden table with two chairs on one side and a stool on the other. The ordinate pointed to the stool and Kys sat down. It was hot. She took off her coat and folded it across her knees, fighting down the bilious feeling inside her.

Two men entered the room. They wore robes similar to the ordinates, but Kys had no idea what rank or department they represented. She tried to focus.

“Junior Scribe Merit Yevins, G/Fl, station eighty-six. Work rate dropped, and she complained of feeling unwell.”

The men sat down across the table from Kys. One had a data-slate, the other a fresh copy pad and a stylus. “This is the file she was working from,” said the ordinate, passing it to the man with the pad and stylus. “I’ve marked the page.”

The man studied the page. His companion activated the data-slate. “Transcript of her work,” he said, and slid it to the man with the file. He went back and forth, checking the file off against the slate copy carefully.

“No obvious component,” he said at last. He looked up at Kys. “Can you remember any particular character, character group or file sequence that you were working on when you began to feel unwell?”

“No,” she said softly.

“Then did a word, or a word-part or any phonetic structure or group of characters come into your mind at that time?”

“No,” she said again.

“Think about it,” the other man said. “Try to recall carefully.”

“Is there a sound you can associate with your discomfort?” asked the first. He slid the pad and stylus across the table towards her. “Perhaps you can write it down? Or say it aloud?”

“I don’t understand,” Kys said. The nausea bubbled through her again. She felt as if she was going to pass out.

“Let us be open with you,” said the first man. We are trying to help you. The data you are processing is in a ciphered form. “Your processing is one stage of the decryption. It is possible you have stumbled upon some meaning accidentally.”

“I... I don’t—”

“It happens from time to time,” the other man said. “At this stage in the process, scribes occasionally and inadvertently recover some small unit of true meaning. A morpheme, a phoneme, nothing more.”

“On rarer instances,” said the first man, “innocuous text, such as this”—he gestured to the file—“may generate a morpheme subliminally in a scribe’s mind. This generally causes feelings of sickness. We wish to recover that subliminal. Once we have done so, we can take steps to improve your well-being.”

Kys blinked. She didn’t understand anything of what they were saying. It was just as much gibberish as the files she’d been staring at all day.

The men carried on talking. She thought about the files, the meaningless jumble of characters floating up the cogitator screen, the way they'd made her zone out.

She knew that Ravenor wouldn't have abandoned her without a good reason, but she needed him now. With what concentration she could muster, she reached out with her mind, hoping to find the strength to call to him.

"Are you listening, scribe?" one of the men was saying. She touched his mind, felt his determination. He was convinced she had something in her head, something valuable that he would recover no matter how long it took.

"Help us to help you," said the other man. "As soon as we have the subliminal, we can quickly ease your discomfort." She touched his mind now, saw a quick, brittle flash of what he meant by "ease your discomfort". The man waiting just outside the room. The secretist in the sober suit, a gun in his pocket, waiting to be called in to put a round through the base of her skull.

Desperation seized her, but the nausea swept in more fiercely than before. Off balance, she half-rose, half-fell off the stool. She tried to get up, the ordinate trying to help her. But she was too dizzy. Then she threw up violently on the floor under the table and rolled onto her side, consciousness fading.

The last thing she heard, as if from the other end of an echo chamber, was the ordinate saying, "What is this?"

The last thing she saw, as if through the wrong end of a telescope, was the ordinate clutching her green jacket and holding up the analyser Carl had given her.

FIVE

Three and a half hours after Jader Trice authorised their use, the psykers unleashed by the secretists were called off. The five of them, exhausted from the huge strain of their search efforts, fled back to the flesh forms they had left floating in dank lead holding tanks in the basement levels of the governor's palace, and rested there, moaning and whimpering.

It was late afternoon in Petropolis, the sky a dirty scumble of grey clouds and vapour. The moment the psykers ebbed away, a fierce thunderstorm broke out over the hive.

Revoke knew keeping the psykers active any longer would have been unwise. Quite apart from the fact that the psykers had come close to draining their energy reserves and he had no wish to burn out such a valuable resource, Revoke was aware of the civil issue. Though invisible and intangible to all but the most gifted or sensitive persons in Petropolis, such overt, proactive psy activity would unsettle the general population. As it was, the data reports were busy with stories of panic attacks, freak weather effects, unprovoked domestic violence, numerous suicides and reputed sightings of the manifesting dead. Formal complaints had been made by the Astropathic Guild, the Navis Nobilite and several other august Imperial institutions that utilised psy-adepts by legal covenant.

Trice had the Ministry issue polite responses, suggesting that another grave incident like the one at the diplomatic palace had taken place, but was now under control. Months of careful political manipulation and other more devious machinations meant that virtually all agencies and organisations in Petropolis were directly or indirectly under the control of Jader Trice, including the Astrotelepathicus and the Officio Inquisitorus Planetia. But most of them didn't realise that fact, so it paid to be circumspect.

There was another reason the psykers had been put back in their boxes.

"We've found him," said Boneheart, one of the senior lieutenants of the Secretists as Revoke entered the Counsel Room.

"Show me." Revoke replied. He had brought Monicker with him and, like a heat-haze shimmer, she hovered at Revoke's elbow as he examined the print outs Boneheart was unfolding.

"Plenty of hits, as you can see," Boneheart said. He was a tall man with a craggy face pitted by old acne scars, his hair an oily, hard-combed shelf of grey. "Hive like this is a target-rich environment. Over nine thousand potentials, but you can rule out all the ones I've put a cross through. Low-level sensitives or latents who don't even know what they've got. That leaves about two hundred higher grade returns, true actives. Most of them will be hucksters, faith healers, backroom clairvoyants, spiritualists, maybe even the odd sub-cult member. Some of them are interesting, and we should pass the locations to the Magistratum."

"But none powerful enough?" Revoke asked.

Boneheart shook his head. "You said our guy's major grade, didn't you?"

"From the briefs I've read, dangerously powerful." Revoke replied.

"Well then, no," said Boneheart. "If we're looking for a gamma or a beta, an alpha even, there are only a few hits that match." He tapped his finger on the graph at a particularly large wobble in the signal. "Like that. Except that's the Astropath Guild. And that, that's the guild's sub-station at Tenthe Arch. In fact, most of the big returns here can be identified as legit psy uses. Except these four."

He pointed. "This one, up in Stairtown. Could be our man, but intelligence suggests it's a known unsanctioned psyker called Efful Trevis. Same story here in Central E Another black-market mind-

pirate known to us. And here. In J. Same again. I've sent teams out to secret all three, but I'm pretty sure all we'll be doing is closing down unsanctioned activities that the ordos should have picked up long since."

"Which behind leaves one." Monicker whispered.

Boneheart nodded. "That's right. This one. It fits damn well. High grade activity, delta at the very least. The site is meant to be unoccupied, so that matches too. A hideaway, someone acting in seclusion."

"Show me the map," Revoke said. Another of the secretists passed him a hand slate. The chief provost was quite particular. "We are to move in immediately and end this."

Revoke looked up at the secretists around him. The low-lit room was quiet except for the chatter of codifiers and data-engines. "Ravenor is an Imperial inquisitor. We must not underestimate his abilities, nor the abilities of the men and women who accompany him. This will be a full force operation, maximum prejudice. I'll be leading it. I want you, Boneheart and Monicker, Tolemi, Rove and Molay as team leaders. Combat ordnance. Where's Drax?"

Secretist Molay looked awkwardly at Boneheart.

"I thought you'd been told, Toros," Boneheart said. "Drax is dead."

"Since when?" Revoke asked, his voice as heavy and cold as permafrost.

"This morning," Molay replied. "He was part of the operation to secret the members of Special Crimes. Someone shot him at a residence in Formal E."

"Who was he secreting?"

Molay referred to his data-slate. "Uh, a junior marshal called Maud Plyton. She worked with Rickens. Lived with her uncle at the address. Two other bodies were recovered from the scene, one male, one female, so that probably accounts for the girl and her uncle. Both were reported as shredded by the sheen birds. Maybe this junior marshal popped Drax before the birds got her."

Revoke pursed his lips. "What is the status of the Unkindness now?"

"They're loose, naturally," Boneheart said. "But we've got Drax's pupil Foelon working to bring them under control. He's a good boy. I estimate we'll have the Unkindness back in play before the morning."

"Very well," said Revoke. "I'll review this matter again later. For now, we have our priority. And we'll just have to do it without bird cover. Harness up. I want us airborne in twenty minutes."

Thunder peeled across the murky city. In Formal E, rain lashed down out of the premature night, rippling the windows of Miserimus House.

Frauka was cooking. Zeph was still prowling the place, a gun in his hand. Carl had gone upstairs to shower. I sat, watching over Carl's machines as they mumbled and whirred, watching data-fields pulse and flicker on the screens. Whatever had been stirred up was now dying down, but that didn't mean we could relax. Only the insane or the recklessly powerful would unleash five psykers to scour an Imperial hive. No, let me correct myself. Only the insane, the recklessly powerful or the Holy Inquisition would unleash five psykers so.

We had not been found, and Wystan's limiter was still off, blotting me out from prying minds. But it was just a matter of time. My confidence was faltering. I had come back to this world, dragging my loyal friends along, to uncover some great conspiracy. I had even boasted that I thought it might go right to the top.

Now, the more I pushed, the higher it got. Arrogantly, I had come back to this world under the badge of Special Condition, cutting myself off so heroically from support or back-up, safe in the knowledge that I was an Imperial inquisitor and, armed with that authority, I could explode this heresy.

Hubris. That's meant to be noble, isn't it? As a human quality, it rates next to stupidity in my opinion. We were going against foes of demonstrably formidable power, the planetary authorities

themselves. Just us, the eight of us if you included Zael. We would all pay for my arrogance. Every single one of my friends would—

“What are you thinking about?”

Zael was with me, curled up in a drum chair.

“Guess.”

He sat up. “You were thinking that we’re really fricked up,” he said.

“Where did you learn language like that, Zael Efferneti?” I asked. “Have you been hanging out with Nayl too much?”

He smiled. “Streets of Petropolis, born and bred,” he said. “I know all kinds of swears.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Was I right?” he asked.

I hesitated for a moment. “We could be in a difficult situation, Zael. I may have put you in a difficult situation. If I have, I’m sorry.”

“Can’t you find the bad guys then?”

I turned my chair to face him. “Some of them. What really matters is what they’re trying to do. We don’t know that yet. Once we do, maybe we’ll—”

“What?” he asked.

Die horribly, I thought. “Do something about it.” I transponded.

“Sacristy,” he said suddenly, getting to his feet and reaching for a glass of water from Carl’s desk.

“What?” I asked.

“Sacristy. I don’t know what the word means, but I had a dream where it was very important. Dreams are important, right? You told me that.”

“For someone like you,” I said and spurred my chair towards him. “Say it again. ‘Sacristy’?”

He nodded. “Sacristy. I had this dream, and when I woke up I thought I’d better remember that, so I did. But only just then.”

“Tell me about it.”

He blushed.

“Go on.”

“All right. I... I was dreaming I was in this lovely golden place. Like a landscape. Green hills, woods, a glade, all these beautiful people walking around with haloes of light around them. There were some buildings too. I think they were golden. That’s probably where the golden thing comes from.”

“Uh huh... move on.”

“So one of the people is Kara. And she looks really good.” He paused and blushed a darker shade. “She had this white gown on, it was really tight. Halter neck. And she said, she made me promise...”

“What?”

“If... if I remembered to tell you the word ‘sacristy’, she’d take her dress off and—”

I swung away. “That’s great, Zael. Keep up the good work.”

“But I haven’t told you the end of the dream yet!” he protested.

“I can imagine.”

“But—”

Carl wandered in. He’d showered and changed. He was wearing black velvet trousers with high boots and a tight black singlet. It showed the taut flesh of his torso and arms, but it also displayed the grim, puckered suture scars around his right upper arm where the limb had been reattached. I was surprised. Carl had been so fastidious about hiding his awful wound so far. He had been ashamed of it, and thought it spoiled his perfect looks.

No longer, apparently.

He smiled at me. "What are you two talking about?"

"You don't want to know," I said.

"Oh, I do!" he grinned, sitting down at his workstation.

"Kara undressing," I said, trusting that would put him off.

"I had a dream!" Zael protested.

"I'm sure you did, little man." Carl beamed. "You two boys and your smut when you get alone together."

Now I felt embarrassed.

Carl's fingers danced across the keyboard, pulling up the latest data-skeins. Carl had always worn jewellery — it was part of his measured elegance — but now I saw that every finger on his right hand was laced with rings. Four or five to each digit. The left hand was bare.

"Nice rings." I suggested.

"Thanks," he replied, flexing his right hand towards me to show off nearly thirty rings, including those around his thumb. "If you've got them, flaunt them, I say."

"Status?" I asked him.

Carl looked at his screen. "Lots of agitation still. Plenty of Ministry comm traffic, plenty of Magistratum flare. Gimme a sec to punch up some data for you."

The vox chimed. It was Zeph. "Contact coming in. Hnh. Stand down, it's Nayl."

Harlon had ridden the commute rail back into E from the Ministry towers. He was tired and hacked off and bedraggled from the storm.

"Don't think I can handle another day like that, Gideon," he told me as he settled down next to me, swigging a big amasec Carl had poured for him. "I mean, I thought Our lives were supposed to be hard. In the Ministry towers, like a drone, it's a mind killer. Just relentless crap. You know, I actually saw a scribe die at his station. And you know what they rushed to the medics? His cogitator."

"Why?" I asked.

Nayl shrugged, sipping his drink. Rain clattered against the windows like pebbles. He looked more exhausted than I'd ever seen him and that was saying something.

"It's all about the data, I think. The data," he shrugged again. "I don't know what they're processing in there, but it's not straight information. It's like code, a jumble, a cipher. It seems all wrong to me. Then again, I don't know what it's like in any Administratum centre."

"You sampled the sort of stuff you're talking about?" I asked.

Nayl nodded. "Yeah, I used my picter when I could. You make sense of it."

"We'll see," said Carl. "I still haven't made anything intelligible out of the stuff from Kys' feed."

"Speaking of, where is Patience?" Carl asked.

Nayl frowned. "Kara had told me she intended to visit Belknap before she came back so he could check her dressings, so I wasn't expecting her for another couple of hours at least. But Patience, like Nayl, was supposed to come straight back to Miserimus after her shift. She should have arrived by now."

"Her analyser's no longer transmitting." Carl reported. "Hasn't been for quite a while now. I'd just assumed she'd turned it off."

"Wystan?" I said.

Frauka paused. "You sure? It could still be a risk."

"Do it, please."

He activated his limiter.

Immediately my mind rose free. I reached out carefully, masking myself, but the psykers had gone, leaving an aggravated weather pattern behind them.

+Patience?+

I couldn't see her, couldn't even sense her unique bio-signature.

+Patience?+

There was no reply.

The armoured fliers dipped down towards the target location, mobbing through the evening light and the thunderstorm.

Clad in black body-armour, his hellgun cinched across his belly, Toros Revoke climbed to his feet in the red-lit hold of the lead flier. He looked back at the secretists harnessed to the bare metal walls.

"Make ready to deploy," he called above the purr of the jet wash.

As if thickened and darkened by the storm, night had closed in across the bay side of the hive. Squalling inshore winds crashed the high tide against the breakwaters, pounding the stone piers of the outer flood defences.

The occulting lighthouse, a black tower against a black sky, pulsed out its regular flashes, as if defiantly refusing to match the haphazard rhythms of the lightning.

Inside, the cold, gloomy chambers and galleries had been lit by thousands of tapers and old, stained glow-globes. The storm winds hissed in under ill-fitting doors and rotting shutters, gusting like unquiet spirits along the dark halls, guttering the taper flames. Five of the fraters, armed with tindersticks, were occupied in a patrol of the lighthouse, relighting all the tapers and candles the intruding wind extinguished.

Most of the other Fraternity members were at devotion in the stockbrick basement, or working in huddled groups in various parts of the structure to record the latest refinements to the prospect and its focus and determiners as revealed by the meniscus. The psyker who Orfeo Culzean had ordered them to procure, an evil-tempered renegade astrotelepath called Eumone Vilner, had arrived that afternoon, and he was hard at work relaying the whispered messages of the fraters on Nova Durma.

In his private chamber, bathed in the light of the five oil lamps, the magus-clancular was taking his supper. Gawdel, a junior frater with a face mercilessly disfigured by disease, was feeding Lezzard liquidised nutrition supplements with a long-handled spoon. Lezzard's exo-shell lacked the subtle motor control to feed himself, and his crumbling, back-peg teeth were long past dealing with solids. After every couple of spoonfuls, Gawdel sponged the magus-clancular's chin with a cloth.

"A little more wine." Lezzard wheezed and Gawdel obediently held the cup up to his mouth.

There was an urgent knock on the chamber door.

"Come." Lezzard called.

Arthous entered, along with Frater Bonidar. They both appeared anxious. Each of them carried armfuls of paper scraps, seer papers, so many that some slipped from their grasp and fluttered to the floor.

"Magus..." Arthous began.

"What's the matter?" Lezzard asked, elevating his exo-skeleton so he was standing.

"A sudden... I don't know what to call it..." Arthous stammered. "A sudden flurry in activity from the meniscus. We're being inundated with new determiners."

"They're coming so fast they're contradicting themselves," said Bonidar.

Lezzard remained composed. "My brothers, my dear brothers, calm yourselves. When you have served the silver mirrors as long as I have, you will know that from time to time such urgency breaks out. A sea-change has occurred somewhere, perhaps a quiet, subtle thing. Someone has experienced a change of heart or inadvertently reckoned upon a new course of action. Some subtle thing. Its effects however, may be far-reaching for our prospect. So the future is reshuffling its deck, rearranging itself to compensate, a knock-on effect. That is what causes these occasional flurries of

contradiction. By the morning, it will have calmed, just as this storm will pass and calm, and a new, true picture will be readable. Why, I remember a time on Gloricient, years ago when—”

“I think.” Arthous butted in. “I think it’s more than that. See for yourself...”

He held out a clutch of the papers in trembling fingers. Lezzard squinted to read them because the thin scraps were backlit by one of the lamps.

“Ravenor. Ravenor. Ravenor,” said Arthous. “And again here. And here. And see? Trice, again and again. Twenty, thirty times.”

The magus-clancular raised a metal-caged hand. “They are known determiners, both of them major focal points. This is to be expected.”

“But new names are appearing too,” Bonidar said. “Here, this name: Revoke. We’ve not seen it before now, but it has turned up eight times. And this one, Boneheart. And this one, Molay. And others besides.”

Lezzard frowned. “Show me,” he said.

The two fraters dropped their paper scraps onto the floor, knelt down and began scrabbling through them, holding up certain readings to show to the magus-clancular.

“Here,” said Arthous. “Another new name. Zael Efferneti. It occurs, by my count... six times. And this. Kara Swole. Two instances.”

“Three,” corrected Bonidar. “Also this name: Siskind. And this one. Lilean Chase: And this, Zygmont Molotch. His name is clouded, but it features on thirteen occasions.”

“All will become clear once the future settles—” Lezzard began, but the tone of his voice betrayed his concern.

Arthous rose from the floor and held out a scrap of paper in each hand. “Read these, then, magus, and understand our fear.”

Lezzard bent forward to look at the scribbled writing on the two scraps. One read, *Orfeo Culzean*. The other said simply, *Stefoy*.

There was a long silence in which only the wind and the rain and thunder spoke.

“Bring Frater Stefoy to me,” Lezzard said quietly.

The two fraters nodded and turned towards the door.

The front entrance of the lighthouse detonated.

Throughout the building, the brothers of the Divine Fraternity barely had time to react before a second blast shook the place, then a third. The tang of smoke filled the lower chambers, and the brothers could hear cries and the blurt of gunfire. They ran to grab weapons of their own.

The killers broke into the lighthouse from all sides, kicking in doors, smashing through window shutters. The storm blew in along with them, and to the bewildered fraters it seemed as if the wind and rain had taken human form to invade their stronghold.

The first group of fraters to have found firearms clattered down the main staircase into the entrance hall and met the wrath of the invaders head on. Unarmoured, and firing only poor quality las-pieces and autoguns, the fraters were cut down without quarter. The intruding killers, grim figures in their black combat plating stalked forward out of the smoke billowing from the ruptured threshold, placing shot-bursts with their hellguns. Fraters were blown off their feet as they tried to return fire, or were hit in the back as they broke and fled. The hallway and stairs were quickly littered with tangled bodies.

“Up.” Revoke signalled to Boneheart. His mind already had a firm lock on the psy-trace somewhere in the basement area.

Boneheart led his squad up the staircase, firing from their shoulders at the landing above as they went. Clipped by the whining energy bolts, sections of the old wooden banister exploded and shattered. The body of a frater tumbled down, hit the stairs and slithered to a halt.

As Boneheart's secretists reached the landing a group of fraters led by Bonidar pinned them briefly, establishing a ragged crossfire from the doorways of the first floor rooms. One of the secretists staggered back, wounded.

Boneheart got in behind the stairway wall and threw a grenade. The bang of light and pressure threw debris out across the landing and forced Bonidar and his men back, dazed and shaken. The secretists rushed them. They swung into each doorway, firing their hellguns on rapid. Fraters jerked and fell, blown backwards, some dismembered by the searing shots. Boneheart himself stormed the largest chamber. Firing from the shoulder, he killed the three fraters in the doorway, then swung round to slaughter two more who were trying to hide behind a table.

Bonidar was in the far corner. He ran at the looming secretist, firing his lasrifles. Two bolts scorched off Boneheart's shoulder guard. With an amused grunt, he altered his aim and fired a single shot. It exploded Bonidar's sternum, communicating such force to the frater's body that it flew backwards across the room, smacked into the wall and dropped on its front.

A bitter hub of fighting now broke out on the back stairs as Molay's team began to push in through the lighthouse's undercroft. Frater Arthous and about twenty of the brothers, armed with autoguns and las-locks, were defending the stairhead, and they had the advantage of cover. The stairwell air became a thick fume of rising smoke through which jittering bolts criss-crossed and glittered.

Molay dropped back and signalled to the handlers in his team. The men released their cannon-hounds.

The quadruped weapon-servitors pounded forward, heavy and hunched as mastiffs. They came up out of the smoke and began to thump up the stairs, their eyes projecting the pink lances of their recognition beams. The fraters immediately began to concentrate their fire on them, but hard round and las-shot alike bounced off the servitors' chrome armour. For a moment, both cannon-hounds were lit up with white sparks as ordnance spattered off them. Then they returned fire.

Each weapon-servitor was armed with a pair of gun-pods mounted either side of its hulking shoulders. The combined firepower of the four lasrifles shredded the stairhead and most of the defending fraters along with it. The cannon-hounds padded forward through the burning devastation they had wrought, playing their recog beams across the charred bodies, looking for anyone still alive. Any they found was despatched with a single close-range las-pulse.

Frater Arthous had lost most of a leg in the fusillade. He tried to drag himself clear, granting in pain and fear as the hounds closed in behind. Arthous glanced over his shoulder just as the first pink beam found him. Then the las-pulse cracked and the hater's head vaporised.

On the floor above, Frater Gawdel and half a dozen other brothers were trying to carry the magus-clancular to a room where they could best defend him. A few other fraters ran ahead, frantically searching for sanctuary. Behind them, they could all hear the rattle of exchanged weapons-fire as armed brethren held a rearguard at the end of the passageway.

Monicker had taken the semblance of the first frater she'd seen on entering the lighthouse, and in that guise she now joined Gawdel and his fellows, apparently to help them with their efforts to carry the magus-clancular. As soon as she was in amongst them, she drew her serrated blade.

One of the fraters suddenly fell back against the wall, blood jetting from between the fingers he had clamped to his throat. Another to Lezzard's left fell with a shriek.

"What in the name of—" Gawdel cried.

Two more fraters fell dead, and now Gawdel and Lezzard could see the bloodied blade in the hands of the brother who had most recently come to help them.

"Kaska?" Lezzard breathed, aghast. "What is this you do?"

Frater Kaska smiled, then trembled and wasn't Kaska anymore. There was just a vague blur in the smoky dark, a glimmer of silver like the ocean at night. The blade flashed out and sliced so deeply through Gawdel's neck the serrated edge grated against his spine.

"P-please..." Magus-clancular Lezzard whispered.

Slowly, Monicker lifted Lezzard's eye-patch and raised the blade towards his one good eye.

+Lead me to this back way.+

Frater Stefoy gasped as the words dug at his brain. He stumbled back a few steps from Eumone Vilner. The psyker continued to glare at him.

"I'm not sure I know of any—"

+I can see it right there in your head, you turd. There is a tunnel exit out of the basement levels to the west, running inside the flood defences. Show me. I have no intention of staying here for *that* to arrive.+

Vilner furnished the word *that* with a gesture at the roof and the sustained sounds of violence echoing down into the basement chambers. Almost all the fraters had left the basement to take up arms, but Stefoy and three others had been ordered to see to the welfare of the odious psyker. The dank chamber around them was empty but for the deserted tables laid out with scrying devices, the small silver mirrors and the bowls of paper scraps.

+Show me!+ Vilner emphasised, hard enough to make Stefoy and the other three wince.

Stefoy turned and hurried over into the far corner of the basement area and started to move aside old packing crates. He'd only been told about the tunnel, he didn't know if it was even navigable. But he found himself agreeing with Vilner: it sounded a safer bet than venturing upstairs. Behind the crates, Stefoy found a boarded-up section of wall. He scrabbled at the old planks so hard he drew blood from his fingertips.

+Hurry up!+ The command came with a pain-goad this time, and Stefoy cried out. He kicked at the old planks until they began to come away and then pulled a few off until there was enough room to slide through into the wet darkness beyond.

"Come on, sir!" he shouted back. Stefoy could hear the booming of the sea, and the darkness smelled of salt.

Vilner and the other fraters started forward. The psyker shoved the brothers aside with his mind so he would be first to reach the gap in the planking.

Suddenly he turned. "Holy Throne!" he hissed.

Revoke was striding across the basement chamber towards them. His hellgun came up and he started to fire. One of the fraters pitched over, his face blown off. Vilner grabbed the other two brothers with his potent telekinesis and dragged them together so they formed a shield of flesh and bone between himself and the oncoming secretist.

Revoke fired again and the psy-bound fraters convulsed as the energy rounds ripped into them. Vilner held their exploded carcasses in the air for a second with his mind, then threw them aside, spearing his telekinesis forward to wrench the weapon out of Revoke's grip. It bounced off the ceiling and clattered into a corner.

Revoke and Vilner faced each other, rigid as statues. Their minds engaged. The basement around them shook with the psychic backwash. Glow-globes burst. Tables vibrated and shook precious scrying mirrors onto the floor. Bowls overturned and scattered seer papers into the air.

Shaking with effort, Revoke took one slow step forward. Veins bulged like hawsers in Vilner's neck. His hands slowly came up at his sides, fists balled. Revoke took another step forward. Some of the paper scraps spontaneously ignited, swirling in the air like fireflies.

Table legs warped and buckled. A small stool tipped over and began to spin like a child's top. Hundreds of the old stockbricks in the wall cracked and shattered, spilling out mortar and dust.

Revoke took a third, leaden step.

Vilner's mouth moved weakly. He made a wet, rattling sound in his throat. Revoke closed his eyes and furrowed his brow with one final effort.

Eumone Vilner turned inside out.

It happened very quickly, like a sudden conjuring trick. There was a brief but intense noise of flesh tearing and bones fracturing, then the psyker burst in a huge shower of blood and gobbets of meat.

Revoke breathed out and wiped a spatter of gore from his cheek.

Stefoy could finally see a frail light ahead. The tunnel was pitch-black, and he had already fallen twice and torn his hands and knees against the rough, salt-wet floor. The booming of the sea was louder now. He realised he could see a flight of stone steps leading up to a small door of metal bars. Backscattered lightning was peeping in through the bars.

Stefoy struggled up the slippery steps and fought to draw the rusty bolt on the bar-door. Outside, he could see the breakwater wall, the sea crashing over it in huge clouds of spume so white they seemed luminous in the night air. Rain was in his face, and wind. The bolt finally drew and he swung the door out, stumbling through onto the gleaming black stone of the sea wall. The force of the wind nearly picked him off into the roiling sea, but he staggered on, shielding his face from the breakwater sprays that exploded rhythmically over the lip of the wall.

Thunder boomed overhead. Stefoy turned to look at the lighthouse, three hundred metres back along the breakwater. Through the rain and the spray, he saw the dark armoured fliers hovering on stall-jets around it, the probing beams of their stablights, the amber glow of the fires now raging in the lower levels of the tower.

Up ahead of him, a metal ladder ran down the landward side of the sea wall. Stefoy clambered down it, and started to run through the midnight landscape of derelict drydocks and rope-maker barns back towards the city.

Revoke turned away from the smatters of Vilner spread across the basement chamber and started to search the room with his mind. It lighted on something almost at once. He walked over to a heavy, padlocked coffer standing in a side alcove. A single un-word blew the lock off. Revoke lifted the coffer's lid and looked inside.

"Well, well," he murmured. There was a sound on the stairs, crunching boots. Without looking round, Revoke knew it was Boneheart.

"Are we secure?" Revoke asked.

Boneheart nodded.

"This wasn't Ravenor," Revoke said. "It was a practising cult, with a hired psyker. Not what we hoped, but interesting nevertheless."

"So where is Ravenor?" Boneheart asked.

"Hidden." Revoke replied. "Hidden better than we can see. We have underestimated his talents. Call the teams. Tell them I want at least one of these cultist bastards kept alive for questioning."

Boneheart did as he was ordered. Then he looked back at Revoke. "So what now? The chief provost won't be happy that w—"

"We'll get Ravenor for him," Revoke said. "I believe I may have found a new way to do it. Help me with this."

Revoke closed the lid of the coffer, and Boneheart took hold of the other end. Together, the two men carried it away across the basement, towards the steps.

Behind them, ignored, the seer papers tumbled in the breeze, some of them burning.

Thonius, they read, every single one of them. *Thonius*, *Thonius*, *Thonius*...

SIX

He taped the gauze in place, then peeled off his surgical gloves as Kara pulled her top back down.

"It's looking much better," Belknap said. "The wound's clean."

"Thanks," Kara said and got to her feet. Outside in the shabby waiting room of Belknap's makeshift surgery, a man was singing loudly in a drunken slur and other voices were yelling at him to shut up.

"Lively tonight," Kara said.

"Pretty much the same as usual," Belknap said. "So, how are things?"

Kara shrugged. "Difficult. Tense. The direction of our investigation has changed and the work's tough. Not dangerous *per se*, but boring in the worst way. And a member of our team is overdue. Missing."

"That's not good," Belknap said. "But I actually meant you."

"Oh."

"You didn't have to come all the way down to Formal I just to get that dressing changed. I presumed it was a cover story so we could talk about the... private matter."

Kara smiled. "Oh, that. Yes, I suppose so." She sat back down on the old barber's chair. "The medication you gave me, I don't know if it's working or not. I mean I don't feel particularly better and in some ways I feel worse. I get tired very easily, and concentration is a problem. And when I try to sleep, no matter how tired I feel, I stay awake for hours. Could that be a side-effect of the drugs?"

"Possibly." Belknap replied. "It is going to be difficult to distinguish as we go along what are effects of your condition and what are effects of the treatment. Let's stick with it for a few days, then switch to another inhibitor if the fatigue is still an issue."

"I need to be sharp," Kara said.

"Of course."

"Now more than ever. I was wondering if there was anything in there..." she nodded her head towards his modest pharmacy stock. "Anything in there that might be a little stronger-acting."

"Kara, if you want to stay sharp, then morphiates and pain-masks are not what you need. You'd be better off managing any pain or discomfort. Anyway, the strongest thing I can prescribe doesn't come out of the cabinet."

"Go on," she said, brushing red hair off her face.

Belknap smiled a little self-consciously. "Corny, I know, but... strong, positive thinking. Your state of mind can have the most extraordinary effect."

"Oh, of course I want to stay positive..."

"I'm talking about more than that. Belief." He reached into his vest and pulled out the silver aquila that he wore alongside his old dog-tags. "In wartime, call it courage. In peacetime, call it faith. In the Guard, I saw men do amazing things... fight off infection, heal wounds... just because they believed. And I saw men die just because they didn't."

"Well, I believe," Kara said. "I mean, I'm no zealot. I can't actually remember when I last went to temple. But I believe in the God-Emperor. After all, I've pretty much devoted my life to His service."

“Oh, I know,” Belknap replied. “And that’s good, but it is easy to believe in Him, isn’t it? We know He’s real, after all. The faith I’m talking about, the real faith, comes from the belief that He’s watching *us* and has the power to transform our lives.”

Kara pursed her lips. “Well, I think I’ve always believed that,” she said. “But I’ve also always believed in expressing devotion to the Golden Throne through deed and duty. I’ve never been big on high mass and night song and all that standing up and sitting down.”

“Fair enough,” said Belknap. “But the ritual can be good too. It focuses the mind on the act of belief. Devotion through deed is fair enough, but most of the time all you’re thinking about is the deed itself, not the devotion. Making time to go to the temple reminds you it’s just about the divine. About you and your relationship to the power above us all. Sometimes worship should be a choice, not a by-product.”

“I’ll take that under consideration,” Kara smiled.

Belknap got to his feet, clearing away the torn paper packet of the dressing. “That’s fine. You asked my advice. In my experience, faith is the strongest medicine of all. Especially in cases, such as yours, where the illness is so...”

“Terminal?” she suggested bluntly.

He nodded. “In such cases, there can be a measurable effect. Just through faith and positive thinking, patients have reduced painful symptoms, enhanced their quality of life, extended their expectancy, even, in rare cases, found remission. I mean to say they have survived cancers that absolutely should have killed them. Because they believed the God-Emperor was watching, and He was.”

“Right,” said Kara, also rising to her feet. “I’ll stop off at a temple on my way back now, light a taper, say the *vobis*. How’s that?”

“It’s a start. Two streets from here is St. Aldocis Understack. Small place, poor, but honest. You could do worse.”

Kara shook her head. “Oh no,” she said. “If I’m going to go to a temple, I want the full awe and wonder experience. I want heavyweight Ecclesiarchy. The whole deal.”

“Well, Petropolis has more than its share of fine cathedrals and high temples,” said Belknap. “The Basilica Hierophantus in Formal B, St. Benedict’s, St. Malkus in the Square — tallest spire in the subsector, Falthaker Abbey — that’s in C, very pretty. And of course the grand templum and the Ecclesiarchus in Formal A.”

“They sound about right,” Kara said. “Thanks. I’ll come back and see you in a day or two.” She started to leave.

“Kara?” She turned back and was suddenly face to face with Belknap. He reached up and unclasped the silver aquila’s chain from around his neck. “Something to help you on your way.”

“That’s yours,” she protested.

“Yeah,” he said. “Been with me since I was a boy. But I think it’ll be content enough to come along with you.”

She put up her hands to lift her hair away from the nape of her neck so he could hook the chain in place. For a second, she felt the warmth of his hands, and smelled the faint musk of his cologne. Then he stepped back.

“Thank you,” she said.

Outside, in the sub-stack sink, Kara hurried along the underwalk towards the transit station. The night was bustling with people, and rainwater from the ferocious storm high above was drooling down through the sink levels.

Kara pulled out her hand-vox. “It’s me. I’m on my way back. Just a quick stop to make. I’ll be an hour and a half. Any sign of Patience yet?”

“No,” I responded. “I’ll keep you informed.” I closed the link and turned my chair back to the others. Patience was now almost two hours overdue. Carl was showing nothing useful on his data-engines, and there was no response from Patience’s hand-vox. Every five minutes, I had Frauka activate his limiter so I could look for her, but it was no good. She was either shielded somewhere, or—

I didn’t want to think about the alternative.

Nayl was getting impatient. “I’m going back,” he said, getting to his feet.

“Back where?” Carl asked.

“The Ministry tower.” Nayl replied.

“We don’t know she’s there,” Carl said.

Checking his weapon and his vox-link, Nayl glared at him. “We don’t know much about anything helpful at *all*, do we, Thonius? Which is frigging ironic given *the stuff you know*.”

“Lose the snide tone, you knuck-head oaf.” Carl snapped. “I’m worried about her too.”

“That’s enough, both of you,” I said.

Nayl shrugged. “All right. But the one thing we do know is the Ministry tower’s the last place she was seen.”

“You’re tired,” Mathuin said. “I’m fresh. I’ll go.”

Nayl shook his head. “I’ve spent the day there, Zeph. Know my way around at least a little. Better if it’s me.”

“I find myself agreeing with Carl.” I put in. “We don’t know where Kys is, so I don’t know how you expect to find her in a place that size.”

“I don’t. You’re going to find her,” Nayl said. “Don’t know how, but you’ll think of a way. And when you do find her, I’ll be right there, ready and waiting to get her out.”

With that, he left. We heard the main door slam shut.

“Wystan,” I said. “Let’s try it again.”

Frauka activated his limiter.

+Patience?+

No reply.

+Patience, where are you?+

Kys opened her eyes. It was cold. She was lying on the ground, on her side. In front of her, just a metre away, the foot of a whitewashed brick wall. The floor she was sprawled on was tiled with glossy white squares.

For a moment, she thought she was naked, until she realised she was wearing a thin gown of disposable paper, the type they sometimes gave patients in infirmaries. Her feet and legs were bare. Her hands were cuffed in front of her with heavy metal binders. She realised that the main reason she’d felt naked was because not a single erg of psy-power existed in her head. Her talent was gone, as surely and completely as when Frauka did his blunting trick.

She rolled over so she was facing into the room. A secure cell, definitely. Caged lights in the ceiling, a heavy gauge hatch in the opposite wall. A plain wooden chair on the floor next to her. Across the room, a man sat on an identical chair, facing her, his back to the door. He wore a simple, sober suit of dark grey with a black dress shirt. His pale skin was freckled and he had slightly thinning red hair.

As she rolled over, he reached a hand to his ear and activated what must have been a micro-bead comm-link.

“She’s awake.”

Then he remained sitting there, staring at her.

After a couple of minutes, the hatch whirred open and an identically dressed man entered. He was a little taller, a little heavier than the first, paunchy around the waist, with cropped dark hair and

the flat nose of a pugilist. He carried a paper sack in one hand, and a small, stubby actuator wand in the other, which he waved to close the hatch behind him. The freckled man got up, took the wand from his colleague, and went to stand by the door.

The dark-haired man sat down facing Kys, and held out one hand to indicate the empty chair beside her. Kys got up, unsteady at first, and sat on the chair.

The man looked at her. "Things sometimes aren't what they seem," he began. "At face value, they're one thing, but peer under the surface and you find all kinds of secrets. Luckily, secrets are what I and my friend here deal in. Secrets. We're experts, you might say."

Kys made no reply.

"So you," the man went on. "At face value, you're Junior Scribe Merit Yevins. You started work today in Administery Tower Three, department G/FI, station eighty-six." He reached into the sack and produced Kys' permit. "Your documents check out. They're not fakes or copies. We even ran them through the Informium. Merit Yevins. That's you. So, what we appear to have is a junior scribe, who became unwell after accidental exposure to a subliminal whilst working at her station."

Kys just stared back at him.

"But there's more to it, isn't there?" the man said. He put the permit back in the sack and lifted out the analyser. "You were found to be concealing this. Data-analyser, expensive model. That's odd, isn't it? Why would a junior scribe be transmitting data for analysis?"

The man dropped the analyser into the sack, rummaged around for a moment and then took out Kys' hand-vox. "Then there's this. Hand-vox. Common enough. So what? Well, this is odd too. It's new. It was purchased locally not more than a week ago. And it's been altered. Altered by someone who really knows his way around tech-priest stuff. No stored calling codes, which is funny, because everybody stores calling-codes. And it doesn't log. It's been fixed not to log. Outgoing or incoming, no codes get recorded. So there's no way of telling who Merit Yevins calls or who's been calling Merit Yevins."

He looked at Kys for a moment, and when she made no reply, he continued. "So we're really scratching our heads at this point, and then we find these." He put the vox back in the sack and took out something else. "They were laced into the hem of your jacket. Thin blades, without handles, seriously sharp. That's a whole new level of odd. Then one of my colleagues here — and I might point out at this stage that the people I work with have all kinds of specialist knowledge - anyway, he says these are kineblades. Designed for use by adepts with telekinetic powers. So we scanned you. You were unconscious through all of this, by the way. And lo and behold, the scan reads you as a telekine. What's more, the sort of telekine it doesn't pay to mess with. So I'm thinking it's very likely that you're not Merit Yevins at all. Because Merit Yevins isn't a trained combat telekine with access to these sorts of toys. Nor is she the sort of person with the expertise to persuade the Informium itself to lie about her identity." He smiled. "We still don't know how you pulled that one."

"Incidentally," he said, putting the kineblades away and handing the sack to the freckled man, "we inhibited you. You must be able to feel that. Standard limiters, even lockable ones, can be removed or tampered with. So we injected a fluid suspension of micro-blockers directly into your bloodstream. You won't be able to use your psychic powers again for at least another twelve hours."

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Do you have a name?"

"Do you?" Kys asked.

The man sat back and grinned. "All right, let's play. I imagined we would. My name is Suldon. My pal here, his name is Brade. We are agents of the Ministry of Subsector Trade, though our agency is clandestine. We're called secretists. You're being detained in the secure wing of our headquarters. I tell you all this simply to demonstrate the hopelessness of your situation. No one knows where you are. No one is coming for you. Our powers of detention are entirely beyond Administratum law, as are our methods of interrogation. You will never see the outside world again. You are not likely to live more than a day or two. Everything you are, everything you were hoping

to achieve, it's all over and done with. Finished. The only thing you have left is the power to determine the quality of what remains of your life. Give us the information we need, and that quality will be relatively high. We'll take care of your last few hours in a way that you will thank us for at the end. Obstruct us, and when that end comes, I promise you you'll remember this moment, and loathe yourself for making the wrong choice."

"Do they train you in these techniques?" Kys asked softly, "or were you born a silver-tongued bastard?"

The man was still smiling as he rose to his feet. "Girl, I make this crap up as I go along. Now, let me tell you what I think."

"Please," Kys said.

"I think there's a very good chance you're an associate of Gideon Ravenor, the rogue inquisitor. We're very keen to speak with him. Actually, that's a lie. We're very keen to kill him in the most painful and permanent way imaginable. I know it must be very hard to contemplate giving up a friend, betraying them and their confidences. Ravenor's probably your mentor, right? Father-figure? Beloved leader? But I tell you what, you'll be so grateful that you did."

"My name is Merit Yevins," Kys said.

Suldon pointed at her and winked. "I love it when they play hard-to-get. We can bring in a psyker any time, rip the truth from your boiling skull. But I have a better idea. It'll involve a lot less mopping the floor."

He looked at the freckled man. "Brade? Go get prisoner AA-15 and bring him here."

Brade nodded, waved the actuator wand to open the door, and left.

"You're going to love this bit." Suldon told her. "Brace yourself. Don't make this too easy for me." He took a palm-sized scanner pad out of his jacket pocket. "Bio-metric reader," he said. "Set to register physiological changes like heart rate, pupil dilation, breathing fluctuations and skips in synapse activity."

"Truth reader," said Kys.

"That's right." Suldon nodded. "It reaction-scans even non-verbal responses. Don't worry, it's not for you."

The hatch opened again. Brade re-entered. "In here," he said.

A small figure shuffled in behind him. He was shackled at the wrists and ankles, his depth of stride seriously restricted. His head was bowed. What was left of his uniform was torn, and from the bruises and dried blood caking his flesh, it was clear he had been severely beaten more than once in the last few days. Fresh purple contusions mottled older, yellowing bruises. Hideous gashes, each more than a week old, crusted the man's chest and shoulders. Something had been used to sever the fourth and ring fingers of both his hands.

When he looked up, his face was a swollen black gourd of bruising and half-dosed, bloodshot eyes.

Even so, he was still recognisable.

It was Shipmaster Sholto Unwerth.

His fingers steepled together, his chin resting on his thumbs, Orfeo Culzean slowly looked up from the regicide board in front of him. The game was set on a little turntable, and Culzean was tournamenting himself.

He rose to his feet. The hotel suite was quiet, except for a delicate sonata by Hanz Solveig that Culzean had left playing at low volume.

"Hello," he said.

"I let myself in," said Toros Revoke.

Culzean recognised him instantly. It was the man who had gone head-to-head with the Brass Thief at the diplomatic palace.

“I’m sure you did,” said Culzean. “I’ve been expecting you, actually. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Revoke half-nodded. “You are Orfeo Culzean?”

“Yes, I am. You?”

“Toros Revoke. You seem remarkably composed, Culzean. Considering your situation.”

“And what is that, exactly?” Culzean asked.

“Precarious,” smiled Revoke.

“Would you like a drink?” Culzean asked. “Perhaps an appetiser?”

“I’m fine,” said Revoke. The little simivulpa was hiding under one of the chairs, hissing at the secretist in pure malice.

“Stop that.” Culzean shushed. “So, let’s get to business, shall we?”

“Business?” Revoke echoed. “There is no transaction here. You speak like you have some leverage. You do not. I... visited your employers at the lighthouse in Q this evening. They are all dead now.”

“I expect so. You are a dangerous man.”

“Thank you. Their leader, Magus-clancular Cornelius Lezzard — as he kept reminding us — remained alive long enough to tell me all about you. By the end, he was quite desperate to tell me, in fact.”

Culzean walked over to the sideboard. “Do you mind?” he asked.

Revoke shook his head. Culzean poured himself an amasec, trying hard not to give away how much his hands were shaking.

“You are a facilitator, an expeditor, and you work for cult concerns such as the Divine Fraternity, so long as they can afford your fees.”

“Yes, sir. That is what I do.”

“You make things happen.”

Culzean took a sip of his drink, breathed deeply and nodded. “I have skills and means. If something needs to be facilitated, I’m the one people come to.”

“According to Lezzard, the Divine Fraternity was concerned with the birthing or manifestation of a daemon called Slyte, whose occurrence they had foreseen. They employed you to make this happen. The birth of this daemon was tied into the activities of Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor, who currently acts against my interests. So that made me and my commander, the chief provost... how did Lezzard put it? It made us *negative determiners*. Is that right?”

“It is.”

“And that’s why you unleashed an incunabula to kill the chief provost?”

Culzean took another sip. “Naturally. It was the most expeditious option. But you stopped it. I watched you. It was very impressive. I should like to know how you did that, Master Revoke. As a result, the determiners changed slightly.”

“Favourably, I gather. Lezzard was quite clear that, despite the failure of your attack, this Slyte was quantifiably more likely to be manifested.”

Culzean set down his empty glass and shook his head. “Throne, sir. You really must have hurt Magus Lezzard to get him to tell you this.”

Revoke shrugged. “I left it to the experts. I can tell you he was in forty-six separated parts when he died.”

Culzean shuddered. “And is that going to be my fate too, Master Revoke?”

“You know, I should think so.”

The connecting door from the bedrooms opened suddenly and Leyla Slade came in. “Orfeo, I heard voices and—”

Her handgun was drawn in a nano-second. Revoke was faster. With his telekinesis, he threw Slade against the wall, smashing a gilt-framed mirror, and seized her. Slowly, unwillingly, Slade raised the gun and aimed it at her own forehead.

“Don’t,” said Culzean.

“You’re in no position to bargain,” Revoke said.

Culzean poured himself a second amasec. “Actually, what do you know? I am. Don’t. Let her be. I’m serious.”

Revoke let Slade go, and plucked her gun right across the room into his hand.

“I’ll listen once, Culzean. Go on.”

“Well, here it is.” Culzean replied, taking his glass and walking over to the settee. He sat down, crossed his legs, seeming utterly relaxed. “His magnificence Jader Trice, and the entire body of the Ministry of Subsector Trade - of which you are a servant — are engaged in some activity that... well, let’s put this fairly. If the ordos knew what you were up to, they would purge this planet by Exterminatus. Just for starters.”

He knocked back his glass.

“So, by way of insurance, you understand, expecting you to come for me, I have prepared a document outlining all I know about your activities. This document is being held in trust by a third party — a major subsector banking house, just so you know. Every hour, on the hour, I send them a ciphered message. All the while I do, they retain the document. If I miss just one cipher, the document will be sent directly, by astropath, to the Inquisition on Thracian Primaris. I’m just guessing, but I think that would rather spoil your endeavours here.”

Revoke said nothing.

“So, this does become business. There is a transaction, after all. You tell me what you want, and I’ll tell you what I can give.”

Revoke turned and shot a mind-nudge out of the room. A few seconds later, the chamber doors opened and Boneheart entered, followed by four secretists lugging the coffer.

They set it down and backed away. Revoke opened the lid.

Inside sat the pyramidal device wrought of brass and the trigger-orb.

“This is the incunabula you used against my Master Trice?”

“Yes, it is.”

“It can find any target, anywhere, no matter how well hidden said target is?”

Culzean nodded. “That’s what it does. The Thief doesn’t need an address. The warp shows it where to go.”

“I want you to use it to find and destroy Ravenor,” Revoke said.

“And in return?”

“In return?”

“My payment,” Culzean said. “I want a piece of what you have. My terms are these. I will destroy Ravenor, but in payment I want Enuncia.”

Revoke stared at him.

“Yes or no,” said Culzean. “I want Enuncia. You’ve decoded the fundamental controls of reality. I want to share in that. Say yes and I will operate this shining weapon for you. Say no and you might as well leave now and watch your backs for the black ships and their virus bombs.”

“My answer is yes,” Revoke said.

“Excellent. That’s business done. Now get the hell out of my chambers. I’ll join you in an hour or so.”

Revoke nodded to Boneheart and the secretists carried the coffer back out. Revoke paused in the doorway. “Any tricks, Culzean, and I will kill you.”

“I should hope so,” Culzean said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

As soon as the secretists had left, Culzean hurried over to Leyla Slade and helped her to her feet.

“That was a lie, wasn’t it?” she said.

“What?”

“All that stuff about ciphered documents held by banking houses. You never did that.”

“A bluff. Ley, not a lie. They’re quite different things.”

“Whatever you say.”

“What I say now is, let’s unlock some of our other weapons. Just in case.”

Suldon waved the scanner pad at Unwerth.

“You know,” he said. “He’s good. Not even a twitch of recognition. Unfortunately, the scanner says otherwise. A massive brain spike. Synapses firing all over the place. He knows you. He really does.”

Unwerth looked up at Kys, his face a pitiful mess.

“I furnish you with all apologems,” he hissed through his split mouth. “I never ever intended to affect your betrayness.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kys said.

Suldon took out his hand-vox. “Revoke? Yes? It’s me. Suldon. In the holding cells. Looks like we’ve got one of Ravenor’s team here. Yeah, locked up. No, she definitely checks out. One of Ravenor’s. Absolutely. All right. As soon as you get here.”

Suldon shut his vox and popped it in his pocket. He looked at Unwerth.

“Get him out of here,” he said.

Brade waved the wand at the hatch and it opened. He jostled Unwerth towards the door.

“One thing,” Kys said.

“What?” asked Suldon.

“That subliminal you thought I’d picked up. I remember now how it sounded.”

Patience Kys looked Suldon in the face and said it.

SEVEN

It wasn't a word. It wasn't even so much a proper sound. Just giving voice to it made her mouth hurt.

But it did a lot more to Suldon. He instantly, explosively vomited, then fell onto his knees, clutching at his belly, violently retching up his stomach contents.

Kys was already moving past him. At the open hatch, Brade was turning fast, drawing a handgun from inside his coat. Kys slammed into him, driving him round against the brick wall of the cell. She grabbed the wrist of the hand holding the gun with both of her cuffed hands, and simultaneously smashed her left knee into Brade's kidneys. He grunted, back arching, and she drove his gun-hand into the wall, scraping his knuckles across the rough, whitewashed brick. Immediately, he dropped the weapon, screaming out in pain. He tried to pivot, to swing her off him. Still holding his wrist, she shoulder-barged him face-first into the wall.

Suldon was back on his feet, closing, drawing his own gun. Kys let go of Brade's wrist, clamped her hands on his shoulder for leverage, and threw herself out into a horizontal body spin. Her bare legs, scissor-kicking, whirled into Suldon, smacking his gun away across the cell and fracturing his cheekbone. He reeled backwards.

But her hold on Brade was weakened. He clawed around, grabbing at her, catching hold of the collar of her paper gown. The left shoulder and sleeve tore away. Kys kicked him in the belly, then grabbed him around the sides of the head with her cuffed hands as he doubled over. She delivered a sharp, vicious twist, snatching the force of it through her arms and her upper body, and broke his neck.

Brade toppled over. Kys had just enough time to duck as Suldon threw a punch at her and, knotting her hands together, drove a blow into his ribs. He staggered back against the wall, flailing out for her. With a growl, she sprang at him, hands outstretched like a diver. Her hands slid either side of his neck, and the metal binder linking them rammed into his throat, smacking his head back against the wall. Suldon made a silent, gagging noise, grappling at her arms. She pushed harder, until the palms of her hands were flat against the wall either side of his head and the binder all but buried in the flesh of his neck. His face went purple and he stopped struggling.

Kys let go and stood back. Suldon slid down the wall into a sitting position, his head flopping over onto one side.

Sholto Unwerth stood in the open doorway, just staring. He looked as if he wasn't taking much in, as if the world had become a place incomprehensible to him.

Kys walked across the cell and picked up the actuator wand Brade had dropped. She fiddled with the settings then triggered it, and her binders automatically unlocked and fell off. She tossed the wand to Unwerth and he caught it.

"Get your shackles off. Quickly now."

Blinking, he did as he was told. She searched the bodies. Apart from some spare change and a pack of lhos, they weren't carrying much of anything. She took one of the pistols, a sleek little snub-nose, and a spare power cell.

Unwerth had freed himself. "What... what pertains now?" he asked.

"We're getting out of here," Kys said.

"I do not deserve... that is to speak, I have dishonoured my service to you and your particulars. I never meant to envocal any materialisms, for I undertook my compactness with your master in most high seriousness. But they hurt me. They hurt me and—"

"Shut up," said Kys. "Face the wall, please."

He did so. Kys pulled the torn paper gown off over her head. Both Brade and Suldon were far too big to trade clothes with, but Suldon's suit jacket buttoned up, was like a coat on her. She tucked the weapon and the power cell into one pocket, and carried the wand in her left hand.

"Come on," she said. "Do exactly what I tell you and don't speak."

Unwerth nodded.

Her own mouth still tingled oddly from the curious thing she had said. Patience had a nasty feeling she was beginning to understand what was going on in the administries of Eustis Majoris. If she was right, then the possibilities were terrifying.

She peered out into the hall. A simple corridor, the locked hatches of other cells on either side. No one around.

With Unwerth in tow, she shut the cell behind her with the wand and started to walk.

In the east, the last vestiges of the storm were grumbling in the low cloud like slow-motion firecrackers. A light rain persisted in the air, enough to keep the alarm posts flashing. The late evening was dark and murky.

Nayl came up the steps of the transit station, and onto an empty street walk. Not even gampers out at this hour. He sheltered under a glass rain cover and coded his hand-vox by the light of the nearby street lamp. Up ahead, the towering peak of Administiry Tower Three was visible against the night sky only because of its millions of window lights.

"It's Nayl. Anything yet?"

"No, Harlon. Still nothing."

"I'm in the tower approaches now. I can wait here all night if necessary."

"Understood. I'll let you know as soon as we get anything."

Nayl put his vox away and stared up at the lights.

"Come on, Patience," he murmured. "Come on, girl. Give us a sign."

Though she hated to admit it, Kara suspected Belknap knew what he was talking about. There was something infinitely reassuring and calming about the candlelit majesty of a great Ecclesiarchy building.

Nightsong was due to commence in a few minutes, and a small congregation was gathering. Knowing that the temple elders would look unfavourably on a hand-vox chiming in the middle of mass, Kara went back out into the towering vestibule and made a call.

"Kara. Have you heard anything from Patience yet?"

"We haven't, I'm afraid." I told her.

"Look, just so you know, my hand-vox will be switched off for the next half an hour or so."

"Why?"

"I'm attending nightsong," she said. "I don't want to disturb the ceremony."

A pause. "I don't remember you ever attending night-song, Kara."

She felt awkward suddenly. "I just... I just felt like it, Gideon. Belknap suggested that a little religious observance might be good for my soul and help with the healing process. He's quite old-fashioned, I think. Anyway, the idea appealed to me. I'm such a heathen most of the time. Besides, all of us could do with a prayer or a blessing right now, couldn't we?"

"I suppose so. Kara, is there something you're not telling me?"

"No," she laughed. "Don't be silly."

"There's something in your voice..."

“Honestly, Gideon.” She glanced at the guide pamphlet she’d taken from a nearby table. “I’m just deciding... deciding whether to take nightsong here in the grand templum or next door in the sacristy.”

“What did you say just then?” I asked. Carl and Zeph looked over at me. “I said I’m just deciding whether to—”

“No, at the end there. Did you say ‘sacristy’?” Zael got up from the sofa and walked right over to my side.

“Yes, the old sacristy. It adjoins the grand templum according to this guide, but it’s much older. I quite like the sound of it.”

“I told you,” Zael said. “I told you. I had a dream.”

“Kara?” I said on the link. “Can you tell me why you’re there?”

“Because Belknap—”

“No, Kara. That place especially. You say you’re at the grand templum. That’s in Formal A, isn’t it?”

“Yes. What’s the matter?”

“Why there?”

There was a hesitation on the line. “Belknap suggested I should go to temple for the good of my soul. So I thought, if I’m going to do that, I might as well go to the biggest. That’s here. The grand templum. Gideon, have I done something wrong?”

“No.” I replied. “But you may have done something very right. Kara, as you’re there, could you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“Could you go to this old sacristy for me and take a look around. Just take a look.”

“All right. Can I ask why?”

I was aware of Zael’s bright eyes staring down at me.

“It’s probably nothing. Just an odd coincidence. But there’s also a chance, just a chance, that we’re experiencing some confluence of fate. Something preordained. Something Zael saw in a dream.”

“I see. Well, all right.”

“Just check it out for me. If the God-Emperor or His agencies of fortune are smiling our way, I’d like to take advantage of it. Like you said, we could all use a blessing right now.”

“I’ll take a look and call back shortly,” she said and closed the link.

“What was that about?” Carl asked me.

“I’ll tell you if it turns into anything,” I said. “Still nothing from Patience?”

Carl shook his head. “Something else, though,” he said. “I’ve had my cogitator’s support engines processing the material Kys sent us all evening, trying to translate it or make some sense out of it.”

“And?”

“Still no sense. It’s absolutely meaningless. Random. Except...”

“What?” asked Zeph.

“It’s burned out the support engines. Completely erased the index drive. They both just died on me five minutes ago.”

Four men in dark suits went by, their feet clattering on the stone floor. Once they were out of sight, Kys and Unwerth came out of cover and moved on. She wasn’t sure if it was just terror, or a fierce determination to do as she had told him, but Unwerth was managing to be very stealthy. He slipped from shadow to shadow, watching for her every gesture. She felt sorry for him. She’d loathed him

during the voyage, but now realised he was touchingly loyal. He had suffered so much because of them.

I'm going to get you out, she decided. I'm going to get you to safety, Master Unwerth. It's the very least I can do.

They crept along the dark passageways of the secretist enclave. They sidled past open doorways that looked into rooms where hard-faced personnel worked at data-engine consoles, rooms where men in protective clothing bent over sheets of paper laid out on underlit glass tables, rooms that looked like library annexes, rooms where pneumatic tubes delivered message cylinders into racks for the operators to open and sort.

Kys could hear a distant humming, a vibration that quivered the floor, as if heavy machinery was working nearby. She pointed the actuator wand at a wall panel and lit up a hololithic building plan in the air. *Hangar*. That was what she wanted. Two floors up, a stairwell just along to—

Someone was coming. She wanded open a door and pulled Unwerth into the shadows of the arch. Two secretists went past, cannon-hounds straining at their leashes.

They stopped a few metres beyond the doorway, starting a conversation with someone they'd met coming the other way. Kys heard one of the secretists snap at his servitor to heel.

No going that way.

She took Unwerth by the hand, shuddering a little as her grip encountered his missing fingers. She led him along the dark passage behind the door she'd wanded open. The humming grew louder.

The tunnel broke at a T-junction. They went right, and she wanded open another hatch.

The chamber beyond was enormous. They were overlooking it from a gantry walk. This was the source of the noise.

Below them, a large number of gigantic machines rattled and spun, circling streams of light and coherent energy around their spindles and rushing gears. Tiny figures moved around the machines beneath them, adjusting and fine-tuning the rate of flow. Processing flow.

Kys did a quick calculation and counted sixty machines. Data-looms. The secretists had sixty data-looms, working in unison.

"Holy Throne." Kys breathed. Even the Administratum centre on Thracian Primaris only had four looms to process the planetary data-flow. Carl had once told her that Scarus itself boasted thirty looms, through which the accumulated business of the sector was handled. The stuff he knew.

Sixty looms...

"Not this way then," she smiled at Unwerth. They turned back and headed up the tunnel again. The tech-adept coming around the corner nearly slammed into them.

"Who—" he began to say. She coshed him with the wand, and then shot him through the temple with her snub-las once he was on the ground. The background roar of the looms covered the brief report.

They hurried on up the tunnel to another hatch. She checked the nearest wall-panel again, studying the hololith.

"Stairwell," she said. "This is good. We can reach the hangar from here."

"That is most profuse." Unwerth nodded.

Kys waved the actuator wand at the hatch. Nothing happened. She did it again, and again. Then she tapped the wand and examined it.

The casing was fractured. Some of the studs no longer worked. Clubbing the adept with it had been a bad idea.

"Oh, for Throne's sake," she hissed. "Give me a break..."

She looked round. Unwerth had disappeared.

"Sholto?" she growled, taking out her weapon. "Sholto, Throne help me, where the hell have you—"

He hurried back into view out of the tunnel's shadows. He was clutching a small, battered tool kit that he'd recovered from the dead adept.

"In all pertinacity—" he began.

"Don't even start. Can you open this door?" Kys snapped.

Unwerth knelt down, opened the tool kit and produced a powerdriver.

"Let's see," he said. "Cross your fingers. I would, but unfortunately I don't have enough—"

"My fingers are crossed, Sholto. Do it."

EIGHT

Boneheart and Molay were waiting for Revoke in the bustling main hall as he stepped out of the elevator.

“Is he here?” Revoke asked.

“Arrived ten minutes ago,” Boneheart said. “We put him in private audience three. Monicker’s watching him.”

“He sent a list of instructions,” Molay said. “*Requirements*, is what he called them. I have to say, he’s got some front. But we’re working to meet them.”

Revoke nodded.

“Do you trust him?” Boneheart asked.

“His abilities?” Revoke said. “Yes. I’ve done some background. His credentials are impeccable. He’s the best there is. Do I trust him as a person? No, not at all. But we’re going with it anyway.”

The three of them started to walk. “There’s another thing,” Boneheart said. “We picked up a girl from Administry Tower Three today. Seemed like a regular sublime event at first, but we’re pretty sure she’s one of Ravenor’s people.”

“I know,” said Revoke. “Suldon called me direct. The telekine, right?”

Boneheart nodded. “Thing is, Toros, if there was any doubt she was one of Ravenor’s own, it’s gone now. Routine cell check found Suldon and Brade dead. She’s loose.”

Revoke stopped. “Loose in here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Damn it. I’ve got to do this thing now and with any luck it’ll make using the telekine redundant. Ravenor should be dead by morning. But find her. The both of you. Personally see to it she’s caught and killed.”

Boneheart and Molay nodded.

Behind them, an elevator hatch opened and the chief provost stepped out. All the junior servants in the hall stopped what they were doing and curtsied or bowed.

“Get lost.” Revoke whispered to Boneheart and Molay. “I’ve got this to handle.”

They nodded and hurried off.

Trice advanced across the hall to join Revoke. Trice was wearing his most opulent robes of office, and three servo-skulls circled around him. A senior cipherist, in a hooded cape of red velvet, followed him, bearing a small metal casket with reverence.

“Toros.” Trice smiled.

“He’s waiting for us, sir.” Revoke replied, bowing.

“Then I’m eager to get this over with. I’ve just been with the Diadochoi. He’s in an especially foul mood. It seems he’s heard rumours of a problem, and is annoyed that I’m withholding the details. I’ve tried to be circumspect. If he discovers Ravenor is active and hunting here on Eustis, he’ll lose it completely. You know how he is about Ravenor.”

“Sir.”

“So, if I’m going to tell him anything, I’d like it to be that there *was* a problem, but now it’s done. I’d like to tell him Ravenor is dead.”

“Then let’s make that happen.” Revoke suggested. He opened the door to private audience three and ushered Trice and the cipherist inside.

Monicker was standing just inside the room, a fizzle of empty air. She bowed.

At the far end of the long table sat Orfeo Culzean. Leyla Slade stood behind him, her arms folded as tightly as her expression.

Revoke closed the door and sealed it.

“Chief provost,” Culzean said, rising to his feet and bowing gently. “An honour.”

“Master Culzean.” Trice replied. “I have heard a lot about you.”

“All bad, I hope.” Culzean replied. “Let me start by saying, just for the record, the attempt on your life that I orchestrated... Well, that was nothing personal.”

“Understood.”

They shook hands.

“Sit, please,” Trice said. Revoke pulled out a chair to accommodate the chief provost.

“You have a problem.” Culzean began, leaning forward and clasping his hands together. “An individual, let’s call him Subject R.”

“Let’s call him That Bastard Ravenor.” Trice smiled.

Culzean nodded and grinned back. “So noted. An individual that you want to track, locate and destroy. I have the means to achieve this. The skills, the weapons. I’ve already forwarded my requirements to your people. I trust they’re all to your satisfaction?”

Trice sat back. “How will you find him? We’ve searched, but so far we’ve failed.”

“With respect, sir,” Culzean said. “You’ve used psykers, as I understand it. Ravenor is too skilful to fall for that. My intel shows he uses untouchables, a resource he inherited from his mentor, Eisenhower. With an untouchable active nearby, Ravenor would be just a blank to the very best of your mind-slaves. He’s cunning, sir, he blocks his mind from prying eyes.”

“So how do you intend to locate him, Master Culzean?”

“I will be using the Thief, chief provost. An incunabula. I believe you are aware of its work.”

“Too well,” Trice said, with a tiny smile.

“Shielded or not, untouchable or not untouchable, the Thief will locate him. It’s what it does. The Thief will certainly find Ravenor. And therein lies the quandary.”

“How so?” Trice asked.

“Under regular circumstances, the Thief is summoned and controlled. This means it must be fed, and then instructed. The control apparatus requires a talented psyker to direct the Thief. However, that control will be lost if the Thief enters the range of Ravenor’s untouchable. In other words, we can unleash the Thief, send him after Ravenor, and then lose possession of him the moment he comes close to the target.”

“So how do you propose we do this?” asked Trice.

Culzean shrugged. “Here’s where the give and take comes in, sir. With your help, I can instruct the Thief in a different way. No need for feeding no need for psyker manipulation. We command it using Enuncia.”

Trice paused. “Revoke told me you were remarkably well informed about our work here.”

“I like to be well informed,” Culzean said. “It was a chance deduction, actually. I observed Master Revoke’s efforts against the Brass Thief, and Enuncia was the only thing he could conceivably have been using.”

“That’s quite a deduction,” Revoke said. “Enuncia is extremely obscure, its appearance in Imperial records fragmentary. Even the most learned people have never even heard of it.”

Culzean maintained his calm, cordial manner. “I am a specialist operator in the workings of the arcane, Master Revoke. I am not most people. There are of course many things I don’t have an answer to. For example — as you said, there are probably no more than two dozen references to Enuncia in all of the Imperial archives, and all of those in extremely restricted works. Only a couple of those references actually contain any operable semantics or accidence. I presume therefore you have uncovered a significant new lexical source for you to be so fluent?”

“In a way,” Trice said. “But more by reconstruction than recovery. If our relationship bears fruit, Master Culzean, we will unfold the truth for you.”

“That’s all I ask,” said Culzean. “Bring me in on Enuncia and I’ll deliver anything you want. Call it payment for dealing with Ravenor.”

“Done,” said Trice simply. “And as a gesture of good faith...” He nodded to the waiting cipherist. The cipherist opened the metal box and showed Culzean what lay within.

“The commands required for the incunabula,” Trice said. “Written in Enuncia and inscribed on an inert metal wafer. Don’t try to read it. Revoke will do that for you. He’s trained.”

“Well, this is wonderful,” Culzean said. “Let’s get started.”

“Toros?” Trice said as he got to his feet. “Have the psykers woken and brought to readiness.”

“There’s no need, sir,” Culzean said.

“Maybe not, but I’d like them ready anyway.” Trice straightened his gown. “If the Thief leads us to Ravenor, and Ravenor drops his guard, I want my psykers right there to finish the job.”

The choir was singing the nightsong counterpart. The sound rose into the upper rafters of the grand templum, pure and clear.

Kara walked out of the west entrance and along a cloister towards the old sacristy. In the blackness, the distant sound of the choir seemed like a mournful wind. Kara had her hand on the butt of her weapon.

There was nothing out here except darkness and dripping rain. The path was blocked with saw-horses and a sign read, “Old sacristy closed for renovations”.

She turned back, reaching for her hand-vox.

Behind her two, quick cracks of las-fire. Running feet in the dark.

She drew her weapon and ducked into cover. Another two snip-shots, blinking in the darkness. More pounding feet, clattering over gravel.

A figure appeared, walking right past her. A young man, skinny, with augmetic eyes. He was walking strangely, plodding, trudging almost. As he went by Kara’s hiding place, something fell out of his hand and bounced on the path.

A compact eight mil.

The young man fell over and lay still.

She crept over to him, rolled him over. His body was going cold. Two huge laser wounds had cut through his torso.

“Oh, Throne,” Kara said as her hand came up wet with blood.

There was someone behind her. She turned and saw the muzzle of a Tronsvasse 9 aiming right at her head.

“You bitch,” said a voice. “You killed him. You bloody killed Limbwall! You bitch!”

“Now wait—” Kara began.

Gunfire drowned her words.

Wind gusted over the rooftop landing pad. Culzean had insisted that the ritual had to be performed in the open. A ring of taper-flares had been lit, blue luminosity wafting up into the high-level air as smoke.

The wrought pyramid of the incunabula sat in the centre of the ring.

“Master Revoke?” Culzean said. “Begin please.”

Revoke took the inert metal wafer from the cipherist’s open coffer and stepped forward.

He read the words aloud. His lips split and blood leaked down the sides of his mouth.

The Brass Thief exploded into being and surged up into the night sky.

The hatch, once Unwerth had fiddled with it, opened. The hangar lay before them. One end opened to the sky and a row of armoured fliers sat in heavy deck clamps in front of the bay's mouth. They started to run across the empty deckway towards the nearest flier.

A las-bolt smacked into the deck close to Unwerth, who jumped back with a squeal. Kys threw herself into him and rolled them into the cover of a repair cart. More shots zipped over them. From a hatch in the far corner of the hangar, a half-dozen secretists were running forward, firing.

Kys pulled her snub-las and returned shots over the cart, forcing the secretists to scatter into cover themselves.

"Get in! Get it fired up!" she yelled at Unwerth. He crawled on his belly into the shadow of the deck clamp and reached up to fuss with the flier's door latches. More shots rained at them. One blew the lid off one of the repair cart's panniers, another chipped the bodywork of the flier. Kys leaned out and raked fire back at them. She clipped one of the secretists as he attempted to rush into better cover.

"Unwerth?"

The doors popped. Unwerth wriggled up into the tight cockpit. Kys fired off another salvo of shots and leapt in after him.

"Now!" Kys yelled. Shots were spanking off the rear of the machine. The window panel of one of the open doors shattered.

"You requisite me to fly this?" Unwerth asked.

"Yes I sodding requisite so! Get us out of here!"

Unwerth thumped main power with his maimed hand. He grabbed the stick as the flier shot itself off the deck clamp. Safety systems auto-closed the doors. The flier, nose down, barrelled out under the arch of the hangar mouth and into the night sky.

Either deliberately or accidentally — Kys couldn't tell — Unwerth pitched them into a steep dive. The vast lit side of the governor's palace rushed past behind them like an illuminated cliff. Below, the canyons of the hive's upper stacks yawned. Unwerth turned them down into an upper alt traffic flow. Fliers and lifters zipped about them. The collision alarm made at least three warning bleats.

"Where?" he asked, desperately.

"Where what?"

"Where would you produce us to go?"

"Uhm..." Kys began.

Back in the hangar, Molay turned to Boneheart, who had just entered at a run.

"They've effected exit!" Molay said. "Flier eighty-seven. We've got it tagged."

Foelon, holding his psyber lure, was right behind Boneheart.

"Sing them in." Boneheart ordered.

Foelon began to spin the lure.

Outside, swirling dark clouds billowed from the roofs-capes and gargoyle-encrusted rain-gutters of the stack tops. The clouds coiled through the air like smoke wound into a vortex by an updraft, and fused into one.

The Unkindness of sheen birds, turning together in a dense, unified swarm, swept down towards the speeding flier.

"Unwerth! Watch it!" Kys yelled. "What the hell is—"

The first two or three smacked against the flier's canopy, cracking the glass.

"Bother," said Unwerth, wrestling with the stick.

Then the rest came in, like a wave, like a chrome blizzard. Kys saw them coming, their wings glinting in the darkness.

“Oh shit,” she said.

Kara dragged the girl into cover as the shots ripped past.

“Stay down!” she said, and fired off a clip into the darkness of the cloister.

Silence, briefly, then confused shouts.

“Move!” Kara cried. The girl came with her. They sprinted down the outside walk of the grand templum.

Behind them, they could hear feet crunching on gravel. Another shot or two sang out.

“Throne! Do you have an exit plan?” Kara yelled.

“My transporter! It’s just down here!”

They ran down an unlit side street to the parked Bergman. The running footsteps were closing behind them. Kara jumped in the moment the doors unlocked. The girl put it into drive and they roared down the street and out across the square. She had to haul on the wheel to avoid a big grey transporter that was just pulling out of the templum’s front approach.

“That way!” Kara shouted, pointing. The girl heaved the speeding vehicle round, its back-end sliding out slightly on the wet stone, and hammered them away down a link ramp towards the inter-formal arterial. Several transporters braked and sounded their horns as the Bergman dashed by, ignoring all the circulation control lights.

“You drive like a marshal,” Kara said.

“I am a marshal.”

“I’m Kara Swole. You?”

“Maud Plyton.”

A laser bolt punched through the roof and out through the front screen. Plyton yelped and swerved.

The big grey transporter, with a man leaning out of the side window, training a hellgun, rushed down the high stack ramp after the speeding Bergman.

The hellgun began to fire again.

NINE

“Signal from Kara,” Carl said suddenly. “She’s in some kind of trouble.”

“Let me speak to her,” I said.

Carl didn’t get a chance to obey my instruction. The vox systems let out a painfully loud wail of distortion, and died. Simultaneously, Carl’s cogitators flickered and shut down. The house lights dimmed.

“Oh, really not good...” Carl began.

“The stuff you know,” Mathuin growled. He was already running from the room.

“We’re under attack,” Zael said.

“It could be almost anything—” I started to say.

Zael looked at me with a cold, calm certainty. “No, I’m telling you. We’re under attack.”

Outside the room, downstairs, a terrible rending impact sounded from the main door. The security systems warbled fitfully for a second and died. More crashing, tearing noises resounded.

I sped out of the room. “Carl, keep Zael here with you. Do everything you can to keep him safe.”

Carl had already drawn his handgun, and pulled Zael over into the corner of the room away from the doorway. Frauka hurried out after me and slammed the door.

I went out onto the landing and began to glide down the stairs. From halfway down, I could see the main body of the entrance hall and what was left of the front doors.

And I could see what was approaching across the hall.

It was the thing I’d sensed the fibre-traces of at the diplomatic palace. The primaeval throwback. The incunabula. A figure of gold and smoking brass, its helm high-crested and devoid of any mark except narrow eye-slits. It had broken in through the heavy wood and metal of the doorway, littering the floor with debris, and now padded forward, shoulders hunched, the crested helm switching to and fro. Gusting eddies of warp-vapour clung to its limbs like streamers.

It looked up and saw me on the stairs. It raised its hands, and with an odd wet, click, extended paired rhyming swords.

Behind me, I heard Frauka gasp, “Bollocks to this.”

“Get back, Wystan,” I said. With his limiter still off, I had no defence capabilities whatsoever.

The incunabula flew at me, its swords coming together to form a two-pronged spear held out in front of it.

A shockwave of immense firepower blew it backwards out of the air and clean across the hall, through a wall, into the lower lounge.

Zeph Mathuin strode forward across the hall below me, his rotator cannon slung in place, the multi-barrels still spinning as he came. He fired another blurt, destroying more of the wall, the rotating muzzles kicking out star-shaped flashes of ignited gas.

“Get out of here.” Mathuin yelled without looking up at us. “Get out while you still can.”

A scratching, slithering sound came from inside the lower lounge and the incunabula reappeared. There were sooty marks on its chest plating, but no sign it had been damaged at all. Mathuin opened fire again and threw it backwards once more, walking forward to press his attack, mercilessly blasting streams of high-velocity shells at the golden killer. It reeled, bucked, jerked, unable to ignore the kinetic impact, but was still undamaged.

Gradually, it began to crunch towards Mathuin, one foot after the other, weathering the blizzard of shots like a man trudging head down into torrential rain. The rotator gears of Zeph's cannon were whirring shrilly. It was close to overheating, running out of ammunition, or both.

Three metres from Mathuin, two, shrugging off the hail of shells one struggling step at a time.

"Wystan!" I yelled. "Activate! Activate!"

The Brass Thief sliced around with its right-hand blade and cut Zeph's rotator cannon in half. In the explosion that resulted, shards of shrapnel burst out of the ruined mechanism. Mathuin was thrown almost the full length of the hall. The incunabula ignored him and swung back to face me.

I was what it was after. Just me.

But now Wystan had activated his limiter. My mind surged free, unrestrained. With a pop, the psy-cannon deployed from the chair's casing and I began to fire. My first two shots actually managed to dent its chest plating. My third slightly buckled its left cheek and left a scratch on the brass.

Still it came on.

In the chilly basement vault of the governor's palace, the five psykers began to mumble and thrash in their lead tanks. Revoke pushed two of the handlers aside and took a look at the biometric display. Nearby Culzean smiled and simply clapped his hands together. He already knew what was happening.

"We've forced his hand," Culzean said. "Ravenor can't deal with the Thief without his mind powers. He's told his untouchable to limit. He should be very visible to you now."

"Is he?" Trice asked.

Revoke nodded. "Ultra-solid return. A house in Formal E, ninth ward. I'm despatching elements right now."

"Never mind that," Trice said. "Send the psykers in."

For a moment, for a fleeting second, I thought I had the measure of this monstrous incunabula. I was pinning it with my mind as I fired cannon shot after cannon shot into it, actually splintering slivers of gold off its armour. It fought back to break my grip on it with furious power, but my will was no trifling thing. I actually had it fast, tight in a vice of psy-energy—

Then the psykers swirled in. Bodiless, they burst into Miserimus all around me, streaking comets of vile white light that swirled and circled and laughed with gleeful inhuman voices. Every lamp, window, glow-globe and drinking glass in the house shattered. Floorboards ripped up like twigs. Doors burst off their hinges. Flying nails and screws and tacks peppered through the air like hail. The banisters behind me collapsed and I heard Frauka cry out as he was thrown off the stairs into the hall below.

"Wystan!"

He was unconscious, or dead. Either way, he couldn't deactivate his limiter and block these unholy wraiths out.

Two fell upon me at once, amorphous, crackling skeins of corposant coating the surface of my chair in heavy crusts of ice. They shook at me, ripping at my mind.

A mind that was already more than occupied holding the incunabula at bay.

The pain was immense. Invisible talons, cold as the intercosmic chill, tore through the outer defences of my soul. Peals of mirthless laughter echoed in from distant, insane worlds of warp-horror and abomination.

I tried to drive them back, prise their clammy grip off my shuddering mind. But it took strength, it took effort. My hold on the Brass Thief was slipping away.

Its rhyming swords raised to strike, it took its first step towards me.

In the upstairs chamber, Zael yelled in fear as Miserimus shook again and again.

“Shut up!” Carl bellowed, glancing around as objects vibrated and moved, or flew clean across the room. His work chair was turning in circles all by itself. His cogitator vomited sparks as the main screen shattered. Bulging shapes slid up and down under the wallpaper.

Holding Zael close to him, Carl stood in the centre of the darkened room, turning in frantic circles as the air churned and eddied around him. A flying data-slate hit him on the cheek. He ducked as a storage case spun across the room.

“Begone! Begone!” Carl yelled. His handgun — useless anyway — had already been yanked out of his hand by the maelstrom. He tried to form a hexagrammatic ward to fight the onslaught.

Invisible forces, laughing at the edge of hearing, grabbed Carl and slammed him hard against the wall, pinning him, spread-eagled, two metres up. Zael screamed out. The boy had fallen to his hands and knees and gazed up at Carl’s helpless body. Terrible pressures were crushing Carl into the wall.

“Holy... God-Emperor...” Carl shrieked in agony.

Zael buried his head in his hands and cowered on the floor. There was an odd, cracking sound that he was certain had to be bones breaking. A scatter of metal objects rained down on the carpet in front of him. Zael blinked.

They were Carl’s rings. The thirty or so rings that had adorned the fingers and thumb of Carl’s right hand. Every single one of them was twisted and snapped open, burst as if split from within.

“C-Carl?” Zael stammered. He looked up.

I was almost insensible with pain. The cold hands of the psykers were upon me, guzzling at my strength, dragging me down to hell. My hold on the incunabula finally gave way.

Its first strike raked across the front of my chair. The second blow, with the other blade, scored the metal deeper. The third punched through, severing vital systems and shooting more pain into my besieged brain stem.

Something knocked the Brass Thief back away from me. I tried to focus through the swirling mayhem of light and wind and debris.

I saw Zeph. He was wounded in the left side from the detonating cannon. His clothes were tattered and bloody, and his augmetic left arm hung in sparking ruins. In his right hand, he clutched Kara’s shivered sword.

He struck the Brass Thief again, drawing a prickle of sparks from its armour, and then blocked the rhyming swords as they cut at him. Stab and parry, one frantic sword against two.

He’d given me a moment’s grace. I focused my will on the most immediate psyker and drove it off me with a barbed psy-lunge. The rotting ghost squealed and retreated a little. But at least two more were there, bleating and greasy.

I could feel some huge psychic force gathering above me, focused on the floor above. Carl’s room. Something born of the darkest warp was boiling into fury up there. I heard screams. Inhuman screams.

In the basement vault, Trice and Culzean looked around at the lead holding tanks. All five were vibrating, like pots on a stove. Warning lights were flashing on all across the biometric consoles. At least three of the handlers had collapsed, blood pouring from their tear ducts and nostrils.

“What the hell is happening?” Trice yelled over the uproar.

There was a loud bang and one of the tanks cracked. Suspension fluid squirted out. The fluid was boiling.

“We’ve lost a psyker!” Revoke yelled, trying to harness the remaining units.

“Lost?”

“He’s dead! Burned out!”

The lid blew off another tank, gushing scalding fluid over the lip. The fleshly body of the psyker inside had just exploded.

“Is this Ravenor?” Trice yelled.

“No,” said Culzean, his face quite pale. “Listen.”

The three remaining psykers were screaming. Screaming out one word, over and over, a name.

Slyte! Slyte! Slyte! Slyte!

Power seemed to leave the psykers assaulting me for a moment. I threw them away from me, summoning my strength to re-engage the Brass Thief.

Zeph Mathuin ducked under one sweeping blow, then sliced the shivered sword upwards with a deft undercut.

It drove entirely through the incunabula’s torso. Miasmal energy, like ichor, dribbled and ran from around the impaling blade.

Zeph tried to pull the sword out, but it was wedged fast.

The Brass Thief lunged.

Mathuin blinked.

The incunabula slowly slid its rhyming swords out of Mathuin’s chest.

Zeph looked around at me, hopeless and lost, and fell dead on his face.

PART THREE

City of Men, City of Gods

ONE

Later, I came to understand that was the moment that Fury seized me. Fury, grief, outrage and an all-consuming hatred I had never tasted before. I speared my telekinesis out along the devastated hallway and grasped the one parting gift Zeph Mathuin had left me.

The shivered sword stuck through the incunabula's torso.

I wasn't thinking anymore. I was all but insensible with rage. My will was stronger and more ferocious man I had ever known it. It was as if I were drawing vast supplements of strength from the psychic powers loose in the house around me, or as if some vengeful force of balefire from the most alien recesses of the warp was invigorating my mind.

I wrenched the transfixed sword upwards and split the incunabula's chest armour through its brass sternum. The golden cage of its ribs broke open, releasing a gout of fetid, violet light from the daemon's inchoate core.

The Brass Thief twisted and writhed on the impaling sword, merely opening the chest wound wider. It made a mewling, whining sound.

I fired my chair's psy-cannon. Not just once, perhaps a dozen times, two dozen even. Every scalding bolt I aimed into the incunabula's ruptured chest cavity, and I kept firing until the relentless salvos had the desired effect.

The brass and gold mechanism of the incunabula's form ripped apart in a blossom of fire, whizzing fragments in every direction. The blast was of such force that the shivered sword came spinning away to thump, tip down and quivering, into the floorboards beside my chair. The empty helm was driven upwards by the fireball and embedded itself in the ceiling by its crest.

The feral essence of the incunabula, the azoic daemon-spark, came shrieking out of the blast, free from the ancient device that had bound it for so long. It vanished, never, I imagine, to be found or enslaved again.

The broken brass remains clattered to the floor, like so much scrap metal, smouldering.

I sank back, exhausted, my powers ebbing. There was a noise behind me and I turned my chair quickly.

Wystan Frauka, bleeding from the side of the head and covered with plaster dust, was pulling himself out of the wreckage beside the staircase.

"H-hello?" he was mumbling. "Ravenor? Anyone?"

"Wystan!" I transponded at full volume. "Your limiter! Now!"

Foul psychic manifestations were still churning about the upper floors of the house, making torn, keening noises, and we were dreadfully exposed. Frauka fumbled with the small device at his throat and switched it off.

A decompressive boom shook the walls as his untouchable effect closed the area down. The bodiless forms of the invading psykers were banished, negated by the sudden deadness. I heard roof tiles dislodge and shatter as the forces were ejected from the building. Within seconds, a torrential rainstorm began to drench the ninth ward of Formal E.

Frauka gazed across the demolished ruin of the hallway, the shattered walls, the torn floorboards, the shot-up plaster. He saw the body lying near the entranceway.

“Mathuin...” he began, then went quiet, realising how pointless his question was.

I powered back up the staircase, or what was left of it. I prayed to the Golden Throne of Earth that I would find Thonius and Zael alive. I was puzzled and disturbed too. The psykers had come for me initially, and then at least half of them had concentrated their attacks on Carl’s room on the first floor, whereupon that loathsome psychic force had begun to gather up there. Why?

The door was closed. Smoke, or vapour of some sort, drifted up from under the door, and a thick coating of rime iced the door and the walls either side, steaming as it began to thaw and slide to the floor.

The door handle rattled, stopped and then rattled again more urgently.

Something was in there, trying to get out.

Kys howled as Unwerth banked the flier hard to evade the swirling flock, but the birds turned as one, like a glittering shoal of pelagic fish, and spurted after them.

Unwerth pulled the nose around again, racing them along an up-stack canyon, missing oncoming air-traffic by the most horrifying of close margins. Heavier lifters, entering the canyon flow from above on guided descent, were forced to abort violently, and rose away from the stacks, sirens sounding. Unwerth yawed frantically from side to side, just avoiding a flier that came head-on, lights blazing, and banked them around the tail end of a massive cargo lifter by executing a virtual stall-turn.

The armoured flier’s jetpods wailed to gather lift as Unwerth drove it on down a crossway. The Unkindness billowed in a sparkling ball as it changed direction to follow them. Swiftly, the sheen birds were gaining again, forming a mercurial ribbon of silver in the air that flowed in and out of the high alt traffic faster than Unwerth could weave the flier between, under and over the slower-moving vehicles in the skyway.

“What in altercation are they?” he yelled, fighting with the stick.

“Birds!” Kys shouted back.

“But machines?”

“Yes!”

“Yet they fly like birds?”

“Yes!” she screamed. “Why? What does that matter?”

The front part of the beating swarm closed around them. They heard thousands of impacts as beaks and wings struck at the fuselage. Alarms sounded. Some of the sheen birds had gone into one or more of the engine intakes, mangled by the jet screws.

“Hold on!” Unwerth cried out. He slammed the nose down and hit the boosters.

The flier broke away from the Unkindness swarm and dropped like a missile into the depths of the stack-way burners lighting blue-hot. The fluttering stream of metal forms spiralled and dived after it.

They were dropping into the lower depths of the towering street, far too fast. Cross-bridges and pedestrian overwalks shot by, Unwerth going over some and under others. Kys could see the multi-lanes of surface traffic coming up to meet them, saw the headlights, the illuminated indicator boards, the jagged neon pointers detailing sink ramps and off-arterial sub-lanes.

“Unwerth...” she began.

Still at full boost, the shipmaster grimly kept the nose down.

“Unwerth!”

The flier levelled and rocketed along five hundred metres of surface street, passing at roof level over the traffic queue so violently that the concussion of its jet-wash rocked transporters on their axles and blew out screens and door windows. Outraged citizens spilled out of their vehicles, only to duck back immediately, screaming in terror as the sheen storm rushed past a second later.

Unwerth sliced the flier between the roof of a cargo-10 and a massive over-road indicator board. Kys covered her eyes.

Unwerth pitched to the left suddenly, leaving the main surface arterial, and powered down over the traffic of a descender ramp. Within moments, they were chasing into the deep chasms of the undersink, into the inter-stack gulfs below the nominal surface level. Flier traffic in the undersink was seriously restricted: it was darker and tighter, and there were many, many more bridges and crosswalks. Roadside klaxons and hazard lamps began to hoot and flash. Indicator screens lit up red with notices to *Abort flightpath* or *Slow down*.

Unwerth did neither. He dropped lower, avoiding bridge spans that loomed suddenly out of the blackness, lower still, as if intent on plunging them into the very bottom-most sumps and pits of the hive-sinks.

Still the Unkindness beat down after them.

“Birds, you said?” Unwerth repeated, concentrating as hard as he could given the limited view ahead, his hands twisting and yanking the stick, the flier rocking and banking violently.

“Yes,” Kys said, holding on tightly. She looked across at him. “Why do you keep—”

She yelped as the flier hit something with huge, glancing force. Unwerth had misjudged an overhead duct and the collision had torn part of the upper control surface from the flier’s tail.

He fought to retain command, feeling the machine buck and try to spin out. Debris and crackling plumes of electrical discharge flurried back in the wounded craft’s slipstream. They were losing speed. The front of the flock was beginning to bang and clatter against the hull again.

A last turn, down yet another dim sub-level, right into the bilges now. Trailing a swirling, mobbing cloud of sheen birds, they gunned down a deep trench of rusted girderwork, moss-black rockcrete and dripping acid, their rushing lampbeams picking up the accumulated filth and trash that trickled down through the undersink. There was no more “down” they could go.

And now, Kys realised, no more “on” either. She saw the end of the trench ahead of them, a chainlink barrier, decaying hazard notices that were coming up too fast to read. The sump trench was a dead end.

Over the din of the sheen birds hammering and chipping at the hull, she cried out Unwerth’s name at the top of her voice.

If he heard her, he didn’t react in time.

The armoured flier hit the barrier fence, taking most of the chainlink along with it like a veil. It inverted, engines flaring, as it went over the sump wall.

And hit the dark, black water beyond in a huge cone of spray.

“They’re closing still!” Kara warned.

Plyton downshifted. “This is a Bergman Amity Veluxe,” she said. “No one closes on a Bergman Amity Veluxe.” The big black transporter surged forward down the steep, high stack ramp, its engine making the most spectacular roar.

Behind it, the grey transporter dropped back a little, then began to push forward again.

At this hour, the arterials of Formal A were fairly quiet. Long stretches of rockcrete highway tunnel flicked by, lit by sodium lamps.

The man with the hellgun was still snapping off shots.

“That said, find an exit,” Kara said.

“Hell with that,” said Plyton.

“Do it! Another straight section and they’ll shoot out our wheels, speed or no speed.”

As if to prove her point, a laser bolt hit the boot lid. The Bergman wavered. Lamps bright, the big grey transporter loomed behind them, jockeying to pull alongside, engine revving.

Kara threw herself over the passenger seat into the back, reached out through the shattered rear screen, and fired her handgun. Her first shots missed. In reply, two more energy rounds tore sideways through the roof.

“Yeah, screw you,” Kara said, and took aim again.

She pumped six shots through the wide front screen of the big grey transporter. It faltered slightly, then abruptly went into a savage uncontrolled spin.

“Plyton!”

Plyton hit the throttle and boosted the Bergman forward just fast enough to avoid it being clipped from behind by the big, skidding transporter. The grey machine went across two lanes backwards and hit the central strip defenders — a barrier of sand drums and metal bars — with such force that it tore itself apart in a shower of glass and flying metal.

“Now get us off this damn arterial,” Kara said.

Plyton tore down the next exit into a gloomy sub-street. She dropped her speed, and made several random turns through quiet underlinks and cross-streets. Finally, they pulled into a loading dock and parked in the cover of some rockcrete columns. Plyton killed the engine and the lights. They sat for a moment in the soft darkness, breathing hard. In the distance, they could hear vehicles roaring past on the arterial, and the sound of sirens. Not just emergency responders, security alarms too.

They got out. Plyton walked the length of the Bergman in dismay. “Look at it! Look at it! Uncle Vally will kill me when—”

She shut up suddenly. To Kara’s surprise, she started to weep.

“Hey,” said Kara.

Plyton shook her off and walked away into the shadows beyond the columns.

Kara let the girl be. She fished out her hand-vox and punched in a code. “Come on!” she said. “Why aren’t you answering? Ravenor? Ravenor, where are you?”

The channel refused to pick up. Kara was just putting in Harlon’s code when she realised Plyton was staring at her.

“What did you just say?” the marshal asked.

“What?”

“That name. That *name!*”

“Ravenor?” Frauka had come to join me. He’d drawn his own compact weapon, for all the good that would do on a night like this. The door handle continued to rattle.

“You want me to...?” he pointed to his limiter.

“Only if we really have to. Wait.”

Outside the rain sluiced down. I was sure it wouldn’t be long now before more conventional agents of our enemy arrived.

The rattling finally ceased. There was a click and the door swung open.

Panting, Carl stood in the doorway, leaning for support against the splintered jamb. His clothes were torn, and serious bruises covered the bare flesh of his throat and the side of his face. Blood trickled from his left nostril.

“Oh Throne,” he gasped. “It’s you.”

“Carl?”

“I thought they were going to kill us. Tear us apart.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’ll live. I probably won’t ever sleep soundly again, but I’ll live.”

“Where’s Zael?”

He gestured into the room behind him and I sped past.

Carl’s room was utterly destroyed. Everything in it had been torn apart, every machine smashed, every stick of furniture reduced to slivers of wood and tufts of fabric. It looked as if a hurricane had passed through. Then again, the rest of the house was hardly what the landlord would describe as “in good order”.

Zael was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room. The carpet around him was singed. He was staring into space, his eyes glazed.

“Zael?”

The boy didn’t reply.

“What happened?” Frauka asked.

“Psykers,” said Carl, wiping his nose. “Two or three of them, I think. I don’t know. The place just turned upside down. These... invisible hands, they pinned me to the wall.” Carl fingered the dark bruises around his throat. “Crushing me, and...”

“Carl? What?”

Thonius pointed a shaking hand at Zael. “Zael... the boy... he just...”

“What?”

“Well, I don’t know what he did, exactly. But he destroyed them. I heard the pyskers shrieking in the air. Zael was laughing, like a little kid playing with toys. I think I must have passed out then, because when I came round, everything was quiet and he was just sitting there. Like that. Just zoned out.”

“All right,” I said. “Our priority right now is to get out of here. Fast. I’ll deal with Zael as soon as we’re secure.”

“Look,” said Carl, “there’s one other thing. I know we’re all jumpy about this, and things have been said about Zael, and I sure as hell don’t want to make trouble where there is none. But I heard a name. I don’t know if it was in my mind after I passed out, if I dreamed it, or what. But I’d swear the psykers were howling out a name. They were... they were saying ‘Slyte’.”

I saw Frauka look at me. It was one of the few times I knew exactly what he was thinking even though he was an untouchable.

“We will deal with this later,” I said. “I’ll watch over the boy. Frauka, see what if anything you can salvage from the wreckage. Ten minutes, no longer. Carl, go and get the cargo-8 from the garages and bring it round the front.”

“Can’t Zeph do that?” Carl said.

“Mathuin’s dead.” Frauka told him.

It was getting so cold out on the tower approaches in Formal A that Harlon Nayl was almost tempted to find one of the late night oven-barrows and buy a cup of the perniciously awful liquid they claimed was soup.

He moved from foot to foot, rubbing his hands together, praying for a call from someone, anyone. It had been almost an hour.

Finally, when he could stand it no longer, he coded his vox and called the house.

Nothing. *Channel dead*, the display read. With mounting alarm, he tried Thonius’ channel, then Mathuin’s, then even Frauka’s. Each one flashed up as dead.

He started to run back towards the rail transit. By the time he’d reached the stone steps into the station, he was sprinting.

TWO

A fragrant scent of sweet corruption mixed with acrid fumes drifted through the lower levels of the governor's palace, concentrated in the floors given over to the secretists' enclave. Someone had at last managed to cancel the blaring alarms, and crash teams had moved in, tending to the injured, putting out machine fires, and beginning repair and recovery work.

The chief provost, shaking with what Revoke presumed to be barely-contained rage, had withdrawn to the safety of an armoured parlour in the cap levels of the tower, taking Culzean and Culzean's female bodyguard with him. Revoke wanted to stay to supervise the recovery, but he knew Trice probably needed protection at this ill-fortuned time, so he left Molay and Boneheart in charge and accompanied his master.

The parlour was part of Trice's personal suite of apartments. Refined, luxurious, it was softly lit by recessed lumin strips and standard lamps, and lined with library shelves of books and slates built into the wood panelling.

Culzean had taken a seat. As ever, he looked remarkably unruffled, and happily accepted a drink one of the servitors offered him. His guard, Slade, lingered nearby, tense and edgy.

Trice paced for a while.

"Ravenor," he said, coming to a halt.

For the third time since the mayhem in the basement vaults, Culzean shook his head and said, "No, not Ravenor. Chief provost, that was something more."

"Your daemon."

"Not mine," Culzean said, sipping and sitting back. "Yes, I was previously employed to facilitate the manifestation of Slyte, but I work for you now."

Trice laughed mirthlessly. "Get me a drink," he snapped at one of the attending servitors. "How convenient, Master Culzean," he said, "that the goal of your previous job was so admirably accomplished tonight. A suspicious man might be tempted to think this was all part of your scheme."

"Are you a suspicious man, chief provost?" Culzean asked.

"Explain to me how I might otherwise read this... disaster." Trice snapped.

Culzean put his glass down and leaned forward, gently smoothing his hands together. His voice was so well-pitched, so gently modulated. "First of all, what happened tonight was a confluence. A combination of events. To clarify the Divine Fraternity through catoptric means of prediction, prophesied that a potent force, known as Slyte, would be brought into being here before the end of the year. Its manifestation would directly attach to the Inquisitor Ravenor, or one of his party of specialists. They employed me to make this possibility a certainty. Because you, and your Ministry, and your grand work, is entirely opposed to Ravenor, that made you key obstacles to the process. Which, of course, is why we got off to a... bad start."

Culzean smiled. Trice did not.

"Anyway, with my help, you moved against Ravenor. This could have finished the Fraternity's schemes — kill Ravenor and, of course, you doom the prophecy — or, as seems to have happened, it provided the catalyst for the event. I did remark, as I remember, that the psykers weren't such a great idea."

Trice glared at him. "Are you suggesting that I—"

"I'm suggesting," Culzean put in smoothly, "that you stop worrying. If Slyte's been born, then Slyte's been born. The Fraternity will be delighted. In time, Slyte may become a problem, but right now, he's just a warp-thing, spat out into our material world. Do you have any idea how many cacodaemons and sprites are conjured up by lunatic cults in the undersinks of a hive this big every year? By the time Slyte grows to be any kind of threat, your project here in the city will have advanced to such a level that he will be a threat you can extinguish with the merest... word. Or have I overestimated the scope of your designs?"

"You haven't," Trice said.

"Put a smile on your face," said Culzean. "Press forward. Use me, because I can help you. And think of this. Slyte has done one thing to help you. If he has manifested, Ravenor is dead. Obliterated. The daemon's done your wetwork for you."

Trice nodded. "If what you're saying is true, Master Culzean, I'll be delighted, despite the damage and losses we've incurred tonight. And I will use you, as you say. You boasted of many weapons in your arsenal as a facilitator. I want you to guard us against Slyte. Revoke will give you any resources you need."

Culzean was about to reply when the main hatch to the parlour slid open. A shocked hush fell as a man walked in. Culzean stared at the figure with contained surprise and rose to his feet. Tall, slender, dressed in long black robes, the newcomer was unmistakably the Lord Governor Subsector, Oska Ludolf Barazan.

Barazan walked directly over to Jader Trice and slapped him around the face so hard it knocked Trice to the deck.

"You useless wretch!" Barazan spat. "Four psykers destroyed! Four of them! And the other one so badly mauled she'll have to be put down! The alarms woke me! Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"My lord!" Trice cried out, seemingly less concerned that he had been knocked down than he was that Culzean had witnessed it. "We have visitors! Visitors! Not while you wear your public guise!"

Barazan kicked Trice in the ribs and made him double up in pain. Calmly, the lord governor subsector turned and smiled at Culzean. Culzean had seen that face so many times on newscasts and pict-channels.

"Master Culzean, we haven't met," Barazan said, holding out his gloved hand.

Culzean bowed and kissed the ring of office. "An honour, my lord."

"Get up!" Barazan jeered at Trice. Revoke stepped forward and helped the chief provost onto a sofa. Barazan turned back to Culzean, his smile broad. "Jader is worried that my little outburst might have unsettled you."

Culzean shrugged. "It's not every day, sir, that a man witnesses a lord subsector corporally punishing his chief provost. But no, I'm not unsettled."

"Oh, and why is that?"

Culzean thought about his next words very carefully. If he had read this wrong, Revoke would probably slay him in a second.

"Because, sir, no scheme of this scale could have been set up without the full knowledge of the lord governor."

"I like him," Barazan said, glancing at Trice and Revoke. "He's very sharp, this one, very perceptive."

Barazan turned around, regarding the chief provost. "I've been observing your conversation, for days now, in fact. What is the point of having secretists if they keep secrets from you?" Barazan winked at one of the servitors. It shimmered, and became Monicker.

“Thank you, my dear. As ever, you serve me well. Jader, I know about Ravenor, damn his name, and I know about your efforts to destroy him without me knowing about it. How thoughtful, Jader, to spare my nerves the worry that bastard was active here on Eustis.”

“Lord, I—”

“Shut up, Jader. Is Ravenor dead?” he asked Culzean.

“I think it’s very likely, lord.”

“And this Slyte? The daemon offers no challenge to us?”

“It depends what you intend to do, sir.” Culzean replied. “I’ve not been told in any detail, naturally. The chief provost is too wise to leak that sort of data to an untrusted minion. But I can imagine. I have ideas. If I’m right, Slyte, whatever its power, is just a bug to be crushed along the way.”

“Good.”

“So long as...”

“So long as what?” Barazan asked.

“You do whatever you’re going to do quickly. Chaos has a habit of escalating. It’s hard to read, harder to predict. Slyte’s nothing now, but soon... Well, I recommend you put your plan together and act right now.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” said Barazan. “I told you I liked this man. Wise counsel.”

“My lord!” Trice said, getting up, urgent. “The project is not finished! Another month, perhaps six weeks, and we’ll have completed the lexicon. I’ve not laboured this long and this hard to prepare the way only to rush prematurely through the final—”

“Jader, dear Jader. I’ve not laboured this long and this hard either. I refuse to wait any longer for sublimation. The pain is so hard, every day. Another month, six weeks? What of it? We have the Encompass now, the colure, the radius, we have the components in place. We know the true centre, dammit! The looms have spun us out a lexicon that is as complete as we need. Once we transcend, all the minor details and omissions will be revealed and finished. I will not wait around for another impediment to trip us. This Slyte, for example, or Ravenor — if, curse the emptiness, he still lives. We will go now.”

“I voice my objections again, lord,” Trice said.

“Now! No more foot-dragging. Tomorrow night, we will undertake the first Enunciation. Get to work. Instigate the masses. Do what you assured me you could do.”

Trice looked aside. “As you decide, sir.”

“Orfeo,” said the lord governor. “Why don’t you follow me up to the residence? I think it’s time you and I had a conversation.”

“Yes, lord. I look forward to it.”

“At your leisure. My guards will show you the way.”

Barazan left. Trice stared at Culzean for a second. Culzean simply sat down again and reached for his drink.

Trice stormed out of the parlour, Revoke behind him.

Leyla Slade waited until Monicker had left the room too. Then she crouched down behind the sofa Culzean was sitting on.

“I really can’t tell,” she whispered. “How’s it going?”

“Well, Ley,” Culzean said. “The bluffing’s stepped up a notch or two. But I think we’re safe.”

“They bought your story about Slyte?”

“Yes, they did.”

“But Slyte...?”

“Oh, it’s more massive and dangerous than they can possibly imagine. But if I let them know that, they’d panic. Then we’ll never get what we want. I need to control this. See it through to the end. That way, I’ll get the pay-off. And believe me, Ley, the pay-off this time is something special.”

“Really?” she frowned. “This Enuncia thing?”

“More than you can possibly imagine, Leyla. I’ll make you a goddess.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Are the weapons ready?”

She nodded. “I’ve got six inscribed hooktors in my clip, the special ones you spent all those months preparing.”

“Good.”

“And the Telluric Stone. That’s in a case in my pocket. There wasn’t any time to prepare more than that.”

Culzean rose to his feet. “They should do, Ley. I have a few tricks myself. Let’s go take the lord governor up on his invitation.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Because he’ll tell us all about Enuncia. And his amasec has got to be a great deal better than the shit they serve down here.”

The southern stack-rises of Petropolis had grown so fast that they had extended out across the river bay, the lower levels of the undersink actually built up on silt-sunk piles above the water, creating a district known as the over-float. It was a dark and stinking catacomb down there, forty-eight stack levels down from surface level. The water reaches were so dark, so ancient that eyeless albino vermin had evolved in the gloom. Effluvia pumped out from blackened spigots. Luminescent moulds sprouted from the stone piers and stanchions. A ripe floodtide of detritus sobbed in and out under the sink-sumps.

Kys surfaced, gagging, and went under again. She came up, grabbed a frantic breath, then treadmilled around in the black soup, searching for Unwerth.

Once they’d hit the water, she’d slammed the ejector charges.

“Sholto? Shol-up! Gah! Sholto?”

Bubbles dribbled up from the sinking flier.

Kys floundered around, her hair plastered to her face by the stinking, weed-filled water. She glanced about. There was no sign of any sheen birds. The place was dark and silent except for the slopping of the water.

And her voice.

“Sholto?”

“Mamzel?” Unwerth spat the word rather than said it as he surfaced in a flurry of bubbles.

“Throne! I thought you’d drowned!”

“I’m obligated to be about to,” gurgled Unwerth. “Can’t swim—”

He went under.

Kys forked her arms and splashed over to him, dragging him up, her flesh tingling from the dilute acid in the water. She towed him over to the nearest mossy brick bulwark and heaved him up onto the platform.

“Unwerth? Unwerth?” Kys pumped his chest and blew air into his mouth.

He remained still.

“Unwerth!” She pounded harder and planted her lips around his, breathing out hard.

He started, gagging, and she rolled him onto his side. A quantity of river filth drained out of his mouth.

Coughing, spluttering, he looked up at her.

“Birds?” he said.

“Yes, bloody birds!”

“As I concupise it, most birds can’t swim,” he said.

Patience Kys realised what he had done and began to laugh. Her laughter echoed out across the dark caves of the overfloat.

THREE

“How’s everyone doing?” Belknap asked.

“Do you have any rubbing alcohol?” Frauka asked him.

“Why? For the scratch on your head?” Belknap said.

“No. Just thirsty.” Frauka smirked, lighting a lho-stick.

Belknap had concealed us in a lockup over the street from the den he used as a surgery. It was a poor place, but it was out of the way. Even at this late hour, the noise from the dirty sink-streets outside was loud and raucous. Drunken tavern crowds, what sounded like a gang fight in a nearby alley, a cluster of black market stalls around the oil can fires of the nearest walkthrough.

Carl limped over to me. He’d bought a hand-vox from one of the black market vendors on the street, and with it he had contacted Kara and Nayl.

“They’re both on their way.”

“What did you tell them?”

“Only where to come,” he said. “Neither have heard from Patience.”

“Get some rest.”

I was waiting near Zael. Belknap had laid the boy down on a ratty cot. Zael’s eyes were still open. He had made no sound or motion since I’d found him in Carl’s room.

“Physically he’s fine. A few scratches. But he’s in a fugue state,” the medicae said. “Brought on by severe shock or trauma.”

“Very likely,” I said. “Tonight has been... difficult.”

“The best thing is to leave him for a while.” Belknap advised.

I agreed, but in my heart I knew the good doctor was wrong. The best thing, the safest thing, would be to execute Zael Efferneti right now, while he was comatose. There was a high likelihood that Zael had manifested Slyte during the psyker attack, that the warp latency in his mind had been provoked into action by the assault. I’d seen that before: individuals suddenly displaying previously unknown psy powers under extremis. Caught in the teeth of three or four murderous psykers, Zael’s fragile sanity had snapped and something else had come out.

And what a thing. Even newborn, it had destroyed perhaps three of the psykers. It had also, I was quite sure, playfully linked its power to mine and assisted with the destruction of the Brass Thief. That was where my almost mindless rage had come from.

The Divine Fraternity had spent years preparing the way for the daemon Slyte. My master, Eisenhorn, had trekked across the sector to warn me. Slyte was an abominable threat to Imperial security, and I, or one of those about me, would bring it forth.

I knew I should just kill Zael right then, before he woke.

But I had good reasons not to. Not just yet. The first, the most human, was that I did not relish murdering a boy in his sleep, especially as I had only circumstantial evidence he was corrupted. There was still a slender chance he was innocent.

Secondly, I could detect no trace of the warp upon him, except for the foggy latency of his farseeing gift. And that was the third reason. Zael’s unformed talent was so rare and so passive. A mirror seer, a reactor. That was precisely why I hadn’t executed him or consigned him to the black ships the day I discovered him. His nascent talent was a precious thing, one that could benefit the Imperium of Mankind so very much. And it was not an *active* talent. It seemed so unlikely that a

passive gift could be the womb, the cradle of a manifesting daemon. Such things inevitably came into our world through minds twisted by madness, greed, psychosis, or potent, active psyker power.

Like mine, for instance.

With his name, and his odd, disarming manner, and his sometimes doubling gift, Zael Efferneti was so obviously the threat. Too obviously.

I would stay my hand until I had the opportunity to study him further. If I got that chance. I owed Zael the benefit of the doubt.

And, of course, there was the fourth reason. If Slyte was lurking beneath the surface of the comatose boy's mind, if Slyte was anything like as powerful as I had been led to believe, putting a weapon to Zael's head would be a very, very bad idea. It might be the hasty action that caused the daemon to manifest permanently.

For now, Zael slept. And if Slyte was sleeping inside him, then at least Slyte was sleeping.

"Sir?" It was Carl. "Some good news at last. Nayl just called to say he's been contacted by Patience. She was calling from a public vox in Formal L."

"Formal L?"

"There's a story to it, apparently. She's fine, though her powers are temporarily inhibited, which is why you couldn't find her. She's on her way here. Apparently, she's got some important information for us."

"Enuncia," Patience Kys said.

There was a moment's pause.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I followed that bastard Molotch all the way to Zenta Malhyde when he was looking for it. He never told me much or shared any of what he had learned, but I know the taste of it, the smell of it. Trice's Ministry is engaged in the production of a working grammar for Enuncia."

It was a staggering thought, but it made sense of many things.

"I believe they're processing, one piece at a time," said Kys, "one morpheme at a time. They're not deciphering it from some archaeological cache or ancient text. They're weaving it from our own, known language bases."

"You mean randomly?" Thonius asked, doubtful.

Kys nodded. "Yes. They're taking raw language, raw symbols, alphabet characters, scripts, syllables, numerals, number bases, etymons and word roots, syntax and grammar structures, and they're breaking it right down to the smallest units, to phonemes and morphemes, which they are then systematically recombining at random into every conceivable permutation."

Nayl sniffed. "Recombining?"

"In any way they can," Kys said. "Ciphering, deciphering, transliterating, substituting. They're forcing the raw material through patterns of anagram, acrostic, pangram, hell, rhymes for all I know. At the most basic level, they are taking every morpheme and trying it against every other possible combination of morphemes. And every now and then, they get a strike. They get a piece of Enuncia that they can identify and secure into... well, I suppose they are producing some kind of primer program."

"And like completing a puzzle," I said. "The more pieces they get, the more help it gives them finding the rest."

"Wait, wait!" said Carl, getting to his feet. "I understand what you're saying, but you're talking about a massive undertaking. Truly massive! Just handling that amount of data and processing it randomly, that would take thousands of years!"

"But it could be done," I said. "Remember the old joke about giving an infinite number of simians an infinite number of script engines and eventually, probability demands, they would produce the complete works of Vayten?"

Carl looked at me. "Yeah, and the bit of that to really remember is that it's a joke."

"Maybe not an infinite number of simians," Kys said. "But how about the entire Administratum of a subsector capital? Millions of scribes using, as far as we know at least five million cogitators brought in from the Mergent Worlds? Sixty main system data looms?"

"Sixty..." Carl breathed.

"It suddenly sounds more plausible, doesn't it?" Kys smiled. "And for the most part, those infinite simians have no idea what they're doing. They're just drones, processing what comes in front of them. Oh, every now and then one has a fit because he's accidentally found or created a piece of Enuncia, but the Ministry have supervisors on hand to cover that."

"Well, I suppose that would explain why the data you fed me made no discernible sense," said Carl, "and then fried my engines. They must be using the imported cogitators because they're polluted. Perhaps more resistant to the material they are handling."

"Or more sensitive," I said.

"I have, as it might be, a query."

We all looked round. Since arriving with Kys, Unwerth had sat in the corner of the chamber, with Belknap cleaning and dressing his miserable injuries. I regretted, yet again, that another individual had suffered because of their association with me.

"What, beggaring the question," he said, "is this Enuncia? And please, sir, do not obstinate me to be excluding my nasal from your business for the good of my health."

I winced at that and moved over to face him. "Enuncia is the name ancient scholars gave to a lost, pre-human language, Master Unwerth. Its origins and use may have associations to the warp itself, or to antique super-races that may once have existed in our cosmos. Tiny scraps of it have occasionally been discovered. We don't know how it was created originally, or even used. It's possibly the source of the arts we now understand as 'magic'. Simply put, the language was a tool, an instrument. By the power of words alone, the fabric of reality could be changed, transformed, controlled, manipulated, reshaped. It was a fundamental device of creation."

"Or destruction," Kys added.

"That sound you made," Unwerth said to Kys. "In the cell. The one by which manner you discomforted our jailer. That was Enuncia?"

"A tiny part of it, probably a meaningless unit," Kys replied. "But yes."

Unwerth thought about that. "I have turned words around in my lifetime, but I have never by wit of them enforced a man to be ill upon the floor."

"You say that..." Nayl grinned.

"How did you know it?" Unwerth asked.

"We've encountered it before," I said. "Some years ago, we were engaged in the pursuit of a heretic called Molotch. His ambition was to recover enough elements of Enuncia from xenoarchaeological sites in the out-worlds to master a rudimentary command of it. Patience actually infiltrated his party for some time, enabling us to track them down and stop them. Molotch was killed."

"Molotch was Cognitae," said Patience. "Should we be concerned that several figures in this drama have the same connection?"

"We should bear it in mind," I said. "Either Cognitae agents are making a second attempt to break Enuncia, or this is a direct sequel to Molotch's work."

"And what will Trice or his occult masters do with Enuncia when they have it?" asked Nayl.

"I would suppose," I said, "anything they like."

A buzzer sounded. The outer door. "I'll get it," Frauka said, rising and stubbing out another lho-stick. "Garters and firm, white buttocks."

Everyone looked at him, even Belknap.

"Sorry, just reading aloud," said Frauka, putting his data-slate down. "My, the power of words."

It was Kara, the final member of my team to congregate in the Formal J undersink. She was accompanied by a dark-haired woman with an attractive face that at present looked drawn and tired.

“This is Maud Plyton,” said Kara. “Junior marshal, Magistratum.”

“Department of Special Crime,” Plyton said. She was staring at my armoured chair dubiously.

“Ravenor.” I replied. The forward shell of my chair displayed my rosette.

“Maud may be the only member of her department left alive,” Kara said. “Special Crime made a chance discovery a few days ago, a discovery the Ministry has been at such pains to cover up that it has silenced many members of the department. Attempts have been made on Maud’s life. Her invalid uncle was murdered in one of them.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. “Can you tell me what this discovery was?”

“Yes.” Plyton replied. She had a sheaf of documents under her arm. “It will take a little time to explain. The discovery was made in the old sacristy adjoining the grand templum—”

“...in Formal A.” I finished. “Could it be, by any chance, that’s also where the two of you met?”

Kara shot me a wicked grin. “Zael, huh? How about that?”

“Kara, Marshal Plyton, I’m keen to hear everything you have to tell me. But first, Kara, I need to talk to you about Zael. And Zeph.”

FOUR

For Jader Trice, the day of days began early. He had trained his body and mind over the years to require only three or four hours' sleep, but on this auspicious night, he snatched just one frail hour. His hand servants woke him at the third bell, with night still sprawled across the city and dawn another four hours away.

The servants lit the lamps in his apartments, bathed and dressed him, and brought him his breakfast. As per the instructions he had written himself, the bathing water was without tincture or oils, and the clothes were a simple attire of dark grey. He put on no rings or signets nor marks of wealth or status. The only concession he made was his fine pocket chron. In due course, that would have to be set aside too, but for now he needed to keep a careful record of the passage of time.

His breakfast eschewed the caffeine, freshly baked sugarbread and conserve he usually favoured. The servants presented him with ripe fruit, ebongrass tea and some wheat biscuits.

As he ate, half-heartedly, sitting at his bureau and reading the first of the day's despatches brought to him by his seneschal, he realised how utterly despondent he felt. This was a day, a moment, he had been dreaming of for over twenty-five years. He'd been planning for it for the last fifteen, and actively working towards it for the whole of the previous decade.

Trice prided himself on a precision of labour, on patience, on attention to detail. He hadn't risen to the rank of chief provost without those skills and, fate knew, they were essential for the matter in hand. The first Enunciation. The commencing Rite of Transcendence.

He had planned every last detail with meticulous care, even down to the weave pattern to be used in the ritual clothing. This wasn't a matter of carefully arranging a private ceremony, like the cabals and séances he and his fellow Cognitae initiates had conducted in their scholam days. This was on a scale unimaginable back then. This was orchestration.

And now, after all the fastidious preparation, all that planning, all that discipline, he found he was being rushed into it. The Diadochoi's unseemly haste! This was wrong. With the lexicon so close to completion, why were they risking failure by advancing the moment of the first Enunciation so recklessly?

Trice toyed with the last piece of fruit and considered getting to his feet, climbing up to the Residence, and demanding that the Diadochoi reconsider. Surely he could be made to listen to reason?

No. Of course not. One did not reason with a man like the Diadochoi. Once the master's mind was decided, nothing would change it. And now, that bastard facilitator, the honey-tongued Culzean, had the Diadochoi's ear, egging him on. Culzean was an expeditor. By the very nature of his profession, he made things happen in the quickest, most direct way. All very clever, Orfeo Culzean, but an Enunciation could not be brought to fruition by following the path of least resistance. It should not be rushed or forced, it should not be *expedited*. It was far too pure and intricate an event for that.

Forty-five minutes after Trice had been woken, a colonel of the Eustis Majoris Planetary Defence Force arrived at the governor's palace in a military pinnace, escorted by four lifter gunships. He had come directly from PDF watch command, Station Lupercal, a star fort in geosynchronous orbit above Petropolis. He was attired in full dress uniform and carried a locked despatch box that was chained to his wrist. The secretists accompanied him to the chief provost's chambers.

Revoke personally led the man in and stood back while the colonel presented himself.

“At your bidding, my lord,” the officer announced, putting the box on the floor, snapping to attention and making the salute of the aquila.

“The Emperor protects.” Trice replied, rising to his feet. “Good morning. You have the weather station reports and the global attitude?”

“Yes, lord. Reports as of midnight, equatorial, with a thirty-six hour plot as commanded. Attitude was calculated by the officers of the watch at Lupercal, Fraylees, Antropy and Kuskin stations, triangulated via astropath through Navy flotillas at Caxton, Lenk, Tancred and Gudrun. The attitude was further confirmed by Adeptus Astrocartographus, at the Deep Relay Discerner at Kobish, the Massive Circular Array at Lockmore Heights and the Kristophe Cartenne Observatory.”

“Margin of error?”

“Decimal zero zero zero two, sir.”

Trice nodded. The colonel picked up the box, unlocked it with a code and handed the chief provost a small yellow data-tile.

“Thank you, colonel.”

“Thank you, sir,” the colonel saluted, and left the chamber.

Trice sat back down and slid the tile into the cogitator beside his desk.

The screen lit and data scrolled down it. It was a projection of Eustis Majoris’ precise sidereal alignment: the planet’s position in space described as exactly as Imperial science could establish. Trice tracked forward and watched the screen resolve the relative plot developing through the course of thirty-six hours. Then he overlaid the weather mapping and watched it again.

“Damn,” he whispered at last.

“A problem?” Revoke asked.

“No,” said Trice. “And that’s the problem. Positional variance is excellent and the weather suits us too. We’ve actually chanced upon a tertiary level alignment. A good one, as it happens. Phasic spread is almost secondary in quality. Gods! A week ago, mis data would have suggested an abysmal alignment tonight. But now we factor in the true centre, it’s...”

“Perfect?” Revoke suggested.

“*Perfect* happens once every sixteen thousand years, Toros. *Extremely fine*, once every five hundred. We knew we wouldn’t hold out for that degree of alignment. By the old calculations, we estimated we’d get a *good* around Midwinter. Now, it appears, we have an *acceptable* tonight. At the eighth hour plus six precisely. What are those odds, do you suppose? It’s almost as if he knew.”

“Maybe he did?” Revoke said.

“Maybe he did...” Trice echoed.

“I don’t understand your displeasure,” Revoke said. “If tonight is propitious, why are you so disappointed.”

Trice ejected the yellow tile from his engine and held it up. “I was hoping the auguries would be poor, my friend. If they were poor, I might have used them to convince the Diadochoi to delay the ritual. He understands facts, and he doesn’t argue with them. It was my last hope. But the predictions are good. So I can’t.”

“You really hoped for a postponement?”

Trice nodded. “I did, Toros. I really did. This is too fast, too rushed—”

“Everything is in place, sir.”

“Of course it is! I made it so! But I designed this moment. So long, so hard... and now I find myself rushed into it at a day’s notice.”

Revoke looked at the floor. “I’m sorry to hear that, sir. I hate to see your disappointment. Maybe I could speak with the Diadochoi on your behalf?”

Trice smiled. “There’s no point, Toros. The first of my sealed orders have already been opened, haven’t they?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The first functions already underway?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then the rock is already rolling, and woe betide any who stand in its way. Even a chief provost. Let me say now, before it’s too late, I am heartened by your staunch loyalty. I may not get a chance to tell you that later.”

Revoke looked awkward. “Thank you, sir,” he said.

Trice rose and tossed the yellow tile to Revoke. Revoke caught it neatly.

“The geometricians will be needing that. Have the data routed to all elements. Eighth hour plus six. As of this moment, the Ministry stands at condition delta. If we’re going to be forced to do this, we’d better do it well.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Begin the masses.”

“They’ve already started.” Toros Revoke replied.

Out across the hive, temple bells were pealing in the pre-dawn dark, calling the faithful to prayer. Most temples in the hive half-filled with the usual bleary attendees, coming to worship out of habit and duty. But, that morning, nine hundred and ninety-nine city temples were packed with capacity congregations of citizens who had been up, dressed and ready hours before the dawn service.

For three and a half years, the secretists had been running private masses in these nine hundred and ninety-nine churches. Ostensibly Imperial in nature, these masses were a skilful and insidious process of conditioning. A variety of methods had been employed, not the least being the fact that the temple bells had been subtly retimed so that their peals created a subliminal call that lured the congregation in. In the first few months, the secretists had vetted the congregations, and quietly removed any worshippers who registered as unreceptive or unsuitable on their biometric scans. Then the clerics in charge of the masses had begun to drop mesmeric subtexts into the services, using ciphered forms of Enuncia, conditioning the congregations into absolute cooperation. Not a single man or woman amongst the worshippers even suspected that the masses they were participating in were anything but the Imperial creed. On that morning, that day of days, no one in those nine hundred and ninety-nine churches so much as blinked when the clerics slid open their trip-tychs and displayed, not the God-Emperor and his saints, but stark, almost psychedelic symbols of Enuncia. Nor did they hear the words they were actually saying.

And these were not low-hab, ill-educated people so preyed upon. Many of the private masses were held in temples that served highborn populations. Nobles, academics, lawyers, educators, merchants, magistrates, civil servants of note. One particular church, St. Pilomel Highstack, was the one preferred by the Officio Inquisitorus Planetia, and thus over a hundred interrogators, explicators and other ordo servants had been inducted. This had delighted the Diadochoi particularly — it had been a recurring question as to how the Inquisition could be contained and muzzled during the preparations for Enunciation, and simply by dint of geography, because of the temple they used, the Inquisition had not only muzzled itself, but had become active participants in the event. A *cosmic irony*, the Diadochoi had called it.

The location of the nine hundred and ninety-nine chosen temples was no accident. If lines were drawn through them on a chart of Petropolis, they defined precise, invisible axes across the city plan. To a casual eye, a plan of the hive looked like a shapeless, unstructured thing, a complex blotch of intersecting stack-streets and overlapping wards. But, when such lines were drawn, as they had been drawn on the hyper-accurate chart on the floor of the Encompass Room, they revealed a peculiar, almost beautiful symmetry to the city layout.

They revealed its planned and exquisitely formulated perfection. They revealed its design, not as a place of habitation and commerce, but as a vast and complex mechanism.

Trice rechecked the time on his pocket chron. Sunrise was now just six minutes away. In the previous thirty-five minutes, he had conducted a series of final briefings with some of the key operation groups. First, with the eight-man team of secretists who would fly out just after dawn and travel to Carbonopolis, the second city of Eustis Majoris, a sprawling, balkanised hive near the southern pole. There, through the course of the day, they would plant and detonate a series of devices and leak disinformation suggesting a systematic program of cult attacks. By nightfall, there would be a state of global emergency, with Carbonopolis the focus of attention for the PDF, the planet's Imperial Guard garrisons and the Navy. Misdirection on the grandest scale.

Then Trice had briefed the chiefs of the Ministry's technical departments, whose task later in the day would be to hijack, by means of cogitation, digitation and vox, all of Petropolis' newscasts, air-networks, audio caster systems and sundry pict-channels. Some would be shut down, others would be set to broadcast specially prepared materials that would be given to the chiefs nearer to time.

Trice had then moved to his next meeting, reading as he walked the latest clutch of despatches that Revoke handed to him. For a moment, he felt exhilarated to see the absolutely sublime way his long-prepared plan was being executed. Every last detail slotting into place, just as he had designed it.

Then his burning despondency had returned. *The haste. The foolish haste!*

The third briefing had been with the eighty-strong team of secretists, under Tolemi's command, who would raid the central hive premises of the Astropathicus during the late afternoon. They would pose as officers of the Inquisition, and the cover story would be a suspected Chaos taint, connected to the incident at the diplomatic palace. Heavy duty inhibitor units would be set up at each astropath centre, and by late evening, all legal telepathic activity in and around the hive would be blunted.

Now it was six minutes to sunrise. At a nod from Trice, Revoke opened the doors into the climate-controlled vault of the cipherists. The perfecti, a dozen men in long green robes, were ready and waiting for him. They bowed and made their formal greeting.

"Are they prepared?" Trice asked.

The senior perfectus, a wizened man called Mattaray, beckoned the chief provost over and showed him the long rows of sealed desks in which the anonymic wafers had been laid out, each one covered by an opaquing field. There were nine hundred and ninety-nine of them. At the end of the afternoon, they would each be hermetically sealed into inert envelopes, placed in carrying coffers, and sent out by secretist despatchers to the nine hundred and ninety-nine axial churches and temples.

"The wafers have been checked?" Trice asked.

"Nine times, each one," said Perfectus Mattaray. "To such a close degree of scrutiny, eight of the perfecti have suffered mental damage. Two have died."

"The efforts of the cipherists will not be forgotten." Trice assured him. "This is an extraordinary achievement. This is the articulation of apotheosis. For all of us."

Mattaray nodded. "It is a shame, lord, that we had to do this so quickly. We would not have sustained injuries and losses if we had been given more time to complete the ciphering."

Trice nodded. Again, he thought, the Diadochoi's haste. The purity of my plan ruffled by his demands.

There lay the core of his despondency. There had been a time, when Trice's great scheme had already been well developed and underway, when there had been no Diadochoi to factor in. Five years ago. Five years, was that all it was? Five years before, Trice's intricate and occult network of intimates and contacts had introduced him to the hideously disfigured man, and so, almost by happenstance, brokered their partnership. The man's brilliance and immeasurable talents had been too useful for Trice to reject. The plan had instantly taken a quantum leap forward and become something momentous and grand everything Trice had ever hoped for but never believed possible.

And he had become chief provost, and the disfigured man had become Oska Ludolf Barazan, Lord Governor Subsector, and together, through labour and genius and deceit, they had ascended the gleaming ladder of destiny to this day of days.

“Chief provost?” Revoke said. “It’s sunrise.”

Trice came out of his reverie. Sunrise, and still so much to do.

“The officers of deliberation await you in the east wing,” Revoke reminded him.

“I’m coming,” Trice said. He nodded to the perfecti. “Your work astonishes and delights me, and the Diadochoi thanks you for your pains.”

The perfecti bowed.

As they marched out of the vault, Trice glanced at Revoke.

“Sunrise, you say? Stand the Ministry at condition gamma.”

Revoke pulled out his hand-vox. “This is Revoke on the command channel. Condition gamma. Repeat, we are at condition gamma.”

“Hey, where are you going?” Kara said.

“It’s dawnsong,” replied Belknap, pulling on his coat. “Can’t you hear the bells?”

“Yeah, they woke me,” she yawned.

“Here’s an idea, why don’t you come with me?”

Kara shook her head. “Plyton and I have got to brief the inquisitor at breakfast,” she said. “Do you have to go?”

“Yes,” Belknap said, very directly.

“Oh. It appears to me that you’re a very... devout person, aren’t you, Belknap?”

“I suppose. Is there something wrong with that?”

She shrugged. They were standing in the doorway of the lock-up. Everyone inside was asleep, except Carl, who was toying with Belknap’s cogitator. The sink streets were quiet at last. Just empty walkways, littered with refuse from a heady night before. A few, dim figures hurried past to attend the local service.

“Does my faith put you off?” Belknap asked.

“Put me off what, doctor?” she asked.

He blushed as he realised what he’d said. “I meant... as a patient, you might be uncomfortable with me talking about my belief while I treat you. Some do, and I try not to. I know I should just be a medicae, not an evangelist. There are others who should minister to the health of the spirit.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” she said.

“But I almost insisted you attended temple...”

“And that seems to have paid off,” she grinned.

He scowled, but he wasn’t offended. “That’s not quite what I meant. I was never a particularly religious man in my younger days. But on active service and working here, the things I’ve seen, I—

“Patrik?”

He shook his head. “Sorry. Kara, there’s darkness everywhere, it seems to me. In this proud, almighty galaxy of ours, there’s only war and corruption and infamy. I can’t make sense of it. Unless I believe. Believe absolutely in the pure condition of mankind. It’s the only thing that keeps me sane. And I truly believe that the quality and purpose of your remaining lifespan will improve if you embrace the love of the God-Emperor.”

“I do embrace it, Patrik. Just not the way you do. Doctor, are you trying to save me?”

He smiled. “I think I am. In every meaning of that word.”

“Then, thank you. But will you forgive me if I do this my way. In the time I have left, there are many things I’d like to embrace.”

There was a quizzical look on his face. She stepped closer.

“Like what?” he asked, his voice tight.

Kara reached up on tiptoe and kissed his mouth. The kiss lingered for a few, delicious moments. Then he pulled away.

“Don’t.”

“Why not?” she whispered.

“Because. Because I want you to. Because I want to touch you.”

“You’ve touched me already.”

“Yes, as your physician.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Belknap smiled and looked down. He cleared his throat. “I can’t, Kara. Because I know that if I start to touch you, I won’t be able to stop.”

He buttoned up his coat and walked to the door. “I’ll be back in an hour,” he said.

“Patrik?”

“Yes?”

“Would you say a grace for my friend Zeph?”

“Of course.” Belknap went out and closed the door behind him.

“Mamzel Swole?”

Kara looked round. Plyton had appeared behind her.

“Are you all right?” Plyton asked.

Kara wiped her eyes. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Good. The inquisitor’s calling for us.”

FIVE

Plyton coughed, awkward. “I don’t know how these things are done. I mean, in the Inquisition.”

“So do it your way, junior marshal,” I said.

She nodded and coughed again. “The morning before that ruckus at the diplomatic palace, I was called to the old sacristy adjoining the grand templum in A. There’s restoration work underway there, and one of the limners had found something.”

“Something?”

Plyton clenched her teeth and sucked in a breath. “Yes. He’d found a false ceiling. The building’s very old, one of the hive’s first edifices. Its original ceiling had been architecturally boxed in and hidden.”

“The fabric of temples is altered all the time,” Carl said, sipping one of the polysty cups of hot caffeine Nayl had brought in from a street kettle stand.

“Sure,” said Plyton. “But this had been deliberately concealed. Anyway, that doesn’t matter. The limner brought it to the attention of the supervising cleric, an Archdeacon Aulsman, and upon inspecting the revealed roof, the archdeacon either committed suicide or was murdered by person or persons unknown.”

“This limner’s gotta be high on the suspect sheet,” Nayl said.

Plyton nodded at that. “Of course, sir. But he insisted it was suicide. And it looked like suicide to me.”

“I like her,” Nayl said, looking over at me. “She called me ‘sir’. Did you hear her call me ‘sir’?”

“Oh, shut up you obnoxious grunt,” Carl said.

“Why did you think it looked like suicide, junior marshal?” I asked.

“Because I’ve seen plenty of them, inquisitor. But that is still not the point. I went up there, took some pics, looked around—”

“What did you see?” Kys asked.

“Not much, mam.” Plyton replied. “I was just looking through a hole in the plasterwork with a handlight. It was very dark. But I saw enough to know there was a spectacular ceiling up there. Very, very old, ornate, beautiful. There were golden figures, inset precious stones, a chart of some sort. There was a landscape too, rolling hills and woodland, temples. The figures all had haloes—”

“A lovely golden place. Like a landscape.” I played back my chair’s vox record. “Green hills, woods, a glade, all these beautiful people walking around with haloes of light around them. There were some buildings too. I think they were golden.”

“Was that Zael’s voice?” Kys asked.

“Yes. The other night. When he told me his vision of Kara and the sacristy.”

“But I never got to see that,” Kara said.

“I don’t think that matters,” I said. “I think Zael was conflating details. He’s not trained.”

Carl snorted, as if to suggest that wasn’t ever going to happen now.

“Continue, please, junior marshal,” I said.

“I took some pics, like I said. Used them as the basis of my report. The next day, I found that the case had been erased from my database and reassigned to another division. Shortly after that, my entire department was suspended by Interior Cases. There was some suspicion that Special Crime

had made a procedural mishandling of the sacristy case and, further more, there was a link to the attempt on the chief provost's life. We were stood down and sent home, to await interview."

"Your entire department?" Carl asked.

"Yes," she shrugged.

"And then what?" I asked.

"I was sure something was wrong. I contacted a colleague. His name is... His name *was* Limbwall. I couldn't reach my superior, in fact I haven't been able to ever since. I believe he's dead. Limbwall and I tried to piece things together. We knew that the sacristy was the key. Then..."

Plyton paused and glanced away for a second. "Excuse me. This is hard to talk about. Then the killers came for me, and they... uhm..."

"They missed her," Kara said, getting up and pulling Plyton against her body in a tight hug. "They had her address. They murdered her uncle and his nurse. Maud did manage to slay one of the killers. From what Patience has told us, I think they were using the sheen birds as a murder weapon."

"Throne! Screw that!" Kys muttered. "I never want to see those things again."

"Like Genny X," Nayl said.

"What?" I said.

"On our first visit here," Nayl said. "A black marketeer Zael found for me. The same spec. Looks like the birds are our enemy's weapon of choice when it comes to keeping things secret."

I rolled my chair forward to face Plyton. "Are you all right to continue?"

She nodded, and smiled at Kara as she broke the embrace. "Limbwall and I decided to go to the old sacristy to scope around and take some more pics. Everything I'd shot at the scene of crime on the first day had been erased. So we went in last night. To our dismay, the place was as tight as a drum. They were building something in there."

"Who were?" Carl asked.

Plyton shook her head. "Who knows? Ministry, I'm pretty sure. Agents of the Ministry of Subsector Trade. They run this city, as you may have noticed. As soon as we realised we weren't getting in, Limbwall and I tried to get out. They came for us. They... they killed Limbwall. Just shot him. Just shot him dead..."

Plyton teared up again.

"That's when Maud and I ran into each other." Kara cut in. "Thanks to Zael, it seems. We made our escape and came here."

"Is that it?" Carl said. "I don't know what use this—"

"No," said Plyton suddenly, glaring at Thonius. "There's more. Limbwall managed to procure a file for me, before the department was shut down." She produced the crumpled folder and spread it out on the table. "I think he dug very deep to get this, very deep. It's original street plans, from the first phase of the hive's construction. Template records made by the pioneer builders and stored by the Scholam Architectus. The records of the city's original planner, a man named Theodor Cadizky."

"Say that name again?" Carl said.

"Cadizky," Plyton repeated. "Why? Do you know him?"

"If it's the same man I think it is, yes," Carl said. He got to his feet and began to pace. "Golden Throne, I didn't think any of his structures were still standing!"

"Carl?"

"Sir, Cadizky was an Imperial senior prominent in the pioneer expansion that originally settled this region. He was a chief Administratum advisor to the Lord Rufus Helican, Lord Bering Angelus and Lord Fedric Antimar, and you know where *those* names ended up. He was an architect, a city planner, a diviser, who believed — and this is evident in his writings — that the hive-cities of mankind should follow a pattern that, in his words, 'must follow the gracious schemes of heaven'."

“You’ve read this material?” Nayl asked.

“Of course!”

“The stuff you know.” Kys smiled. Thonius bowed to her, mockingly.

“Go on, Carl.” I prompted.

He turned to face me. “Inquisitor, Cadizky was a genius, ahead of his time. He planned buildings that were designed to resonate with the warp. He constructed towers that channelled the Astronomican thanks only to their architectural structures. And, as it turned out, he was a madman. The ordos penanced him and later executed him, as an enemy of the Throne. All of his known works were demolished and levelled.”

Carl turned to the table and began to sort through the papers spilling out of Plyton’s folder. “And now we find—” He swallowed hard, agitated. “And now it turns out this entire hive was constructed on plans he drew.”

“Which means what, Carl?” I said.

He stared at me. “Give me time to process these charts. I’ll be able to tell better then. But, on the face of it, I’d say Petropolis isn’t a city. It isn’t a hive.”

“Cutting you more slack than you deserve, Thonius,” Nayl said, leaning forward, “what, on the face of it, are we talking about?”

Carl glared at Nayl. “Damn you, bitch. That tone of yours is getting on my nerves. Why don’t you trust my learning, just for once?”

“The question stands, Carl,” Frauka said quietly, rising to his feet from the chair in the back of the room. “What are we talking about?”

Carl spread the papers out wide. “Petropolis has grown, developed, overlapped itself, but its basic structure remains. You can see the axes. Ignore the distortion of more recent expansion. Here, see? And here? The plan remains, just as Cadizky arranged it in the original proposal of construction. There’s a symmetry, an order, underlying every part of Petropolis that has been added since. An occult geography.”

“Look,” said Plyton, clearly unsure if she was supposed to butt in at this point but admirably positive she should. “If Petropolis isn’t a city, if it isn’t a hive, as you said... what is it? What was it built for? What did Cadizky plan here?”

“An instrument.” Carl replied. “A device. A spiritual resonator that would only begin to operate when it was filled with millions and millions of human beings.”

“Holy Throne!”

Everyone looked at me: Kara, Nayl, Kys, Frauka, Thonius and Plyton.

I realised I had been the one who had exclaimed.

SIX

The immense, seven-fold vault hatch opened slowly, like the petals of a flower blossoming. Jader Trice and Toros Revoke stepped inside, into the cool, pure air, into the hemisphere of light. They could hear the powerful air-scrubbers panting and gusting in the darkness above.

They were entering the chamber of the lexicon, directly three floors down from the Encompass Room.

The lexicon was a book, but it was not fashioned in the shape of any conventional book. Curving pages, printed on inert metal, were fixed to an axial spine, so that the lexicon took the form of a metal sphere, two hand spans in diameter. A stroke of the hand would peel the sphere open on a particular page, like parting the feathers of a bird.

But no hand had ever touched the lexicon. It hung in a sterile suspensor beam, each additional page fitted into it by the ring assembly of skeletal servo-arms sprouting like a crown below it on the deck. Reading beams, bright violet, maintained an assessment of the pages, scanning for errors or faults, watching for imperfections, even ones as slight as a rogue mote of dust.

No human had ever read the lexicon either. The primer had been compiled remotely via the servos. A very few secretists and cipherists had viewed individual pages, even studied particular sequences. But no one had regarded the plenary contents. No one had that much sanity or willpower. Yet.

Trice gazed at the layered metal globe suspended in the column of light. The chamber servitors approached him, shambling beetle-things painted surgical white or scrubbed to base metal, their hulls covered with purity seals.

“Is everything ready for conveyance?” Trice asked.

One of the servitors projected a hololith reply, a moving diagram that showed how the entire west wall of the chamber would hinge away so that the lexicon could be carried, by means of manipulation beams into the hold cavity of a specially refitted bulk lifter.

Trice nodded, flicking his hands through the hololith image to advance it. He flicked back to check several details.

“The lifter pilot?”

“A surgically lobotomised operator, as you specified,” said Revoke. “General flight governance will come remotely from palace control.”

“Who have you put on that?”

“Galbrade,” Revoke said. “The best pilot we have.”

“It’s quite beautiful, don’t you think?” Trice said, gazing at the lexicon.

“Yes,” said Revoke. “I think it is.”

Trice turned suddenly, hearing voices from above. He stared up at the observation gallery that ran around the chamber, high up. Revoke followed his gaze.

“What is he doing here?” Trice demanded.

The Diadochoi was wearing his public face. Culzean was with him, looking down at the lexicon as he listened to the Diadochoi talk. They were too far away for the words to be distinct, but the Diadochoi was evidently explaining the principles in detail.

Trice took a few angry steps towards the nearest staircase, but Revoke stopped him.

“Go up there and do what?” he said quietly. Trice’s eyes shone with bitterness, but he made no reply.

Revoke said, “You have enough things to do today without finding time for recriminations and arguments. Let it go.”

“He is so contrary, so wilful. He shows me no respect.”

“Sir, you were the instigator and master of this project from the start, but nevertheless you allowed him to become part of it. You could have refused the partnership with him. I believe you didn’t because you are afraid of him.”

Trice nodded slightly, his lips pursed. “He is the most dangerous man I have ever met. Once our paths had crossed, there was no way I could disentangle myself from him. It was better to exploit his talents and tolerate his faults.”

“Then you should continue to do so.”

Trice nodded again, more emphatically now, and the two men started to walk back to the vault hatch.

“Remember,” Revoke said quietly, “you made him. You made him part of this great project, you made him lord governor subsector, you made him Diadochoi and tonight, you will make him a god. The one thing you don’t want to make him is your enemy.”

Patience Kys made a revolted sound. “Did you have to bring that thing in here?”

Nayl nodded. He had caught and killed a small sheen bird on the roof, and now was stripping it apart, using some tools and cutters he’d borrowed from Belknap. Metal feathers and dismantled chrome mechanisms lay on the white cloth Nayl had spread out on one of the smaller tables.

“I figure we need to know how these things work.”

Close up, dead, it was a miserable thing. Age and weather had worn it down to a silver wire skeleton, with stiletto-blade plumes and a secateur beak. Deposits of thick black filth and grease had built up in its crevices and contours, and it stank of pollution.

“Carl told me the sheen birds of Petropolis had been commissioned from the Guild Mechanicus by the city founders. Machine birds, you see. They were meant to be part of the architecture, programmed to simulate the flocking activities of real bird life, a mobile decoration to complement the city spires.”

Nayl grunted. “The stuff he knows.”

“After my encounter with them, I don’t think of them as decoration anymore.” Kys said. “And it all takes on a more sinister quality now we know about Cadizky. I mean, they were probably his idea, along with all the other hidden meanings and esoteric structures he laced into this city.”

“Well, they’re hard to kill,” Nayl said. “Look here.” He took a stainless steel probe and levered open the sheen bird’s thorax, exposing the core of the mechanism. “I mean, they’ll break if you hit them hard enough, but the power source — it’s a solar-charging unit — and the miniature cogitation box are incredibly well protected. Meant to last forever, after all.”

“How did you kill it?” Kys asked.

“I netted it and then hit it hard enough. The point is, it was one single, small, feral sheen bird, roosting up near the heating flues. It was not part of a flock, under control, or trying to kill me.”

Patience thought about that ruefully.

It was late morning, the day a clear, muzzy grey. There was an oddly muted sense of expectation in the air, but Kys was pretty sure she was projecting that herself. Carl, the marshal woman Plyton and the inquisitor himself were grouped around Belknap’s old, underpowered cogitator at the far end of the lockup, trying to discern some comprehensible pattern from the ancient — and incomplete — designs of the mad architect Theodor Cadizky. Nearby, close to where Nayl and Kys sat, Frauka was reclining on a stack of old mattresses, reading his slates and smoking non-stop. Zael lay on the little cot beside him. There had been no change in the boy’s condition.

Belknap was off running his morning surgery. In the lockup's adjoining room, Kara was sorting through the weapons and equipment Carl and Frauka had managed to salvage from Miserimus before their hasty exit. It wasn't much, though Patience was happy at least that her quiver of spare kineblades had been amongst it. Unwerth was helping Kara. On several occasions, Kys had overheard Ravenor suggest to Unwerth that he should slip away, return to his ship, and extract himself from the danger. Unwerth had refused. In fact, he had "obtusely strenuated the supposition." Kys was glad. When the time came, they would need all the help they could get, and Unwerth had revealed himself to be a man of hidden talents: his loyalty, his endurance and his piloting skill being the three most notable revelations so far. And Kys hoped, that somewhere down the line, Unwerth might claim a degree of payback against the men who had tortured and brutalised him.

Kys considered taking a walk, just a few blocks, until she was clear of Frauka's blunting, so she could test how well her telekinesis had returned. But, suddenly, there was no time.

"You'd better all see this," Ravenor said. Nayl called Kara and Unwerth in from the side room and the group gathered in around Belknap's cogitator.

"We're pretty much certain now." Carl began, "that the old sacristy is of particular importance because it is the point at which the axes cross. It's what Gadizky called 'the true centre', the fulcrum on which his entire design turns. If Petropolis is a temple, then the old sacristy is the high altar."

"So whatever they're planning to do," said Kara, "they'll do it there?"

"Yes." Ravenor said. "Now tell them the rest, Carl."

"Well I started to run some basic searches and data-probes about the old sacristy, and ran into stuff. There's something going on. The grand templum is closed today, no reason given, and the immediate area has been sealed. We've got lots of irregular activity at the Ministry, the governor's palace and the Magistratum. Comm lines are very busy. Security's been heightened at state buildings. Road networks are closed in Formal A, some public data systems have been suspended. Air space above A has been restricted, what else?"

"It's happening now, today, tomorrow at the latest," Ravenor said, and though his transposed voice was flat and toneless, Kys' spine prickled. "So we don't have time to call for help, and we don't have time to devise a sophisticated plan to combat this. We have to go in right now and do whatever we can."

"Ah," said Nayl. "The old-fashioned way. Let's load up."

I watched them prepare, selecting armour and weapons from the limited resources we had left. They were all eager, ready, and although we had no real plan and were outgunned to an almost comical degree, positive action felt so much better than hiding and waiting. Plyton came to speak with me.

"Request permission to join your people on this, inquisitor," she said.

"Granted, junior marshal. I hadn't expected you to sit this one out anyway. May I call you Maud?"

"Of course, inquisitor."

"Ravenor will do. Get what you need from Nayl, Maud. And may the Emperor protect you."

I had prepared a report, storing the document in my chair's memory, and now I made some final alterations to bring the facts up to date, and transferred it to a message tile.

"Kara?"

"Yes, Gideon?"

"Take this, if you will, to the nearest clerk of law or legal practice. Belknap will know of one. Arrange for a clerk or lawyer to leave Petropolis at once with this tile, and travel to the nearest conurbation with an astrotelepathic office. He will then have the contents of this pod sent immediately to the ordos on Thracian Primaris. I've attached all the necessary codes. You'll have to pay him well, so access our funds and use your discretion. I don't really care what it costs."

Kara picked up the little tile. "I'll get right on it," she said.

I moved across the chamber and stopped beside Sholto Unwerth.

“Master Unwerth, I know I am just wasting words, but you do not have to involve yourself in this.”

He looked at me and grinned. “I would be preferential to muck in and do some good. Unlike the name my old father straddled me with, I would like to be remembered as a man who had some worth.”

“So be it. Please follow all the instructions my people give you. They are experts in what we are about to do.”

“Which is?” Unwerth cocked his head.

“Walk headlong into death, destruction and all points in between.”

I left him laughing at that and approached Frauka in the corner of the room.

“You won’t be coming in with us, Wystan.”

“Oh,” he said.

“Why?” he added after a moment.

“Because I need someone to stay here with Zael. I need someone who can watch over him.”

“Surely the medicae—”

“I need someone who knows enough about what’s at stake to know what to do if he wakes before I return. Or what to do if I don’t return.”

He frowned and nodded. “I see. Well, you certainly can’t be asking the medicae that.”

“If Zael is what we fear he is, you have the greatest immunity. It might be enough for you to get done anything that needs to be done, before it’s too late.”

“Very well.”

“Wystan, as far as I’m concerned, he’s still Zael. He’s still an innocent teenage boy, and he still deserves our protection. The moment you get a hint he’s anything other than that, act. And if I don’t come back, you won’t have a choice. The risk would be too great.”

“I understand,” said Wystan Frauka.

“I need to find the nearest reliable law office.” Kara began as she walked into the surgery. “Maybe even a bail bondor or a notary or... what are you doing?”

Belknap was sorting medical instruments and dressing packs into his black leather practice bag. “Getting ready,” he said.

“For what?”

“Nayl told me what was going on. He wanted to borrow some field dressings and wound kits. Well, if you’re going into a situation that you know is going to be violent, I think you need a trained combat medicae with you.”

“Oh no—” Kara began.

“It’s not up for debate,” Belknap said. “What happens if me being there to patch one of you up and get you back on your feet is the difference between success or failure today? I don’t even want to think about how much is at stake.”

Kara sighed. Belknap opened a metal foot locker and took out an object wrapped in an oil cloth. “Besides,” he went on, “it’s a bonus if that medicae knows how to shoot.” An old, well-worn, las-carbine came out of the cloth. It was Guard-issue, and had a folded skeleton stock. Belknap looked it over with practiced skill, then dropped it into his bag.

“This is all because I kissed you, isn’t it?” Kara said.

“Yeah,” smiled Belknap. “Probably is.”

Later in the afternoon, a few spits of rain in the air, Belknap opened the metal shutters of his lockup’s loading bay, and the Bergman rumbled out onto the sink street, followed by the cargo-8.

Belknap closed and locked the shutters, and then climbed into the cargo-8. A moment later, the two vehicles pulled away and joined the up-stack traffic.

From the grubby window of the lockup, Frauka watched them leave.

“Just you and me now,” he said.

Frauka took out his handgun, checked the load, set it on the table beside him and sat down next to Zael’s cot.

SEVEN

“It’s time, sir,” said Revoke. “The sixth hour.”

Trice knew that. He had just changed into the long grey robes prepared for the ritual, and in doing so had removed his pocket chron for the last time.

“How do I look?”

“Regal,” said Revoke. “But we should be leaving now.”

Side by side, they left the state apartments and strode down the long hallway. “Reports?” Trice asked as they walked.

“The Diadochoi and the ritual cipherists are already en route to the sacristy. The anonymic wafers have been sent out to the axial temples. Our people there report capacity congregations for the evening masses. City media networks have been switched to our control and selective broadcast will begin shortly. Astropathic function for the entire hive is also secured and shut down. Situations says the crisis we stage-managed in Carbonopolis is monopolising global attention as we hoped. The perfecti of the geometricians confirms that the Encompass Room is aligned and composed.”

They reached the secure elevators. The duty guards bowed as they stood back to admit the chief provost.

“Any problems?” Trice continued.

With a low warble, the elevator began to carry them up through the palace.

“Some crowd issues in Formal A,” Revoke said. “Nothing serious, but a lot of people gathering. Some are worried about the terrorism reports from the second city and just want to get into the grand templum to pray. But a lot more are there out of curiosity. We’ve closed the area down, but it’s obvious from a distance that something big’s going on.”

“How do we handle that?”

“I’ve already spoken to Sankels,” Revoke said. “He’s moving every available marshal from Interior Cases into the cordon zone to supplement the secretists. Sankels has assured me he’s mobilised full crowd control and riot gear.”

“All right. That’s good. Anything else?”

Revoke shook his head. The elevator came to a stop and the doors slid back to let them out onto the concourse of one of the small cap-level landing bays. A luxurious armoured flier with the crest of the Ministry on its stubby wings sat on the pad, engines idling. Two gunship escorts sat behind it.

Guards snapped to attention. The side hatch of the flier stood open and the chief provost hurried to it, Revoke with him.

They climbed into the passenger bay and an aide closed the hatch.

“Conveyance of the lexicon will begin in fifteen minutes,” Revoke said.

“Then we go to condition beta.” Trice replied.

The flier rose into the air and powered out of the landing bay with the gunships flanking it. It was already getting dark, and the immense city below spread out in a mass of gloomy monoliths and glittering lights.

We were still streets away, but already it was clear that the precincts of the grand templum were the scene of some important event this night. A bright glow of searchlights lit up the sky beyond the

nearby buildings and crowds of pedestrians were beginning to clot the approach roads. Overhead, fliers and gunships buzzed past with increasing frequency, some obviously patrolling the district.

"It's getting sticky," Carl voxed. He was up ahead of me, riding in the Bergman with Kara and Maud Plyton. "Lot of crowd build up and a palpable sense of unease, almost panic. We can see cordons now. Yeah, riot cordons. Armed marshals. Roadblocks too. They're checking all traffic. Nothing's getting within a kilometre of the templum precinct except Magistratum vehicles."

"Understood," I said. "I consulted my chair's filed charts of the templum area. Any suggestions?"

"Plyton says she and her pal got in last night by way of the north-west corner. It's a jumble of buildings, almshouses and beneficent chapels and the like."

"I see it on my chart."

"The three of us might be able to slip in that way. I'd like to give it a try."

"All right," I replied. "But be careful and stay in contact."

Up ahead, through the front screen of the cargo-8's cab, we saw the Bergman pull off through the crowds down a side street and disappear.

"What about us, then?" Nayl asked from the wheel.

"We try the front way," I said.

"Just walk in?" Kys asked, dubiously.

"Well, I could make everyone in the crowd and every marshal on that cordon line think we were a Magistratum truck full of riot officers, but I don't want to play the psyker card too early and get us picked up."

"If you can't make us look like a Magistratum truck, why don't we just *use* a Magistratum truck?" Belknap asked.

"I like the way he thinks," Nayl said.

It took nearly twenty-five minutes to navigate around the backstreets of the district to the north-west corner of the templum precincts. But Carl's instinct had been good. The area was almost deserted. The crowds, evidently, were favouring the more public zones like the wide boulevards leading into Templum Square.

Plyton drove the purring Bergman into a cobbled lane that ran down the back of the Choristers' Hall, and pulled into a small yard. The old precinct buildings around them were deserted and dark though beyond them, in the south-east, the night sky was glowing with the powerful illumination set up around the templum.

The three of them got out and checked their equipment one final time. Plyton was wearing her black Magistratum body armour with the badges and insignia of Special Crime removed and, apart from her bolstered Tronsvasse 9, she carried a big, black pump-action riot gun that Nayl had found for her. Plyton seemed a big, bulky figure compared to the much shorter, curvier Kara, whose compact body was wrapped in a dark purple armoured bodyglove with a short tan jacket over the top. She carried the shivered sword across her back, and a bolt pistol in her hands.

"Which way?" Kara whispered.

"Follow the light," Carl said, snidely.

"We can do that," Plyton said. "But if we jink over to the left there, we can come in along the side of the Paupers' School, and then be screened by the almshouse wall all the way down to the refectory and the gate lodge."

"The stuff you know," Carl mocked, checking his Hecuter then sliding it away under the long brown leather coat he was wearing.

"What's that?" Kara asked, pointing at the tails of his coat.

Carl opened the leather coat and drew the sheathed blade out.

"Throne, where did you get that?"

“It’s one of the rhyming swords that incunabula used to kill Mathuin.” Carl replied. “I found it in the rubble just before we left. I intend to shove it right back down the throat of whoever sent that thing.”

With Plyton leading, they scurried down the gloomy lane, and across into a paved courtyard lit by a single lamp. On the far side, it opened up into the circuit road that ran around the inner precinct proper. They could see the white cordon barriers running all along the street. A Magistratum riot crawler rumbled past along the circuit road.

“Anyone around?” Kara whispered.

“Yeah, there’s a three-man patrol down there.” Plyton replied. “Give it a sec. Yeah, they’ve gone round the corner. Go!”

The three of them dashed across the circuit road, ducked under the luminous white cordon, and into a small, unlit cobbled lane with the bulk of the Paupers’ School to their right. They hurried on, keeping their backs to the wall. Kara signalled them to freeze as a six-man squad of riot officers in full armour jogged past the end of the lane.

Then she beckoned them on again.

Carl brought up the rear. He looked around and sniffed the cold night air. “It’s going to be a wild night,” he muttered.

A large black Magistratum truck came grumbling down the empty transit underway and Belknap stepped out from behind the cargo-8 waving his hands.

The track came to a halt, engine running, and a marshal, looking huge in his riot armour, clambered down.

“What’s the problem?” he crackled over his helmet vox.

“My eight’s broken down. I was told to clear out of the area just now by some of you boys and then the damn thing stalled on me. Can you give me a hand? I’m no good with engines.”

The marshal signalled to his driver and followed Belknap around the cargo-8 to the open engine hatch. “Surprise,” said Nayl, and shot him through the visor.

At the same moment, a kineblade whistled out and pinned the truck’s driver to his seatback.

“Clear!” called Kys.

Unwerth jumped down from the tailgate of the cargo-8 and opened the back hatch of the Magistratum vehicle for me. Belknap, Nayl and Kys dumped the bodies of the marshals in our vehicle and locked it up. Then Belknap and Kys joined Unwerth and myself in the back of the Magistratum track and Nayl got in behind the wheel.

He put the big machine in gear and drove us away along the transit, turned right into one of the boulevards, and began to crawl through the pedestrian crowds gathering at the cordon across the mouth of Templum Square. There were two similar Magistratum tracks and a riot crawler in line ahead of us, and the marshals at the cordon had lifted the barriers aside to bring them through.

“If anybody wants to pray for good fortune, they should do it now,” Nayl said as we closed on the barrier. To my surprise, Belknap actually did what Nayl suggested, closing his eyes and mouthing the charm of sanctity under his breath.

Through the armoured hull of the truck, we could hear the anxious murmurings of the vast crowd.

“Nearly there,” Nayl said.

Eager to get the cordon closed and prevent the pressing crowd from spilling through, the marshals waved us on after the other vehicles.

We were in the huge plaza of Temple Square now. It seemed ominously empty after the bustle of the streets. The bulk of the grand templum towered ahead of us, lit up by dozens of powerful searchlight units that had been erected around the plaza. The huge white stab beams lanced up into the night sky and tracked slowly, occasionally catching on the fuselage of one of the patrol fliers

circling low over the area. There were a lot of riot marshals on the ground around the templum, along with figures in grey suits. I noted that at least three of these grey figures were managing weapon-servitors on leashes.

Marshals with lighted batons were ushering us over to park with other Magistratum trucks in the plaza on the east side of the templum. There were dozens of vehicles drawn up there already. Nayl pulled us in on the far side of them, so line of sight from the main activity around the front entrance to us was blocked by the parked trucks.

“What’s the time?” Kys asked.

“Nearly seven-thirty.” I replied.

Jader Trice climbed out of his flier and walked clear, keeping his head low as it rose away again, into the search-lit sky. Revoke led the chief provost in through the main entrance of the grand templum, and the secretists and marshals all around them broke into spontaneous applause.

“Thank you,” smiled Trice. “Thank you all.”

Boneheart awaited them in the immense nave.

“Everything is secure. All units report steady status, condition beta.”

“Excellent,” Trice said, straightening his robes.

“The lexicon is two minutes away.” Boneheart added.

“I want to see it arrive,” Trice said. “Where’s the Diadochoi?”

“Already in the sacristy.” Boneheart replied. “He went through as soon as he touched down, along with the cipherists.”

“And Culzean?”

“Culzean was with him, sir.”

Trice turned to Revoke. “I’d like you to come with me, Toros. After all your work, you should witness this too.”

“I should stay and supervise—” Revoke began.

“Everything’s covered,” Boneheart said. “You go on.”

Revoke nodded to Boneheart and followed the chief provost out through the west entrance and along the wide exterior cloister to the old sacristy. This building too was floodlit the vertical searchlight beams like the bars of a giant cage around it.

“Day of days.” Trice murmured.

“This is a great moment for you, sir.” Revoke replied. “A culmination.”

“A great moment for us all,” Trice said.

They entered the old sacristy.

The vault was lit by thousands of glow-globes. Ministry contractors had erected a large circular dais under the domed roof, the centre of the dais positioned directly beneath the apex of the dome. Ranks of seating had been built into the edges of the dais, facing inwards and, at the compass points, sleek obelisks of resonant stone had been set upright in sockets, each one corresponding exactly to the axes of the hive’s occult geometry. Trice climbed up the short flight of steps onto the dais, seeing Culzean and his bodyguard sitting amongst the other senior cipherists and dignitaries in the seating section. Culzean nodded to Trice, but Trice chose to ignore him.

The air was clean and cold. The central area of the wide dais was empty, except for the hub of suspensor rods poking up through the precise centre of the stage. Around this hub stood the thirteen grey-robed cipherists chosen to officiate the Enunciation. The Diadochoi was with them.

“What is he wearing?” Trice hissed to Revoke.

The Diadochoi was not dressed in the grey ritual robes Trice had so carefully designed and made. He was wearing a tailored gown of scarlet velvet and a long shrouding mantle.

“Lord,” Trice said, approaching the Diadochoi.

The Diadochoi turned and smiled at Trice. He was using his public face, the face of Oska Ludolf Barazan.

“Jader! Our great day reaches its climax. Aren’t you excited?”

“Lord, you should be changed by now. The ritual robes—”

“Too drab for an occasion like tonight. I will be wearing this.”

“Not drab, lord.” Trice fought to contain his fury. “I designed the robes to be inert, so that they would not, by colour or design or pattern, threaten the purity of—”

“You worry too much, Jader,” the Diadochoi said. “Hush up now. See? The lexicon is here.”

Trice was about to explode with rage, but Revoke squeezed his arm and shook his head. Everyone looked up.

The ages-old false ceiling of the sacristy roof, accidentally penetrated by a simple limner, had been torn out. The real roof, the original dome, was now revealed. The sheer beauty of the ancient frescoes: the haloed figures, the golden temples, the idyllic pastoral landscape, stilled Trice’s anger for a moment. Perfection unveiled. Paradise found.

This, Trice considered, was what had driven Archdeacon Aulsman to suicide. The sheer heresy of it. For all its ornamentation, for all its lapis and selpic, its silver-etched constellations, this was Theodor Cadizky’s handiwork. There was no God-Emperor, no primarchs, no illustrious holies of the Imperial creed. What the frescoes showed, and boldly proclaimed in their inscriptions, was a prelapserian Eden, where ordinary men and women walked upon the face of Terra and were bestowed with the power of gods. Around them were the esoteric marks of a great chart, a mirror of the scribings the geometricians had wrought upon the floor of the Encompass Room. The perfect axial alignment of the hive’s mechanism, the occult order and the lines of power that Cadizky had built into his Petropolis.

“Lexicon conveyance approaching,” Revoke said, as his headset bipped.

“Open the shutter,” said the Diadochoi.

With a whirr, the central portion of the dome high above them slid open, leaves of metal unfolding around each other. They could hear the jetwash of a lifter hovering over the roof.

“Time?” Trice asked.

“Ten minutes to eight, sir.”

“We are at condition alpha,” said Trice.

Kara, Plyton and Carl had reached the north-east gate lodge of the templum precinct. The old sacristy was ahead of them now, swathed in light.

“Cover!” Carl hissed. They ducked into the shadows as the roar of an approaching lifter echoed around the old walls.

“Gods!” said Plyton, peering out. Blazing with stab-lights, a heavy lifter was coming in over the domed roof of the old sacristy, caught in the beams of the flood-lamps. It hovered in place, the noise of its engines shrill, and projected an intense white beam down from its belly, apparently into the top of the dome.

“Ravenor! Ravenor!” Carl voxed anxiously. “It’s started. Something big is happening!”

On the east side of the grand templum, we got out of the Magistratum track. There was no longer any time to worry about the risks of discovery. I slid my chair up around the outer wall of the templum, heading for the main entrance. Belknap and Nayl followed me, running. Nayl, a huge shape in his brown armoured bodyglove, held a custom plasma rifle up to his chest. He’d fitted it with an underbarrel grenade launcher. Belknap, leaner than Nayl, in his black army fatigues and long, billowing leather coat, cut a romantic figure, like a pirate or a swashbuckler. He carried his practice bag in his left hand.

Kys and Unwerth went the other way, looping around the north side of the templum. Dressed in a tight green skinsuit, her hair loose, Kys was forced to rein in her long stride so that the diminutive Unwerth could keep up. Patience had a twinned pair of laspistols, and she'd drawn them. Her four kineblades remained sheathed in the boning of her bodice.

"Keep up, Sholto!"

"In all affectation, I am racing as fast as my foreshortened under limbs can go! I am not provided with lissom leggage such as you display, mamzel!"

"Lissom leggage?" Patience said. "Did you just compliment me, Sholto?"

"I believe something of that formature may have slid out."

Suddenly there were shapes ahead of them. Figures. Riot marshals and at least two secretists in grey.

Kys didn't hesitate. Running towards them, she began firing her laspistols. "Unwerth! Let's go! We're in it now!"

"And so we begin," Nayl said lightly, as the mass of marshals and secretists covering the main entrance of the grand templum spotted us.

No more hiding.

"Fire at will, Harlon. Let's see how many we can take with us."

Massing forward, the agents of our enemy had begun bellowing challenges, but at least one of them clearly knew an armoured support chair was a warning sign. They began firing. Riot guns boomed in the mailed fists of Interior Cases officers, and the lasguns and pistols of the secretists quickly joined them.

"Get down!" I transponded and began to let rip with my psy-cannon. My shots ripped through the front rank of riot marshals at a distance of twenty-five metres, bursting their armour and sending them sprawling. I did not slow my pace. Shots struck my chair's front and bounced off. Belknap had sensibly ducked in behind me, using my chair as a shield.

Nayl to the left of me hit the deck, rolled and came up on his knees as gunfire ripped over him and pummelled the sides of the Magistratum transporters parked behind us. He began to fire, raking with his plasma rifle, simultaneously pumping grenades from the under-barrel launcher.

Mayhem swept across the Templum Square in front of the great church. A ferocious ripple of explosions from Nayl's launcher raised fireballs across the broken flagstones and up the entrance steps, sending bodies flailing into the air. His plasma bolts licked like daggers of sunlight, blowing men apart or ripping through them.

Sirens began to sound. Pausing only to reload his launcher from the pack on his hip, Nayl was up again, running and firing.

Boiling smoke now swathed the main entrance. The air was full of gunfire and confused yelling. I skimmed forward over tangled, crumpled bodies.

"Carl!" I voxed.

There was no answer. Somewhere off to my left, Nayl was exchanging a furious barrage of shots with the wrong-footed enemy. I heard the bang of shotguns, the crack of las-weapons, a melody syncopated by the fierce, squealing shriek of his plasma rifle.

Straight ahead of me, two weapon-servitors bounded out of the thick, black smoke raised by Nayl's munitions. They were huge, chromed cannon-hounds, unslipped and ready to kill. Their pink recognition beams found my bulky shape at once.

+Belknap! Down!+

The medicae ducked behind my chair, not so much because I had told him to but because I had layered my will into the telepathic burst, forcing him to drop. The gunpods on the servitors' backs began to fire, drizzling me with murderous fire from their four lasrifles.

Fortunately, the adepts of the Guild Mechanicus, who had manufactured my support chair at Gregor Eisenhorn's personal request, had made it with the same care they used for main line battletanks and striding war titans.

The devastating onslaught spattered off my housing like rain. The cannon-hounds hesitated, bemused. I knew my chair would not easily withstand a second full-on salvo.

I reached out with my psy and lifted one of the hounds off its feet, activating its gunpods as I swung it around to face its companion. Crippled by the first blizzard of las-bolts, the other hound instinctively returned fire, and the two weapon-servitors destroyed each other in a searing exchange of close range shots.

I let the mined servitor go and it crashed to the ground, parts of its mechanism spilling out and scattering across the flagstones. Its companion had been fused into a crater by the ferocity of fire.

I moved forward again. A secretist I had not seen came out of the whirling smoke to my left, aiming a longlas.

Behind me, Belknap raised his lascarbine out of his practice bag and shot the man three times through the torso, slamming him onto his back.

"Thank you," I said. "But I could have covered it."

"Just trying to be useful." Belknap replied.

The suspensor beam shafted in through the open shutter and the lexicon, a tiny dark sphere, descended into the old sacristy. The suspensor rods below in the middle of the dais crackled as they activated and took the weight of it, lowering it gently until it sat at waist height in the middle of the chamber.

The beam from above snapped off, and the lifter pulled away. The shutter gradually began to lock back in place.

The Diadochoi stepped towards the slowly revolving lexicon held in the beam of light. The thirteen cipherists closed around him.

"The first Enunciation will now begin," the Diadochoi said. "Jader, take your seat."

Trice nodded humbly and backed away towards the seating.

"Time?" he asked.

"Eight-oh-two," replied Revoke.

"Send the signal to the axial temples. Tell the clerics to begin enunciating the anonymic wafers."

"Signal is sent." Revoke replied. Trice sat down in the front row of the dais seating. Beside him, Revoke took a seat and then immediately got to his feet again, his hand to his forehead.

"Toros?"

"An alert, sir. Trouble at the main entrance of the templum. And..."

"What?" Trice hissed.

"Unleashed psychic power. Very strong, very urgent. I can taste him. It's Ravenor."

Trice went pale. "Go," he breathed. "Go now. And kill him, for damnation's sake!"

Revoke hurried down off the dais, out of the sacristy and began to sprint down the cloister towards the grand templum.

Behind the grand templum, Kys ceased fire. Faced by her brutal assault, the five marshals and three secretists she had encountered had tried to fall back into cover around the north porch so they might cut her down while she was still in the open. But she had nudged out with her telekinesis and frozen them all in their tracks: startled, immobile targets. The yard was now littered with their bodies.

Kys looked back at Unwerth. The barrel of the machine pistol he had tied to his hands was smoking. He had not hesitated when the shooting began.

"Nice work," she said.

"I try my part, as it goes."

Ahead of them around the curve of the grand templum and the outcrop of the north porch, the back of the old sacristy was lit up by floodlights. Pulling away from the domed roof, a brightly lit lifter was beginning to climb up into the night sky.

"I think we're missing the main event," Kys said. "Follow me."

"I would, mamzel, excepting for that discomforting sound."

Patience Kys came to a halt and looked around. A figure stood just inside the doorway of the north porch, urgently spinning a psyber lure around himself.

High above them, a furious clinking rang out of the night: the beating of steel wings. Called out of the air, from every building in the formal, the Unkindness formed into a seething ball overhead, glittering and flashing in the floodlights.

"Not again." Unwerth stammered.

"Sholto. Get behind me," said Patience Kys. "Get behind me now."

Forming themselves into a slender arrowhead, the sheen birds banked upwards, then dipped and streamed down to shred them both.

Wounded in the thigh, limping, Harlon Nayl swung around and cut down two more secretists with his plasma rifle. He could see the main entrance of the grand templum, swathed in smoke, most of which he had created. But he no longer had sight of either Ravenor or Belknap.

The Templum Square looked like a battlefield, like the streets of a city where civil war had raged. The fury of his one-man gun battle with the marshals and secretists had sent panic cascading through the already jumpy crowds at the edge of the square. A full-scale riot had broken out along the approach roads and boulevards. Nayl knew he had to get to the old sacristy. He limped forward, ignoring the distant echoes of gunfire and screaming issuing from the darkness and the smoke.

Then something more solid came out of the smoke and kicked him in the face. Nayl went down on his hands and knees and lost his grip on the plasma rifle.

Boneheart threw a killing punch down at Nayl's spine, but Nayl rolled onto his back, his mouth bleeding, and captured the punch in the cup of his hands. Still on his back, he tightened his grip like a vice and fractured the hand bones and fingers in Boneheart's fist.

Boneheart screamed in pain and staggered away, clutching his hand. Kicking himself back onto his feet, Nayl drew his Hostec autos and pumped eight shots through Boneheart's body.

The secretist juddered and fell. A pistol in each hand, Nayl circled, checking for other surprises. There was no one in sight, no one alive, anyway. So why did he feel like—

A blade struck out of nowhere, so hard and fast Nayl had barely time to react. He lurched backwards and the blade sliced off the muzzles of both his weapons.

He tossed the ruined guns aside and hunched in low, turning, wary. Monicker, a scarcely-visible phantom in the smoky air, danced around him and stabbed with her serrated blade. Nayl felt the rip gouge his back, right through his armoured bodyglove.

Desperately, he turned around, but the phantom had already vanished.

Keeping behind the big man, always behind him, Monicker closed for the kill.

With Belknap behind me, I hovered into the nave of the grand templum. It was an empty and silent space, in shocking contrast to the violent night outside.

"This way," I said to Belknap.

A man in a grey suit ran in through the west entrance ahead of us. He had stale yellow eyes, like dying suns. He slowed down and began to pace towards us.

"Imperial Inquisition!" I announced. "Surrender now."

"I know who you are," he said.

I knew who he was too. He wrenched out with his mind and slammed me backwards. Belknap tried to shoot him, but the yellow-eyed man merely nodded and tossed the good doctor twenty

metres backwards through the air. Belknap cracked a pew as he landed. He rolled onto the floor, unconscious.

+Let's go!+ I sent, and went fleshless. Revoke met me head on, forming a barbed, red spectral form that tasted of sour wine and ripped right through my mental shields. I foundered back, as exposed as the inner flesh of a seafood delicacy broken from its shell at a supper table.

Aware of the stench of my own mental wounds, I reinforced my armour and met Revoke again, lancing skewers of psy-force into his red mind form. They transfixed him like quills.

He howled.

The aftershock rattled the wooden pews of the grand templum and blew out several windows. I pushed the skewers deeper, becoming an urchin-form laden with metre-long spines. Revoke screamed again, and broke away, shattering the spines like glass. He circled into the upper limits of the grand templum taking the form of something vaguely bat-winged whose distressing shape was described by more than four dimensions. It extruded long, fibrous tentacles that lashed me, stripping away my perfunctory shielding, and savaged the edges of my mind. In desperate defence, I made my fleshless form blade-sharp and drove upwards through the flailing tentacles, severing some, until I punctured the wet core inside the bat-shape.

Shuddering, Revoke's body fell to its knees. Blood drizzled out of his eyes and nose. He tightened his mind, folding the alien bat form up into a tiny red dot, then unfolding the dot as a complex geometric form. The shape began to self-repeat and fill the air with copies of itself at an exponential rate. The multiplying geometric forms smelled of burnt blood and old bones.

I tried to turn, seeking space to fight back. They were all around me.

There was a violent snap which felt like the entire planet had been pulled out of gravity like a fruit being plucked off a bough. The foul geometric forms, hundreds of them now, rushed in together, fitting tightly against one another like the teeth of a fractal dragon, catching my mind between them. This was constriction like nothing I had ever known. Not biting, but crushing, being caught between complex shapes that fitted against each other so perfectly that there was no space between them for anything else to exist.

I was being crushed into nothing, compressed so tightly that the only place I could go was outside reality to my doom.

I tried to break free. I couldn't. I couldn't.

Kara, Carl and Plyton rushed the north door of the old sacristy and crouched in the shadows. From their point of concealment they could see the newly-built dais and the hooded cipherists gathered around the slowly turning sphere hanging in the column of light.

"We should—" Plyton began.

"Wait!" Carl cried. "Terra's sake! That's Governor Barazan!"

The Diadochoi reached his hands into the light and opened the metal leaves of the lexicon. He began to read, announcing the unannouncable.

Plaster fell from the ceiling. Lightning flared in the sky above. The Diadochoi enunciated the first few syllables of creation.

Fed with power, the resonating obelisks began to shine. With a numbing rush, ethereal white light flared out of the sacristy and soared in solid bands down the axes of the city. Every single one of the nine hundred and ninety-nine churches was lit up by the beams. The clerics had been halfway through reading out the anonymic wafers. Now they continued, as burning light suffused their congregations with auras of flame.

In the radiance of the old sacristy, the Diadochoi played his hands over the lexicon, declaiming the un-words of power, the anti-language that was Enuncia.

He paused and reached up to take off his public guise. The mask of Oska Ludolf Barazan flopped down to the floor of the dais.

The burned, scarred, true face of the Diadochoi was revealed, a vile mass of seared tissue, raw flesh and lipless teeth.

He fanned his hands out, fluttering the spinning metal pages of the lexicon again and read out the words so revealed.

A halo surrounded him. Piece by piece, his body was restored, flesh reknitting and recreating, gloving his hands in skin, sweeping across his raw skull to resculpt a face. Meat, skin, hair, all reformed, bright and new.

“Oh Holy Throne!” Kara cried.

“What?” asked Plyton. “What is it?”

“It’s Molotch,” said Carl Thonius. “It’s Zygmunt bastard Molotch.”

EIGHT

Kara and Thonius ran forward into the sacristy, into the almost blinding radiance. Plyton was right behind them.

Their first shots cut down the secretists who tried to prevent them from reaching the dais. Some of the seated guests reacted in alarm, but most were too entranced by the cosmic wonder unfolding at the centre of the stage.

Carl was first on the platform, his Hecuter blazed into the light. Two of the officiating cipherists went down, bright red blood leaking from their bodies across the white platform. The radiant light flickered for a second and the lexicon vibrated, as if disturbed.

Molotch turned, the sudden displeasure on his face changing to a smile as he recognised Carl, and Kara behind him.

Hands still playing the pages of the lexicon, he formed new un-words that first froze and then evaporated the shots from Carl's pistol and Kara's bolter in mid-air before they could reach him.

Then he spoke another un-word.

The force of it hit them like a wrecking ball. Plyton was thrown right back off the dais. Kara, hurled into the air, crashed into the raised seating, breaking both it and herself. She felt ribs and collarbone go before pain blacked her out and left her sprawled amongst the broken wreckage of the seats.

Carl had taken the full force of the un-word. His coat and most of his clothing was shredded off, his skin blistered. His back had hit the platform so hard that it had dented under him. It felt as if all his internal organs had been pulped and his mind set on fire.

Carl Thonius screamed, partly in pain, but mostly in helpless fury.

They had left it too late. Molotch was now far too powerful for any of them to stop.

The Unkindness sliced in and Patience Kys met it with a laspistol in each hand and four kineblades orbiting her lean figure. Her telekinetic gifts had never been tested by such a huge and complex threat before, but she didn't falter. The guns began firing, flicking from target to target between shots. Exploded, smoking sheen birds fell out of the rushing formation. The four kineblades swept into the oncoming flock like surface-to-air missiles. She drove each one independently, slicing them through individual birds and immediately on into the next.

She also hit the birds themselves with her telekinesis. She caused collisions, impacts that sheered wings off, even hammered some sheen birds beak-first into their neighbours like iron nails.

In seconds, before the Unkindness had even reached her, hundreds of their broken chrome forms littered the flagstones.

But there were too many, too many even for her formidable talents. Suddenly they were all around her, and she was pushing the swirling mass away from her in every direction as she continued to shoot, and stab with her blades.

Rips began to appear all over her arms and legs. She heard Unwerth, right behind her, cry out in pain as part of the whirling metal blur ripped into his arm. Then another sheen bird struck his forehead square on and dropped him to the ground, barely conscious.

Concentrating hard, Kys howled out in frustration. She was killing a dozen birds every second, but it just wasn't enough. She felt a metal flight feather rip across her temple, a beak tear one knuckle, a fluttering chrome edge slice through her left shoulder.

Still she fought on, blasting point blank and sewing her kineblades through the dense storm of bodies.

Then she staggered backwards as a bird got past her and hit her in the face. Blood poured down her left cheek. With a desperate grunt, she flared out her telekinesis and billowed the entire flock away from her for a second's respite.

But only for a second. It immediately rushed back. She no longer had the strength to drive it away.

The phantom with the knife put another deep cut into Nayl's body and he hollered in pain. He was fast for a man of his size, but this half-there daemon was a great deal more nimble.

The only thing Nayl had going for him was experience.

He couldn't see his opponent, not well enough to fight back effectively.

So he didn't try. He closed his eyes. And there she was.

He could smell a sweet, female scent that showed him her position as clearly as if he'd seen her.

Monicker lunged in, her blade about to rip into Nayl's liver. A fist hit her instead.

She fell, shocked, hurt, suddenly frantic. He was on her, pinning her with his weight.

Nayl looking down at the transparent shape he held, pressed to the ground beneath him.

"What are you?" he growled.

For a moment, Monicker flashed like a mirror and was him, another Nayl looking back at himself. That usually worked. That usually disorientated an opponent quite long enough for her to finish her wetwork.

Nayl looked at himself.

"Fancy that," he said, and broke her neck.

Secretist Foelon, spinning his psyber lure, stalked across the square towards the swirling ball of the Unkindness, grounded like a dust-devil over the flagstones. The shooting from inside the flock had stopped. The targets were undoubtedly dead by now.

Foelon felt his spinning lure twitch oddly. It abruptly began to ignore the laws of centrifugal physics. Dragging hard against his struggling arm, it lashed backwards in a whip crack and wrapped five times around his throat.

Foelon gagged out a terrified gasp. The lure pulled tight, so tight it lifted the secretist off the ground and lynched him in mid air.

The Unkindness burst apart, the mass of it exploding away in all directions from the central focus, spilling out across the square, dissipating.

It left in its wake thousands of dead or damaged sheen birds, carpeting the flagstones like autumn leaves. And Patience Kys, still standing, her clothes ragged, her flesh covered in scratches and cuts.

She bolstered her spent laspistols, mind-called her now-buckled kineblades back to her, and looked up at the hanged man dangling in the air.

Kys turned her back on Foelon and let him fall to the ground. She bent down beside Unwerth. He was groggy and covered in cuts himself.

"We've got to move," she said. He nodded and got up.

Side by side, they struggled round to the old sacristy. It was lit up, not so much by the massive floodlight arrays, but by the huge beams of white-light radiance that poured out of it and blazed away along the axial strands of the city.

They hobbled to the doorway. Plyton lay on the threshold, badly knocked about.

“What happened?” Kys yelled over the hurricane roar of the light.

“Kara and Thonius are inside.” Plyton gasped. “But the man hurt us all bad. I fell. I managed to crawl here.”

“What’s going on in there?”

“Some kind of ritual.” Plyton yelled back. “So bright. So much power...”

“We’ve got to get in!” Kys said.

“That isn’t permissive.” Unwerth shouted to her. He’d already tried to walk into the light flaring out of the doorway, but it was like a solid barrier.

Kys pushed her hands against it, felt the light crackle and pulse like a telekinetic field.

There was no way in.

Carl tried to move, tried to rise. It felt as if the howling light was pushing him down into the decking of the dais. He fought against it, drawing mental strength from his long hatred of Zygmont Molotch and the shock of seeing the bastard alive.

He sat up.

His hands still flitting over the lexicon’s metal pages, Molotch looked round as he noticed Carl stir. He whispered an un-word, almost as if he were blowing Thonius an affectionate kiss.

Carl fell backwards, screaming. It felt as if his entrails had been ripped out.

Molotch returned to his enunciation.

Up in the seating, Culzean suddenly jumped up.

“Diadochoi! Diadochoi!” he yelled, trying to make himself heard over the monumental clamour.

“Take your seat!” Trice yelled, getting up too. “How dare you disrupt the—”

“Look! Look, you fool!” Culzean bellowed back in his face. “Look!”

Carl Thonius had risen to his feet. A filthy red light throbbed out of him, backlighting his skin and making silhouettes of his bones. In the ethereal brilliance of the sacristy, he was like a drop of blood in a pail of milk.

He raised his right arm and the flesh crisped away like burning paper, exposing the blackened arm bones and the long fingers that sprouted into talons.

“That’s Slyte.” Culzean stammered. “In the name of darkness, that’s Slyte!”

NINE

Molotch saw what faced him. Disbelief twisted his face. He opened his mouth and blasted the glowing red figure with a stream of Enuncia so violent it made the dais shake.

Carl withstood it and his own dark, red light seemed to grow stronger as if he was drinking the power in. He moved forward, his black talons rising.

The remaining cipherists broke and fled, except for one who was too slow. Carl's black bone-claws shredded him and spattered the white staging with wide patterns of blood.

Molotch tried a final un-word, but Carl clawed at him. Molotch staggered back across the dais, yowling, the left side of his face torn off. Carl lashed round and ripped his claws through the spinning metal pages of the lexicon, tearing them away. Metal sheets shivered into the air, tumbled out of the suspensor beams, and fluttered onto the deck. Ripped and incomplete, the lexicon itself toppled off its support and crashed to the deck.

The storm of noise grew louder. An infernal red quality now began to tinge the white radiance, as if that one drop of blood was staining the milk pink.

Tears streaming down his face, Jader Trice ran forward and tried to gather up the torn and buckled pieces of the lexicon. They burned his hands. He looked up.

Carl bent down over him and gently placed his black, bone-hand on the top of Trice's head, like a temple deacon administering a benediction.

Jader Trice rotted away into a dry, mummified husk, then that too disintegrated, and scattered away as dust on the wind.

Carl turned and moved towards the dignitaries in the seating sections. Most were fleeing for their lives, jumping over the back of the dais.

"Ley!" Culzean cried. "Cover us now!"

Leyla Slade pulled out her custom handgun and fired six times, not at the oncoming daemon, but at the dais stage in front of it. As each specialised bullet impacted, there was a burst of green vapour.

The hooktors bubbled into being. Six of them, each one twice the size of a large man, released from their bondage in the painstakingly engraved bullets.

They were slaughter-daemons of Nurgle, mindless warp-forms of immense physical power, each one a noxious, sticky cluster of diseased eyes, bulging from a swollen, panting body sack of reptile flesh and pulsing viscera. The hooktors moved on tripods of long, membranous limbs, like the furled wings of ancient flying lizards. Each limb culminated in a huge, hooked toenail, a hoof-claw as heavy and grey as stone.

They made their terrible gibbering. The wretched, faecal stink of them filled the air. Thumping forward on their hideous toenails, they attacked Carl with unthinking frenzy.

Culzean and Slade together grabbed hold of the gravely disfigured Diadochoi.

"Time to go, lord!" Culzean yelled. "The hooktors will hold it off long enough for us to make our escape!"

The Diadochoi mumbled out some mangled words, blood pouring from his ripped face.

"No arguments now." Culzean cried. They manhandled the Diadochoi off the dais.

Behind them, Carl and the hooktors tore each other apart.

When Harlon Nayl limped into the grand templum, the first thing he saw was my support chair, motionless, halfway down the nave. Facing it, ten metres away, knelt a dark-haired secretist, blood running from his nose and the corners of his staring, stale-yellow eyes.

Nayl knew what this was. He could feel the queasy trembling in the air around him that told him these two, motionless figures were engaged in a titanic, invisible battle.

As fast as he could move his injured limbs, Nayl ran forward, hoping he could slay the secretist psyker while he was still out of his skin and physically vulnerable. The only weapon Nayl had was Monicker's serrated dagger.

Revoke's psy-control was staggering. He had left a sliver of his mind aware of his surroundings, to protect it from harm. He saw Nayl coming forward, and barked an un-word that punched Nayl in the stomach and dropped him to the ground.

But not before Nayl had hurled the dagger.

It stuck through Revoke's right shoulder. Revoke yelped in pain and his grip on me slipped. I felt the clenching geometric forms loosen ever so slightly as Revoke fought to retain control and grind me to oblivion.

All of my mind's power was focused on the one, stark desire to pull free. As Revoke's hold slackened, that single impulse squirted out and expressed itself physically instead. For a moment, my entire will channelled itself into the motivator systems of my chair.

My armoured chair slammed down the nave, crunching straight into Revoke's kneeling body and dragging it along. Revoke was still draped across the front of my chair when it struck the massive bronze altar at the end of the nave at close on forty kilometres an hour.

My chair rebounded, shivering backwards. Revoke's limp, broken corpse tumbled off onto the flagstones.

I fought to regain my wits. I was hurt, exhausted, my mind trembling from the agonies of the fight.

Back down the nave, Nayl was helping the unsteady Belknap to his feet. I powered out through the west entrance and on towards the old sacristy.

It was blazing with light, but that light was now stained with red, and the stain was spreading along the sizzling axial beams blasting out across the city. Flames licked at the shattered windows, and sections of the dome, crackling and ablaze, were falling in.

Ahead of me I saw Kys, Plyton and Unwerth.

"There's no way in!" Kys yelled at me.

There had to be.

Kara blinked and looked up. The energised wind was shrieking around the buckled dais, and flames were gusting up the sacristy walls, reducing the ancient, precious frescoes of the caving dome to billowing particles of glowing ash.

The light was red, not just from the flames, but from the energy radiating from the centre of the platform. What had been white and pure was now crimson and thick.

She tried to move, but her body was too badly hurt. Bones broken, internal organs flaring with pain.

"Oh, God-Emp — ahh! God-Emperor!" she gasped out. She turned her head and saw the splattered gore and torn flesh of hook-nailed daemon-things covering the dais. What the hell had happened while she had been—

Carl stood over her. Kara screamed.

It wasn't Carl. It was a red luminosity wearing his body like a robe, lighting his skin from within, exposing his skeleton like a medical scan. His right arm was denuded to the blackened bones, right up to the place where the *Hinterlight's* medicae had surgically reattached it.

“Oh Throne! Oh Holy Throne!” she cried, terrified. The glowing daemon began to reach its taloned hand out towards her.

“Please, Carl! Please, don’t!” she wailed.

The hand hesitated. The red glow inside Carl Thonius diminished for a moment. “Kara?” he said, his voice sounding like it was coming from a long way off. “Oh, Kara, the stuff I know. I can see into your mind. You’re afraid of me. You’re afraid I’m going to kill you...”

Carl’s eyelids fluttered. Shock and pain crossed his face. “No, no... you’re dying already! I can see it, that awful lump in your skull. Oh, Kara, no! Not you! Not like that!”

Suddenly, the fierce red glow swelled inside him again. His voice became a rasping growl. “Let me make it better, Kara. Let me finish it quickly.”

The black talons swept towards her face.

Outside, I saw the light change. It swirled darker, as if gallons of red ink or blood was mixing into it. The axial beams were now almost crimson. I felt the shudder of an enormous psychic force burst inside the collapsing sacristy.

“Back!” I cried. “Get back all of you! *Do it!*”

The ground shook, as if an earthquake was striking. The immense light inside the sacristy went out, leaving nothing but the swirling fire. Every floodlight around the square blew apart in sprays of glass, and the windows of all the buildings around the grand templum shattered.

The dome of the sacristy ruptured and fell. Flames belched out of the doorways and window-holes. The force of the eruption threw my companions into the air and flung my chair backwards.

Crackling like forked lightning, the disconnected axial beams boiled out across the city of Petropolis. The nine hundred and ninety-nine temples and churches along Theodor Cadizky’s fearful lines of godless symmetry detonated like bombs, destroying many buildings around them. Firestorms engulfed entire hab blocks and stacks. At the governor’s palace, the monumental energy feedback incinerated the Encompass Room and engulfed the uppermost twenty floors of the tower in a gigantic fireball.

It blazed like the raw summit of an angry volcano, hurling white flames up into the blackness of the sky.

TEN

Thousands died that night. Thousands of people, and some of them were innocent Imperial citizens, victims caught in the horror and the devastation. To most inhabitants of Eustis Majoris, it was an infamous disaster, a night of cataclysm. Most histories record it that way too.

Certainly the planet was plunged into civil chaos. Months of rioting and unrest followed, and spread throughout a subsector terrified that Imperial rule had been overturned. It led to civil wars, to famines, to plagues. Two decades later, the effects were still being felt.

I content myself with the knowledge that, even at so great a cost, it was a small price to pay. I know what might have been if that cabal of madmen and their ruthless secret keepers had managed to complete their pernicious ritual to acquire the power they craved.

Do not presume this means I am happy about the outcome. I deplore the destruction and the deaths. I console myself with the knowledge that every planet in the Imperium would have suffered the same or worse had Zygmunt Molotch achieved his apotheosis.

Martial law was imposed on Eustis Majoris. It took a year to return Petropolis to a state resembling order. In that time, the ordos intervened, led by my Lord Rorken himself. They purged, they cleaned, they excised the last taints of Jader Trice's corruption wherever it could be traced. Thousands more died, executed for heresy or complicity to that offence. Subsector governance was switched to Caxton for two terms, until a new lord governor subsector was found and elected under the supervision of the Inquisition.

Even before the Inquisitorial intervention arrived and took charge of the wounded world, I had departed, taking my battered and wounded warriors with me. There was a final business to be dealt with, one that could not wait. Molotch, by Culzean's manipulative contrivance, had fled Eustis Majoris. We would not rest until we had hunted him down and destroyed him once and for all.

Medicae Belknap, perhaps the staunchest, truest soul I have ever met, urged me to stay and employ my influence and authority to restore control to the ravaged city. But that is not my area of expertise, and we were the only ones ready and able enough to begin an immediate pursuit of Molotch while he could still be traced. I would not allow him to remain free, or escape me once again. He had done that too many times already.

We left Eustis Majoris the day after the destruction of the sacristy, travelling aboard Master Unwerth's *Arethusa*.

Nayl, Patience and Unwerth himself were recovering from their injuries. Maud Plyton came with us, seconded to my service. I was happy to have her.

Zael remained in a coma. We transferred him to life support aboard the *Arethusa*. Frauka seldom left his side.

The one miracle in it all, of course, was Kara and Carl. We found them unconscious in the burning ruins of the old sacristy, with barely a scratch on either of them.

Somehow, perhaps by the divine providence of the God-Emperor himself, they had been spared in that final moment of catastrophe, as the ritual of Enunciation tore itself apart.

SOON

Aboard the Arethusa, in warp transit, 404.M41

“It’s strange,” said Belknap.

“Good, though?”

The medicae nodded. “Of course. But I’ve never seen anything like it. The mass is just shrinking. Disappearing. Look, I’m going to the lab to check these results. Perhaps there’s a fault with Unwerth’s rickety old medical systems.”

“I hope not,” said Kara, sitting up on the infirmary cot.

“So do I,” he replied. “I’ll be back in five minutes.”

“I’m glad you came with us,” Kara said.

He looked back at her. “You’re my patient,” he said. “I told you that I’d stay with you as long as you needed me.”

“Right,” she shrugged.

Belknap smiled and coughed. “What I meant to say was... I’m glad I came with you too.”

He left the infirmary. Kara lay back on the cot, breathed deeply, and closed her eyes.

“Kara?”

She sat up with a start. Carl stood beside her bed.

“Please...” she began.

“Kara.” His eyes were wide and pleading. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Please, Carl,” she repeated. “I have to tell Gideon. I must. I really must.”

He reached out his hands, imploring. She shrank back, especially from the right hand.

“Please, Kara,” he begged. “If you tell Ravenor, it’ll all be over. I need more time, just a little more time. I can master this, understand it, learn to control it.”

“No, Carl—”

“Please, Kara! I’m not what you think I am! Would a warp daemon have fought against Molotch and destroyed his ritual? Would an evil man have saved you? Would an evil man have cured you?”

He touched the side of her head with the fingers of his right hand. She closed her eyes and shuddered.

“I made you better.” Carl Thonius whispered. “All I want is for you to help me to get better too. It’s not a lot to ask.”

He took his hand away and smiled. “There. I see it. You won’t tell. I know you won’t. You won’t tell them about...” his voice trailed off.

“The stuff you know,” whispered Kara Swole.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. Well known for his comic work, he has written everything from the *Mr. Men* to the *X-Men* in the last decade, and received particular acclaim for his five year run on *The Legion* for *DC Comics*. He is currently writing *Majestic* for *Wildstorm*, and *Sinister Dexter* and *The VCs* for *2000 AD*. His work for the Black Library includes the popular strips *Lone Wolves*, *Titan* and *Darkblade*, the best-selling *Gaunt's Ghosts* novels, and the acclaimed *Inquisitor Eisenhorn* trilogy.

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