



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000



VAULTS OF TERRA

# THE CARRION THRONE

CHRIS WRAIGHT



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VAULTS OF TERRA  
**THE CARRION  
THRONE**



CHRIS WRAIGHT



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## WARHAMMER 40,000

**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 Astra Militarum 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.**





## CHAPTER ONE

Say nothing, listen with utmost care,' he said. 'You understand me. You are in danger – you know this. You can see the tools against the far wall. But do not look at them. Look at me.'

The speaker held the man's staring eyes with his own, which were deep grey and did not blink.

'I brought you here following testimony from those who know you,' he said. 'They came to me, and I am bound to listen. Their words have been recorded. You can see them on the tabletop, those volumes there. No, do not look at them either. Look at me. You are afraid. If you let it turn your mind, it will be the end of you, so I will ask you to remember that you are a human being, a master of your passions. When I ask you a question, you will need to answer it, and if you do not speak the truth, I will know. The truth is all I desire. You have one chance left, so hold on to it. Hold on to it. Clutch it. Never deviate from it. Do you understand what I am telling you?'

The man before him tried to do as he was bid. He tried to hold his interrogator's gaze, to keep his hands from shaking uncontrollably, and that was difficult. He looked ill, he stank. Two days in a cell, listening to the screams filtering up from the levels below, would do that to you.

He couldn't reply. His scab-latticed lips twitched, but the words would not come. He shivered, twitching, fingers flexing, unable to do what was asked of him.

His interrogator waited. He was used to waiting. He had overseen a thousand sessions on a hundred worlds, so giving this one a little more time would serve well enough. He sat back in his fine orlwood chair, pressed his hands together and rested his chin on the apex of his armoured fingers.

'Do you understand me?' he asked again.

The man before him tried to answer again. His face was ashen, just like all lowborn faces on Terra – Throneworld-grey, the pallor of a life lived under the unbroken curtain of tox-clouds.

'I...' he tried. 'I...'

The questioner waited. A thick robe hung from his armoured shoulders, lined with silver death's heads at the hem. His hair was slicked back from a hard-cut face, waxed to a high sheen. His nose was hooked, his jawline sharp. Something faintly reptilian lingered over those features, something dry, patient and unbreaking.

Over his chest lay the only formal badge of his office – a skull-form rosette of the Ordo Hereticus, fashioned from iron and pinned to the trim of the cloak. It was a little thing, a trifle, barely larger than the heart stone jewel of an amulet, but in that rosette lay dread, hard-earned over lifetimes.

The bound man could not drag his gaze away from it, try as he might. It was that, more than the

instruments which hung in their shackles on the rust-flecked wall, more than the odour of old blood which rose from the steel floor, more than the scratch-marked synthleather bonds, that held him tightly in his metal chair.

The inquisitor leaned forwards, letting polished gauntlets drop to his lap. He reached down to the belt at his waist and withdrew a long-barrelled revolver. The grip was inlaid ivory, the chamber adorned with a rippling serpent motif. He idly swung the cylinder out, observed the rounds nestled within, then clicked the chamber back into place. He pressed the tip of the muzzle against his subject's temple, observing a minute flinch as the cool steel rested against warm flesh.

'I do not wish to use this,' the inquisitor told him, softly. 'I do not wish to visit any further harm upon you. Why should I? The Emperor's realm, infinite as it is, requires service. You are young, you are in passable health. You can serve, if you live. One more pair of hands. Such is the greatest glory of the Imperium – the toil of uncountable pairs of hands.'

The man was shaking now, a thin line of drool gathering at the corner of his mouth.

'And I would not waste my ammunition, by choice,' the inquisitor went on. 'One bullet alone is worth more than you will ever accumulate. The shells are manufactured on Luna by expert hands, adept at uncovering and preserving the things of another age, and they know the value of their art. This is Sanguine, and none but two of its kind were ever made. The twin, Saturnine, has been lost for a thousand years, and has most likely been un-made. And so, consider – would I prefer to use it on you, and cause this priceless thing some small harm, or would I rather that you lived and told me all you know, and allowed me to put it back in its holster?'

The man didn't try to look at the gun. He couldn't meet the gaze of the inquisitor, and so stared in panic at the rosette, blinking away tears, trying to control his shivering.

'I... told you...' he started.

The inquisitor nodded, encouragingly. 'Yes, you did. You told me of the False Angel. I thought then that we might get to the truth, so I let you talk. Then your fear made you dumb, and we were forced to start again. Perhaps everything you have told me was a lie. See now, I am used to those. In my every waking hour I hear a lie from a different pair of lips. Lies are to me like teardrops – transparent and short-lived. If you lie to me again, I will perceive it, and Sanguine will serve you. So speak. Speak now.'

The man seemed to crumple then, as if a long-maintained conflict within him had broken. He slumped in his bonds, and his bloodshot eyes drifted away from the rosette.

'I made an... error,' he murmured, haltingly. 'You know it. You knew from the start. A mistake.' He looked up, briefly defiant. 'A mistake! See, how was I to know? They spoke of the things that priests speak of. I was confused, in my mind.' Once the words started to come, they spilled out fast, one after another, propelled by fear. 'It is hard, you know? To live, to... *carry on living*. And then someone comes and tells you that there's another way. There'll be rations – better than we have now. More hab-units, given to those that need them. And they'll stop the killings, down in the underhive. They'll send arbitrators down there, and they'll stop the ones that hunt us. You know that we're hunted? Of course you do. They find the bodies all the time, and no one does anything – they never have. So I listened to that, and I knew it was wrong, somehow, and that our only protector dwells on the Throne, but he's here, the Angel, now, and he listens, and I go to listen to what his preachers tell us. And if they gave us instructions to store supplies or carry weapons, then I did it because I wanted to believe. And I did. Throne save me, but I did.'

‘Slower,’ warned the inquisitor, dragging the muzzle of his revolver down the man’s cheek and placing it closer to his lips. ‘Order your thoughts. I have seen the results of your work. I have seen corpses with terrible things done to them. I have seen blood on the walls, smeared in mockery of holy sigils. These are not the work of cutpurses. They are the work of heresy.’

‘No!’ The eyes went wide again with terrible fear. ‘You have it wrong!’

‘Most strange, how many who come here say that.’

‘It is true, lord, *true*. I know nothing of these... crimes, only that he told us we must arm against the dark, for no one else—’

‘Does anything. But now someone is doing something. I am doing something. I would like to do more. I would like to root this out.’

‘Yes, yes, you must root it out.’

‘Where do you meet?’

‘Malliax.’

‘You have told me this already. You know what I need. The place. The place where you went to hear these things.’

‘I do not...’ The fear returned. ‘I do not know the name. I cannot take you there.’

The inquisitor’s grey eyes narrowed by a fraction. His finger, finely armoured in dark lacquered plate, slipped away from the trigger, but he kept the barrel pressed against the man’s chin. For a long time the two of them looked at one another, one desperate, the other pensive.

‘See, now I believe you,’ the inquisitor said at last, withdrawing the gun and slipping the safety catch on.

The man took a sucked-in breath – until then, he had hardly dared to. He started to sweat again, and his trembling grew worse.

‘It’s true!’ he blurted, his voice cracking from fear. ‘It is true – I can’t take you there.’

The inquisitor sat back. ‘I know it,’ he said, easing the pistol back into its soft real-leather holster. ‘You are not foolish enough to lie to me. I could break you apart, here, now, and you could tell me no more than you have already.’ He flickered a dry smile. ‘Consider yourself fortunate you met me this day, rather than when I was a younger man. Then, I would have rendered you down to your elements to seek what you hide, just to be sure. Not now. I know when there is nothing left to find.’

The man did not relax. A different fear entered his eyes, one of new cruelty – a deception, one of the thousand that the agents of the Holy Inquisition knew and practised. There was no way out for him now – once a mortal man entered the black fortresses, that was the end. All knew that. Everyone.

‘I would tell you,’ he stammered, breaking down into tears, ‘if I could.’

The inquisitor rose from his chair, and his robes whispered around his ornate boots. Fine ceramite armour pieces slid across his body as he moved, each one as black as obsidian, each one edged with a vein of silver. His movements were precise, feline, barely audible despite the power feeds coiled tight inside every segment.

‘Yes, yes,’ he said.

‘Please,’ sobbed the man, slack in his bonds. ‘I would tell you.’

The inquisitor reached for the table on which the testimony parchment had been piled, and pressed a command bead. He looked over the scrolls absently – heaps of yellowed, scaly hides bearing the blood-brown scrawl of scholarly transcription, each one sealed with his own personal sigil of authority.

‘That is all I asked you,’ the inquisitor said, almost to himself. ‘You are free to go. You have done me some service, and you should reflect on that, when you are able, with pride. It is through loyal souls that we are able to do our work.’

The man stared at his interrogator, open-mouthed. Lingering suspicion played across his ravaged features.

The inquisitor glanced over towards him. ‘We’re not monsters. You have nothing more to tell me. If you recall more, you’ll come to me, I’m sure.’

The man began to believe. His eyes started to dart around – at his bonds, at the tools, at the barred door beyond. ‘Do you mean...?’

The inquisitor turned away, moved towards the door. As he approached it, thick iron bars slid from their housings and the armoured portal cracked open. A dull red light bled from the far side, snaking over the dark stone flags of the interrogation room. For a moment, the inquisitor was silhouetted by it, a spectral figure, gaunt and featureless.

‘All we wish for is the truth,’ he said.

Then he moved out into the long corridor beyond. The air was sterile, recycled down through the levels of the Inquisitorial fortress by old, wheezing machines. Black webs of damp caked the flagstones, and the filmy suspensor lumens flickered. An augmetic-encrusted servo-skull hovered down to the inquisitor’s shoulder, bobbing erratically and trailing a thin spinal tail behind it.

‘*Hereticus-minoris*,’ it clicked. ‘*Phylum tertius*. Tut, tut.’

At the end of the corridor, a man waited. He wore the thick-slabbed armour of a storm trooper captain, dun-grey, battle-weathered. His face was similarly seasoned, with a shadow of stubble over a blocked chin. His black hair was cropped close to the scalp, exposing tattooed barcodes and ordo battle-honours.

He bowed. ‘Lord Crowl,’ he said.

‘Something keeps him from talking, Revus,’ the inquisitor said. ‘A greater fear? Maybe loyalty. In either case, it is of interest.’

‘Will you break him?’

‘We learn more by letting him go. Assign a watch, mark his movements until you gain the location. I want him alive until then.’

‘It will be done. And afterwards?’

The inquisitor was already moving, his boots clicking softly on the stone as he made his way towards the next cell. ‘Termination,’ he said. ‘I’ll oversee, so keep it contained – I want to see where this leads.’

‘As you will it.’

The inquisitor hesitated before entering the next cell. The sound of panicked weeping could already be made out through the observation grille in the thick door. ‘But I did not ask you, Revus – how is your sergeant, Hegain? Recovered fully?’

‘Almost. Thank you for asking.’

‘Give him my congratulations.’

‘He will be honoured to have them.’

The servo-skull bobbed impatiently. ‘*Numeroso*. Dally not.’

The inquisitor shot the thing a brief, irritated look, then reached for the armour-lock on the cell door. As he did so, he summoned a ghost-schematic of the next subject’s file, which hovered for a second in

an ocular overlay. Reading it, his lips tightened a fraction.

‘I will need my instruments for this one,’ Inquisitor Erasmus Crowl told Revus, then went inside.

Terra.

Holy Terra, marvel of the galaxy, heart of wonder. No jewel shone more brightly, no canker was more foul. At its nexus met the fears and glories of a species, rammed tight within the spires and the vaults, the pits and the hab-warrens. Spoil-grey, scored and crusted with the contamination and majesty of ten long millennia, a shrine world that glowed with a billion fires, a tomb that clutched its buried souls close. All the planet’s natural beauty had long since been scrubbed from its face, replaced by the layers upon layers of a single, creeping hyper-city. The sprawl blotted out the once-great oceans and the long-hewn forests under suffocating mountains of rockcrete and plasteel, tangled and decaying and renewed and rebuilt until the accretions stretched unbroken from the deepest chasms to the exalted heights.

No part of that world was free of the hand of man. Viewed from space, the planet’s night-shrouded hemisphere glittered with constellations of neon and sulphur, while its sunlit hemisphere gasped in a hot haze of pale grey. Its skies were clogged with voidcraft and lifters, packed with the manufactures and commodities that kept the teeming world from starving itself. With those commodities came living bodies – pilgrims by the million, products of a migration that never ended, bringing souls from across the vastness of space whose only wish was to live long enough to reach the sacred precincts of the Palace itself; to somehow endure the crowds and the hardship and the myriad predators that circled them for just one glimpse, even the smallest, of the golden towers portrayed in the Ecclesiarchy vid-picts, before they died in rapture.

So few made it. Most died on the warp journey, either of old age or through the loss of their ships in the void. Those who reached the solar system waited for years in the processing pens on Luna, then the vast orbital stations within sight of the planet below. It was said that a man could be born, live and die within those cavernous holding centres, all while his documentation worked its way tortuously through the offices of scribes and under-scribes. Often it would be lost, sometimes stolen, a mere speck amid the avalanche of parchment folios that fuelled the administrative machinery of the Imperium’s sclerotic heart.

And yet, those few who by luck or the will of the Emperor made it to the sacred soils of humanity’s birthworld still numbered in the millions, such was the fecundity of the eternal pilgrimage. Like the forgotten tides of Old Earth, the flow waxed and waned, governed by the great festivals of the Ministorum, the feasts of the saints and the Lords of Terra. And of all the sacred days ordained for the masses to partake in, by far the most sacred was the remembrance of the Angel – Sanguinala, the Red Feast, the Festival of the Blessed Sacrifice. On that day, once every solar year, the numbers swelled beyond reason, and the pilgrims crammed like cattle into the feeder stations, clawing at the gates and screaming at the guards to let them in. The most exalted of all, so they said, would be permitted to approach the Eternity Gate itself, to witness the rites of remembrance performed on the site of the Angel’s legendary stand as the feast reached its frenetic climax.

Now Sanguinala was just a week away, and the canyons of Terra’s world-city were already bursting. Every looping thoroughfare and crumbling causeway was swollen with a living carpet of supplicants, chanting the rituals, swaying in unison, moving with the inexorable purpose of an invading army towards the cavernous maws of the Outer Palace itself. Over them all hung the attack craft of the

Adeptus Arbiters, the black-clad judges, more watchful than ever for the bad seeds hidden among the multitudes. Every passing hour saw them swooping into the throngs, dragging out a ranting disciple or witch-in-potentia and bundling them into the crew-bays of their hovering scrutiny-lifters.

The air was hot. Frenzy gripped the megapolis, and supplicants went mad amid the dust. Looming above the lesser towers, massive beyond imagination, the titanic walls of the Outer Palace soared in tarnished splendour, waiting for the inundation to crash against their flanks.

Interrogator Luce Spinoza watched those walls now, their outline half-lost in the haze of morning. The parapets were over fifty kilometres away, but still they dominated the northern horizon, as imposing as the mountains had been that now served as their foundations.

She stood before a floor-to-ceiling crystalflex window set atop the highest level of a spire's crown, over a kilometre up, just one of thousands of towers that jostled and crammed the cityscape in all directions. Away in the east, the dim light of the world's sun tried to pierce the ever-drifting clouds of smog, casting a weak and dirty light across the steel and adamantium.

Spinoza had never laid eyes on the Palace before. To witness the holy site, even from such a distance, gave her a kind of vertigo. Somewhere within, she knew, buried deep inside that man-made continent, He endured. The thought of it was enough to make her weep for the sacrifice, as she had done, many times.

Spinoza was so lost in contemplation that the soft approach of her superior went unnoticed. On another day she might have been given penance for the lapse, but Adamara Rassilo understood the occasion, and made no note.

'You never get used to it,' Rassilo said, coming to stand beside her. 'Seeing it unfiltered, knowing what it holds.'

Spinoza bowed to her. 'I can only imagine, lord.'

Inquisitor-Lord Rassilo wore armour of deep crimson marked with the fleur-de-lys of her allied Chambers Militant. Her hair was olive green, sheer and close-cut, exposing a smooth face that gave away no determinate sign of age. Her rosette was a pearl-ringed jewel, at first glance as clear as glass, but which on closer inspection reflected the icon of an Inquisitorial skull from within its depths.

'How was the journey?' Rassilo asked.

The journey had been hell. Nine warp stages from the outer edge of Segmentum Solar, all taken in a battle-damaged ordo frigate with a depleted crew and an astropath who had gone mad on the run from Priax.

'It was fine,' Spinoza said. 'I am glad to be here.'

'And we are glad to have you. So, come, let us speak.'

Rassilo turned away from the viewing portal. Her chamber was large and luxuriously appointed. A patterned marble floor, worth a governor's stipend alone, underpinned an artful arrangement of Vandire-era furnishing, most fashioned from genuine organics and only a few betraying the telltale of synthesis. Wax candles flickered in wrought-iron holders, augmenting the always-weak daylight from the windows.

Rassilo gestured towards a chair for Spinoza, and the two of them sat opposite one another, framing a holo-fireplace that cracked and spat in an antique grate. Rassilo clicked her fingers and a diminutive dwarf-servitor scuttled to her side, arms stuffed with reams of parchment. The dead-eyed creature handed one to her, burred something, then wobbled away.

‘Interrogator Luce Spinoza,’ read Rassilo, leafing through the file. ‘Admitted from Schola Progenium Astranta under the watch of Inquisitor Tur. Initial actions performed with commendation. Graduated to Explicator under Tur’s tutelage, before his lamented death on Karalsis Nine. Thence several further appointments – I will not list them all. Notable attachment with the Adeptus Astartes.’ She looked up at Spinoza. ‘The Imperial Fists, eh? How did you find them?’

Spinoza remembered every moment. They had been perfection to her, the very embodiment of His divine will. They had accepted her, too, in the end, and the alliance had been fruitful – so much so that Chaplain Erastus had gifted her his crozius arcanum, Argent, when they parted after the successful reduction of Forfoda, an honour beyond words. Even now, five years later, the gesture still humbled her.

‘They were true servants,’ she said, with feeling.

‘And dangerous ones,’ said Rassilo. ‘No world knows that more than this one. But it is good you are returned. The Throneworld has need of witch hunters. There are never enough.’

Spinoza stiffened. Returning to the heart of the Imperium had never been her plan – the void was where the true war was. And yet, in Tur’s absence, there was no resisting orders from the centre, for she was not inquisitor yet, and she had always known another mentor would be found for her.

‘No greater honour exists,’ she said, and that was truthful enough.

Rassilo nodded. ‘You’ve seen the state of things. This world is invaded every hour in greater numbers than our enemies could ever muster. Think on that. Every single pilgrim is screened, and screened again, but it can never be enough. All are suspect, all are dangerous, and if taint is suffered to flourish here, then we are lost.’

‘I yearn only to serve again.’

Rassilo closed the file and laid it on her lap. ‘You’ve been asked for by the Inquisitor Erasmus Crowl – do you know the name?’

Spinoza shook her head.

‘Perhaps not the master I would have chosen for you, but I cannot refuse him. He has been here too long, alone, but no servant of the Throne is more dedicated. He will drive you hard, in his own way, but he is fair, and you will learn much if your ears and eyes stay open.’

Spinoza’s expression never flickered. She remembered the killing fields of Forfoda, the glory of the Space Marines: unstoppable, a living wall of gold set against the parapets of faithlessness.

‘What does he require of me?’ she asked.

‘He has no retinue,’ said Rassilo. ‘For years he never demanded one. Now he wishes for an acolyte. Why? I do not know. It is his right, though, and I suppose he judges your qualities will balance his own.’

‘I will learn what I can.’

Rassilo smiled. ‘You need not hide your feelings, interrogator. This station will not last forever. Acquit yourself well here, and there are those in the ordo who will notice.’

‘My apologies, I did not mean—’

‘You are young, you have ambition.’ Rassilo clicked her fingers again. ‘Your time will come. In the meantime, let me make your path a little easier.’ The dwarf-servitor waddled back into the room, this time towards Spinoza. In its chubby grey hands was another file, bound with snapwire and sealed with a thick dollop of wax. The servitor held it up and gazed at Spinoza with a vacant, dumbly sorrowful expression.

Spinoza took the file. It was marked in the ordo routine cipher: Crowl, E., O.H. 4589-643.

‘Read it,’ said Rassilo. ‘It will assist your introduction.’

Spinoza looked up at her. ‘Is this...’ she started. ‘Does he know?’

‘I doubt it.’ Rassilo leaned forwards in her chair. Her armour-plates were artfully made, and moved like folds of fabric around her. ‘Consider it a gift made in recognition of sacrifice. This is Terra, child – one gift given, another returned.’

Spinoza looked down at the file, and ran her finger down its spine. The servitor stalked off again, its bare grey feet tottering across the wooden floor.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

Rassilo waved that away. ‘I appreciate your vision of service. We talk and talk – puritans, radicals, whatever that means – but ignore the real divisions. We need those whose blood is hot.’

Rassilo rose from her seat, and Spinoza followed suit. The interview was at an end. The two of them walked to the door, Rassilo ahead, Spinoza following. Before taking leave, Rassilo embraced her formally, then studied her a final time.

‘There are many battlefields, interrogator,’ she said. ‘This is just another one – just as deadly, just as noble. Remember that.’

Spinoza nodded.

‘I will,’ she said.





## CHAPTER TWO

From Rassilo's tower, within sight of the Palace walls, Spinoza took an air shuttle to travel south. The pilot wore a dark grey uniform bearing the ordo symbol – a bronze skull superimposed on the Inquisitorial 'I' device. As she boarded, she glanced at his neck just above the stiff collar and invoked the filter over her left iris. A false-colour security tattoo showed up on his flesh: barcode, the reference number, operational history.

'Location, interrogator?' he asked as she took her seat next to him.

'Down-grid, Salvator sector, 456-42-Delta-Delta,' she said, securing herself.

The air shuttle powered up from the pad, its landing gear folding inwards as it turned on a wave of superheated downdraught.

Spinoza looked out of the nearside portal. The airspace around them was thick with boiling toxspirals, twisting up from the cityscape below. The shuttle pushed up into regulated airspace – the preserve of Adeptus Arbites, the Inquisition and other exempted Imperial agents – and the craft's macro-turbines opened up.

Below them, a thousand lesser aircraft plied filth-trailed passages from spire to spire, feeding the gritty haze that shrouded the depths below. Marker-lumens, red and filmy, blinked by the million, faint beacons amid a sea of perpetual murk.

Above them, just visible against the bone-grey of the sky, were the shadows of the sentinel watchstations, hanging in low orbit, each crammed with listening devices and augur batteries, forever scanning. Above them in turn were the behemoths of the defence grid, some as old as the Imperium itself, and above them, out into the icy vacuum, were the voidships – millions of them, embarking, arriving or engaged in ceaseless patrols.

Spinoza had served with Tur on major hive worlds, but the multitudes here were still numbing. She looked down, watching the airborne fleets mingle and congest, and knowing that below, far below, groundcars and grav-transits were crawling through stacked-deep tunnels and catacombs, ferrying far more souls than could ever hope to afford privileged above-ground passage. She also knew that what she witnessed was the same on every single square kilometre of the world's surface – there were no forests, no seas, just an unbroken press of spires, hab towers, temples, gaols, crypts and garrisons, grasping and throttling the entire globe in a vice of iron and rockcrete.

As they travelled south, the monumental profile of the Outer Palace finally dipped below the horizon. The tips of the spires below them became less ornate, the film of smog thicker. The

background stench of unwashed humanity, always present on Terra, became more pungent. They were heading into less exalted zones.

Eventually the pilot brought the air shuttle down, spinning it on its axis as it descended past the tower-crowns. The light around them faded, and the flanks of the spires rose up on all sides, dark with age and pollution. Directly below, less imposing than the colossal constructions soaring up around it, was another tower – coal-dark, buttressed and crenellated in the classical gothic style. Steep-angled roofs and stacks of age-darkened blast shielding gave the impression of a rambling, tottering mortuary, archaic and lit from within by strange fires. At its summit was a wide landing platform, ringed with las-batteries and marked with an ordo skull sigil.

The shuttle touched down and the doors released, ushering in a waft of hot, astringent air. Spinoza disembarked, to be greeted by a storm trooper captain, clad in battle-armour though helmless. A team of servitors limped across the platform to retrieve her sealed void-crates from the shuttle's hold.

As standard, as she walked, she scanned the man before her.

*Physique human-normal, she noted. Heavily built. Trace stance-type indicates non-progena intake. Hellpistol, combat-knife. Nine visible combat honours, three of them exemplar militaris. Impressive.*

‘Welcome to Courvain, interrogator,’ the captain said, making the sign of the aquila. ‘Captain Maldo Revus, personal attachment commander to the Lord Crowl. The inquisitor awaits within.’

As they walked towards the exit ramp, hot wind whipped across the platform, stirring up the films of fine dust that coated every exposed surface. Ordo gun-drones whined overhead, tracking every aircraft within a few hundred metres of the fortress. The sounds of the infinite world-city rose up around them, above and below, a dull roar like the crash of the planet's long-forgotten waves.

‘You have served here long, captain?’ she asked, wishing to see if his answers matched the information she had already processed.

‘Eight years,’ said Revus.

‘That is good,’ Spinoza said. To stay alive that long in the company of an active inquisitor was rare, and indicated either great luck or capability. ‘That is very good.’

Revus didn't reply. Perhaps he considered the subject beneath him.

Once inside, thick blast shutters closed over them both, sealing them within an environment-type she was familiar with. The walls were black, glossy, embossed with litanies from major Ministorum devotion screeds. The sealed atmosphere was filtered, pulling out the worst of the filth but exposing the other aromas of an ordo fortress – warding incense, surgical chemicals, the lingering human excretions of fear.

They descended steep flights of stairs. They passed robed scribes, their faces hidden under heavy synthwool cowls, shuffling between scriptoria with dusty bundles of parchment clasped under their arms. Servo-skulls blundered through the shadows, chittering mindlessly. Echoing clanks, origin indeterminate, rose up from the depths below.

Spinoza took in the detail. Tur's demesne had been different. He had been a crusading inquisitor, as most were, forever tracking the void in search of deviation, and so his travelling entourage had been extensive – assassins, gun-servitors, priests, together with standing response arrangements with three separate chambers of the Adepta Sororitas. As a result, Tur's permanent base of operations, on the death world of Regita V, had been an echoing, half-empty place, visited only to consult the archives or interrogate the most challenging of subjects.

But this fortress was very much occupied, very much in use. Spinoza could hear the overlapping whisper of leather-soled sandals, hundreds of them, moving from one candlelit chamber to the next. She could sense the press of warm bodies above and below her, teeming like flies on rotting sugar, stuffed tight, running down level after level, until the holding chambers were reached, and despair was the only emotion left.

Revus showed her to a pair of closed wooden doors, finely made but sparsely adorned. Over the doorway was a brass death's head, spotted with patina, under which was inscribed the High Gothic *Servitio Aeternam Ad Mortem*.

'I will leave you here, interrogator,' he said, bowing.

'You do not smile much, captain,' Spinoza said.

'This is Terra, interrogator,' he said, shrugging, and withdrew.

Rassilo had said the same thing. It seemed to be something of a mantra, *This is Terra*, used when no further explanation could be given.

Before she could reflect on that further, the doors before her opened, swinging silently on hidden hinges.

The chamber beyond was lit poorly by a few suspensor lumens. Just as elsewhere, there were no external windows. The entire place felt as if it might have been buried underground.

Her new master sat beneath two great iron candelabras, robed in silver-lined black, his face illuminated from below by the flickering green of a data-slate. Above his shoulder hovered a servo-skull, its single red eye glowing in the gloom.

'Closer,' he said.

She took in more details as she approached, automatically appraising, judging, filing. The inquisitor was tall, gaunt, clad in extremely fine armour. His skin was pale and ridged with a faint crust of old scar tissue.

'Thank you for your summons, lord,' Spinoza said, coming to stand before him.

'Nothing to thank me for. And call me Crowl.' The man's voice was dry as a gnawed bone, unfiltered by vox enhancement. He pressed an armoured finger to the data-slate, and the green light flickered out. 'You spoke to Rassilo?'

'I did.'

'She'll have given you a file on me.' Crowl smiled, and it made his pale face flex strangely. 'Read it yet?'

'I have seen no file.'

'Good answer. Sit down.'

There was a heavy seat, carved like a throne, opposite Crowl's. Everything in the chamber had the weight of age on it. Spinoza did as she was bid, trying to work out how much of the inquisitor's display was genuine and how much feigned.

'I've been following your career,' Crowl said. 'I suppose it's now that I tell you what a good man Tur was, and how sorry we are that he died like that. But he wasn't, was he?'

'He was an excellent inquisitor.'

'That's possible too. Did you conduct many actions?'

'I think I earned my position.'

'I agree.' Crowl's forehead was lit by the soft blush of red from the servo-skull's hovering presence. 'You were tutored on Astranta. You must like rain.'

‘Then you know it?’

‘A long time ago. What did they teach you there?’

‘Everything that I needed to know.’

‘To love the Imperium, I suppose, which endures forever.’

‘Of course.’

‘What would you say if I told you that it was a lie, and that nothing lasts forever?’

Crowl’s speech was rapid, his mouth moving economically. Spinoza could see how that might unsettle an interrogation suspect, and resolved to study the auditory patterns later.

‘Then I would call you heretic,’ she replied, ‘and have you terminated.’

‘Good again,’ Crowl said. ‘But down here, every spire has a million tongues, and every tongue is forked against its neighbours. We tell them to inform on their own kind, and they do. All the time. If I wanted, I need never leave this tower, and still they’d find their way down here, all ripe for destruction. You’d be busy, if you terminated them all.’

‘Better to die, than to—’

‘—infect an innocent. You’d be burning the bodies of liars. They come to us because they’re jealous, lustful, or their minds have gone. I had a man tell my processors his own mother had fallen to the dark. He wanted to take her hab-unit. Three metres square, stinking like a grox-pen, underground, unheated. But it would have been *his*.’

‘I hope he was punished,’ said Spinoza.

‘Nothing I could devise would have been worse than the life he’d made for himself.’ Crowl leaned forwards. ‘Here’s the point, interrogator. There are witches on Terra, but to see them, you have to filter out the noise. Pay no attention to the voices you can hear. Pay attention to the ones you can’t.’

‘I shall heed the warning.’

Crowl laughed, a dry chuckle. ‘Maybe you even will, in time.’

‘*Ignoro*, child,’ rasped the servo-skull suddenly, whining as it gained loft. ‘Filth *toto mundo*. Burn-burn.’

Spinoza raised an eyebrow.

‘This is Gorgias,’ said Crowl.

‘The skull has a different philosophy to yours, then,’ said Spinoza.

‘It’s good to be faced with contrary views. Some of the time. Now, are you ready?’

‘Give the order.’

Crowl got to his feet. ‘I conducted an action yesterday,’ he said, gesturing for Spinoza to join him, and they walked back towards the doors. ‘A man. He had the mark. You know it? When you sense it, like a smell. I almost put him to the trials, but he was resisting me. Most of the time my presence alone is enough to induce terror, but he was ready to face more of it before he broke. So that made me curious, and I let him go.’

The doors opened. Revus was waiting on the other side, his armour now fully sealed and his black-visored helm in place. Behind him were six others of the unit. The storm troopers offered salute, and stood aside to let them pass.

‘Captain Revus tracked him,’ Crowl went on, moving into the corridor. ‘The subject resisted temptation for a while, but they always give in, sooner or later, and so he led us to his minders. Someone has power over him, and I wish to know why.’

‘What do you intend?’ Spinoza asked.

‘Cut out the den, find someone who knows something, bring them back here for a quiet conversation.’ Crowl sniffed. ‘There’s something stirring out there, I think.’

‘And Sanguinala is coming.’

‘You noticed that? Keep up, Spinoza – I want you close on this. It’ll be a good introduction to the glory of our infinite city.’

They marched further into Courvain’s depths, always down. Revus and his squad followed close behind. Gorgias whined overhead, staying close to Crowl’s shoulder. A wicked-looking needle gun extended from a socket under its left cheekbone.

They reached a blast door, which slid back on their approach. A low hangar chamber opened up, lined with personnel carriers. Most were Nighthawk gunships, black liveried with Inquisition sigils, capable of carrying twelve and armed with rotary cannons under their stubby wings. They were squat, blunt things, designed to operate at close quarters in confined spaces, their twin-angled turbines giving them lift in any direction.

Spinoza clambered inside one, following Crowl. The storm troopers piled in after, shackling their hellguns to wall-mounted claws and buckling up. Before the outer hull doors locked closed, Spinoza glimpsed the entire hangar wall fold slowly outwards, exposing the grey haze of the Terran exterior.

She sat back as the turbos juddered into full power. Things were moving fast, but that was no bad thing. It was better to be in action than mired in sloth, and she mentally ran down the pre-battle litanies to aid her readiness.

*May He guide my arm, may He guide my strength, may He keep me from the crime of hesitation, of weakness, of mercy.*

The gunship lifted, then boosted clear of the hangar’s exit channel. They were out. Through a narrow real-viewer slit in the armoured hull, Spinoza watched man-made cliffs soar up around them, lit from within by sickly lumens. Then the gunship dropped, filtering through the lines of milling aircraft below. The pilot drove the Nighthawk hard, heedless of the other vehicles hurrying to get out of the way of the Inquisitorial transport. Soon the gunship was up to full speed and rattling along the canyons between the spires.

‘How far?’ Spinoza asked.

‘Closer than you’d think,’ said Crowl, allowing his body to sway with the gunship’s jerking movement. ‘We’ll be out of Salvator soon, into Malliax Profundis. It only gets dirtier.’

The further they went, the more the weak sunlight faded away. Spinoza glimpsed vast arches passing overhead, twinkling with watery light-points, and equally vast chasms below, yawning into blackness. Perhaps, she thought idly, there was no ground level here at all, just an endless procession of deeper foundations, spiralling down to the world’s core.

Despite the darkness, the press of humanity around them showed no signs of slackening. She could see crowds everywhere, cramming the causeways leading to the spires’ enormous gates, cramming the transitways that spanned the gulfs between them, cramming the plazas and cramming the dust-kicked railheads. Soon they were unindividuated – all she saw was a slowly oozing swamp of grey work-shifts, dirty synthwool cowls, head torches bobbing through the brume.

‘Locus approach, ten seconds,’ announced Revus, pulling his hellpistol from its holster and checking the power pack.

The boom from the gunship’s engines lessened as it spiralled to the drop-point. The storm troopers calmly took up their hellguns, adjusted their helmets, made final equipment checks.

‘Standard *purgatus*,’ Revus told them calmly. ‘Take the leader, the rest to be terminated.’

Spinoza looked over at Crowl, who had closed his eyes. It looked like he was meditating, his sidearm still holstered, his hands clasped loosely before him. She took up her own weapon. Even after it had been modified, a crozius arcanum of the Adeptus Astartes was a heavy piece. She looked down at Argent’s scrimshawed outer casing, the thick bone marked with battle honours, its charred disruptor black from a lifetime of energy dissipation. Despite her physical conditioning, the equal of any mortal human, without her armour she would not have found it possible to wield effectively. As it was, though, given her artificer suit of red-gold plate, forged on the anvils of Ophelia itself, the crozius made her deadly.

‘Five seconds,’ intoned Revus.

The gunship was dropping vertically now, exterior lights doused, whining down a well shaft into nothing. The storm troopers’ helm-lumens flickered into life, glinting from black visors. From outside the shaking hull, Spinoza could just about make out screams of panic, something crashing heavily, a siren wailing.

Then the Nighthawk’s hull doors slammed open, and the storm troopers spilled out, leaping down from the hovering gunship and into ankle-deep water. It was nearly pitch-black. Massive rockcrete columns rose up on all sides, each one as wide as a Titan, dented and pitted. Crowds were scattering, splashing and swarming like gutter rats into whatever crevice would take them.

Ahead of the dropsite was a gaping circular outlet, ten metres in diameter and rimed with a coat of ancient rust. The iron bars that had once prevented entry had either rotted away or been broken, and now the orifice gaped blackly, taller than a man and ringed by toothy oxidised stumps. Above it rose a riveted wall of black steel, clustered with clots of grime.

The storm troopers sprinted to the outlet, leaping over the frothing lip and into the thick dark beyond. Crowl and Spinoza brought up the rear.

‘Where is this?’ asked Spinoza, activating the disruptor on Argent and flooding the tunnel with electric-blue light.

‘This is the foot of Spire *Malevolens et Diabolus Traitoris Nine*,’ said Crowl, kicking up the foul water as he strode. He had still not drawn a weapon. ‘You are as close to the earth of Old Terra as most will ever come.’

The cold hiss of lasfire echoed from up ahead, distorted by the tunnel’s curve. The two of them pushed on, reaching a domed chamber twenty metres high. Cascades of water ran from cracks in the roof. Rows of pump stations, all inactive, sunk into the oozing mire, their valves and filters clogged. More chambers stretched off ahead, linked by arched roofs, clustered with more defunct machinery and tangles of corroded pipework.

The storm troopers were doing their work. Already the water underfoot had turned a murky red, and bodies floated face down in the foam. Revus had pushed on ahead, taking three of his squad into the chambers beyond. The remaining three skirted the dome’s edge, scanning for residual threats.

Spinoza went warily. The place stank of mouldering sewage. A hundred ambush points remained in the claustrophobic dark, but Crowl strolled after Revus as if he were ambling in the cloisters of a Ministorum oratory.

Then an explosion went off – a crack, muffled by distance and thrown-up water – followed by agonised screams. Then more lasfire snapped out, echoing and overlaid on itself, then nothing.

Crowl led her into the chamber beyond, and the one beyond that. The storm troopers stayed close,

and the bodies piled up, more and more of them, punctured and bloody. Some of the corpse-faces stared out from the foetid pools, grey and luminous under the glare of armour lumens, shock still visible on their pallid features.

They reached a brick-lined arch, dripping with rivulets of oily liquid. As Spinoza ducked to pass under it, she caught a flicker of movement to her right. Instinctively, she swung out, thrusting the crozius protectively.

A man leapt out at her, rags sodden, his face contorted with loathing. He tried to slash out at Spinoza's face with a knife.

Spinoza pulled back smoothly, letting the man fall out of balance, then swung the crozius down onto his neck. Her assailant screamed briefly, caught in the flare of corrosive energy, before his spine snapped open and his body slapped, limp, into the water.

Crowl glanced down at the mess, then up at her.

'Easy to use, that thing?' he asked.

'Not very.'

'Heavy, I'd guess.'

'There are exercises, to develop speed.'

'You must show me sometime.'

Then he was moving again, passing under the arch and into the chamber beyond. Spinoza followed him, stepping over the wet corpse at her feet.

This one was circular, thirty metres in diameter, crowned with another dome of sodden brick and stone, a patchwork of old repairs that leaked in dirty cascades. Stalactites, black with age, hung from the roof. The floor was lost under a morass of the same foul water, rimed with chem-yellow foam and studded with more floating bodies.

Revus had already secured the space. Every enemy still drawing breath – three souls only by then – was now isolated against the far wall. Two were abhumans: bloated, over-muscled, their pulpy necks bulging against work-shift collars. They both carried cable-wrapped iron wrenches two-handed, looted from some manufactorum assembly line and converted into primitive shock mauls. The third was human-normal, wearing dirty robes, his head bare and shaved. The same look of almost fanatical loathing lit his scrawny features, but he was weaponless and his hatred was impotent.

They had backed away, those three, until the wall rose up at their backs. Revus' squad had them pinned, and faint red points of sighting-beams rippled across their blotchy faces.

One of the abhumans was already twitching, its pudgy eyes flashing with panic. As Crowl and Spinoza approached, it broke out, splashing towards the inquisitor. The storm troopers opened up, punching a flurry of las-spears into the oncoming mutant, and it stumbled, crashing into the mire. The foam boiled red around it.

That left two. Only then did Crowl take out his pistol.

'To cleanse the soul,' he murmured, aimed, and fired a single bullet.

The robed man was caught in the chest, flung back against the wall and splayed like a spider. The body slipped down into the mire, leaving a long black stain on the crumbling bricks, eyes wide the whole time.

Spinoza looked at Crowl. 'I thought you wanted him alive, lord?'

None of the storm troopers moved.

'This is Terra,' Crowl said, strolling up to the trembling abhuman. 'I have the one I wanted.'

Only then, walking with Crowl, did Spinoza get close enough to see the surviving mutant's eyes. They were not as twitchy as the other one's, not as febrile, although they gave away fear. A lot of fear.

Crowl came up close, heedless of the danger from the looming shock maul. Gorgias hummed overhead them both, chuntering to itself semi-audibly.

'You'd rather have died without agony,' Crowl said, addressing the mutant. 'You'd rather have given up that slave to my knives, and he would have let you do it, too.'

The abhuman looked down at the inquisitor, defiantly, but his jowls quivered. 'He was a faithful son.'

'There's no faith in this place.'

'You won't get what you want from me.'

'No,' said Crowl, turning to look at Spinoza. 'But she will.'

Then the abhuman lunged, hammering the shock maul down at Crowl's exposed head.

Spinoza leapt between them, skidding through the slime to bring her own maul to bear. The two weapons screamed against one another, shrieking with unleashed electric power, before the abhuman's weapon cracked apart. Spinoza lashed out, left, right, smacking the shards away before pressing her crackling crozius up against the mutant's chins and driving him back against the wall.

'Enough, Spinoza,' said Crowl, coming alongside her and placing a restraining hand on her arm. The stench of burning flesh rose pungently from the abhuman's charred jowls. 'But very good. Really, very good. I can see why the Space Marines liked you.'

Spinoza relaxed the pressure, slowly. The abhuman had been surgically altered. Up close, she could see the suture lines. Underneath all that blubber and vat-grown muscle fibre was a human-normal, mutilated and stretched, but with standard mental capacity.

'How did you know?' she asked.

'You get a sense.' Crowl studied the pseudo-mutant up-close, reaching out to feel the fat-rolls between his fingers. 'He's yours now, anyway. Find out what they're doing here.'

Then he turned, splashing his way towards Revus, who was waiting in silence at the chamber's edge, his hellpistol trained unerringly on the cult's sole survivor.

'All corpses to be preserved,' Crowl said. 'Get them sent to Gulagh for processing. I'll handle the scholarship myself this time.'

Revus saluted. 'Then cauterise?'

Crowl kept on walking. 'Yes, captain. Burn it all.'

Gorgias, floating ahead with its eye glowing bloodily, clicked agreement.

'*Affirmativo*,' it chattered, mindlessly. 'Yes-yes. *Combustum. Yes.*'





## CHAPTER THREE

On Terra, dawn was a meagre thing, a faint lifting of the dark, half-accomplished, leaving semi-night shrouding all but the highest spire peaks.

Spinoza had woken long before the grey creeping daylight, conditioned by her schola training. She had pushed herself from her bunk, shivering as her naked feet touched Courvain's cold steel floor, then knelt before the altar in the wall.

Then she had prayed, mouthing the Ministorum rites, sticking to the old Pradjia doctrine, the one she had loved as a child, with its old rhythms and replies.

*I am weak. He is strength. In Him, I am strong.*

*I am imperfect. He is perfect. In Him, I am perfected.*

She had knelt until her knees had numbed and her wrists ached. Then she had risen, performed the physical exercises, donned her clothing, her armour, and then finally her interrogator's rosette – a clenched steel fist, crushing a snake with ruby eyes. It was not a full Inquisitorial sigil, and lacked the holographic tell-mark of the ordo, but those who knew what to look for would know what it meant.

Her small chamber had no mirror, but she knew what she would see if she had one brought: a stocky woman, thirty Terran-standard years old, short peroxide-blonde hair, broad features, pale freckled skin, brown eyes. She would see the tight features, the erect stance, the belligerence bubbling under the surface, only tempered by decades of conditioning.

*I am unfinished. He is finality. In Him, I am completed.*

She looked down at her rosette. It was flecked with blood, and she reached for a rag to clean it. The pseudo-abhuman had died badly, thrashing and screaming at the end. They all died badly under the trials. It didn't matter how they entered them – confident, terrified, numb – they all ended weeping.

Still, there was knowledge now. She had gained what Crowl had sent her to gain. She had a name – the Angel's Tears – and the location for two other cells, and half-snippets of data on movements and plans. It was a cabal of sorts, a gathering of malcontents, just as existed on every world in the glorious Imperium, gnawing like rats at the base of civilisation. But they were getting ready for something – an event that the subject knew almost nothing about in detail, only that it was coming, and soon, and required heavy armament if all was to be accomplished. In the end, his bloodied face had almost been ecstatic.

A soft chime sounded at her door.

'Come,' she said, reaching for her cloak and pinning it to her shoulder.

A thin girl entered, grey-skinned, clad in a black shift. Her hair was sparse, already beginning to shed. Spinoza guessed she was no more than eighteen standard. She carried a tray laden with food – meatslabs, vitgruel, real fruit.

Real fruit! There were eight grapes, dried almost to raisins, clinging to a black stalk. The girl's hands shook as she carried the tray, and her sunken eyes never left it.

Spinoza took the tray from her, placed it on the chamber's only table, then sat. The girl turned to leave.

'Wait,' said Spinoza, tearing a strip of meatslab and chewing. 'How long have you served here?'

The girl looked confused, and it was then that Spinoza realised her error. The girl had always served here. Her parents had always served here. If in the future she obtained a sanctioned mate, then he, and her, and any children would always serve here. Courvain was her world, within the world of the city, within the world that was Terra.

'What is your name?'

'Yessika.'

'You serve the Lord Crowl?'

The girl nodded, warily.

'In his private chambers?'

A shake of the head.

'You deliver from the refectories, to the higher levels?'

A nod.

'You will serve me, while I dwell here?'

Another nod.

'Good. I am glad to know you, Yessika.' Spinoza took one of the grapes, and the leathery skin yielded just a little in her grasp. 'You looked at these, as you carried them to me, did you not?'

Yessika shook her head vehemently then, a mix of outrage and fear. 'No, lord, I did–'

'You would not be human had you not. Looking is no crime. Come here.'

Yessika shuffled closer, twisting her hands on her shift, looking nervous.

'I wish to serve the Lord Crowl well, while I am here,' said Spinoza, popping the grape into her mouth and chewing. By the Throne, it was good – real juice, acrid, bitter from whatever transport it had endured, but *real*. 'I can only perform my duty with knowledge. If you hear things, you will tell me, yes?'

Yessika looked uncertain. She halted, coming no closer.

Spinoza took a second grape and rolled it between her fingers. 'Come here.'

The girl sidled closer. Spinoza reached out, pressing the grape against her thin lips. 'Open.'

It took a second for Yessika to comply. When she did, taking the fruit, she was too afraid to chew.

Spinoza laughed. 'Go ahead.'

Yessika's jaw began to move. As she did, a look of awe spread slowly over her emaciated features. She smiled, the juice dribbling down her chin, which she greedily caught with a fingertip and licked clean.

Then the fear returned, and she started to twist the fabric of her shift again.

Spinoza placed an armoured hand on her shoulder, feeling the bird-thin bones shift under the skin. 'One gift given,' she said softly.

The girl looked back at her warily, then nodded.

‘You may go.’

Yessika hurried out, closing the door as she went. Spinoza sat back, and finished her meal. As soon as she had done so, a red light blinked on top of the console next to her bunk. A brass receptacle, slung with black cabling, hung like a crushed spider on the wall, crowned with an iron vox-emitter. It looked like it had been there for a thousand years.

Spinoza activated the link. ‘Your command?’

‘*I read your report,*’ Crawl’s voice crackled. ‘*Very thorough. You’ll go to the coordinates you extracted and bring us another subject.*’

‘As you will it.’

‘*The Angel’s Tears. That’s what they call themselves?*’

‘So it would appear.’

‘*What do they want, Spinoza?*’

There was no answer to that, not with precision, and yet precision was hardly required. They were mobilising, storing looted weapons, spreading like a contagion throughout the lower reaches of Salvator’s spires. Like so many, they had listened to foul whispers in the night – of another order, of a better life, of another way – and that was enough to drag their actions into the sordid swamp of perversion.

‘I will endeavour to discover more detail,’ she said.

‘*Keep one of them alive a bit longer next time, maybe?*’

‘If there is something to be gained by it.’

There was a pause at the other end of the vox-link. ‘*Very well,*’ said Crawl. ‘*Use your judgement. And be wary – the location you identified is further into Malliax. I recommend taking an escort.*’

‘I will.’

The link cut out. Spinoza studied her reactions. Was she being too curt? It was hard to maintain the proper sense of respect, something that had always come naturally with Tur. Crawl was testing her, that was evident, looking for a reaction. She understood that, and ought to have been able to adjust.

But there was no reverence in his speech. If he had been a man of the Imperium, rather than an agent of the Holy Ordo, she might have...

*I am impatient. He is eternal. Through Him, I endure all things.*

She got up, and pressed the comm-bead to summon an armed escort. Before leaving the chamber, she reached for the crozius and mag-locked it to her belt. She had little doubt it would be needed.

Crawl sat back in his throne, pressing his hands together, his brow furrowing.

‘What do you think?’ he asked.

Gorgias’ sensor-eye dimmed momentarily, then strobed back to life.

‘Like-like. *Spiritus bonum.* Chose well.’

‘Thought you’d approve. She’ll have to learn fast.’

‘*Spiritus bonum.*’

‘Yes, you said that. I suppose that counts for something.’

Crawl reached for a crystal vial, perched on a leather-topped table by his side. He took a distasteful look at the blood-red liquid within, then removed the stopper and drained the contents. It took a few seconds for it to work, and the restorative effects were less than they had once been.

Gorgias chuntered disapprovingly, and levitated into the shadows. ‘*Nequissimus.* No good.’

‘I know it,’ Crowl replied.

Then he rose from the throne and walked from the chamber. Once in the hallway, he descended four levels, took a turbo-lift to nominal thoroughfare-level IX, and summoned a groundcar from the waiting pool.

The driver pulled up, opened the side doors and made the sign of the aquila. She was middle-aged, in her twenties, wearing a stiff-collared uniform. The groundcar was heavy-tracked with armour-grade plates and slit windows. As it came to a halt, its trembling smokestacks leaked sooty palls up the walls.

Crowl got in. ‘My thanks, Aneela.’ He settled into the padded seat. ‘How is your daughter?’

‘She is well, I thank you, lord.’

‘Learning her rotes?’

‘She strives to.’

‘If she wants to join the Adeptus Terra, she will need to.’

‘We tell her this.’

Crowl smiled. ‘The young.’

‘Your command?’

‘Take me to Gulagh.’

The driver saluted again, raised the groundcar’s flak shields, and powered the machine smoothly towards one of Courvain’s many exit ramps.

Crowl sat back, watching idly through the long horizontal real-viewer. The tarquezine began to have an effect, and he felt the first twinge of stimulus bleed through his muscles.

They trundled out into the open, leaving the arched gates to the fortress and powering out across a single-span bridge towards the forest of rockcrete ahead and above. Soon they were surrounded by phalanxes of traffic – ore-haulers, tracked personnel crawlers, Astra Militarum supply trucks, all shoving and belching into the transit lanes that webbed the chasms between towers.

Aneela skilfully guided the groundcar out onto the priority conduits used by privileged Imperial agencies, and soon they were rumbling across a series of vaned bridges that vaulted the gridlock below. Statues of saints flanked the thoroughfare, all of them caked in soot and with their faces cracked and obscured.

Above, the skies were thick with boiling dust, punctured only by sulphurous lumen beams. The arbitrators were out in force, their black-flanked hunter-killers hovering on gritty downdraughts like metal vultures. Below them, below it all, churned the eternal throngs, milling in amorphous gradations of mania. Crowl spied cowed processions wending their way across the ambulatory plazas, headed by priests carrying gauzy red lanterns. Dimly, just audible over the endless thunder of ranged promethium engines, he could hear the massed chanting, the rolling boom of drums, the heavy clang of servitor-dragged gong-gurneys.

The processions were getting more numerous. Over the next few days, they would coalesce, boiling out of the cavernous shells of the cathedral precincts, swelling like a living river and rising towards the hundred-kilometre-long Avenue of Eternal Remembrance – the vast causeway built from the annihilated remnants of enemy Titans that led down, eventually, to the fabled Eternity Gate itself.

The groundcar sped north, weaving between the colossal spire flanks, ducking under layers of overhanging transit-tubes. Vox-augmitters blared out ritual scripts, fifty-metre-high pict screens displayed glowing icons of the Angel Sacrificed, while every scrap of exposed space seemed to be

occupied by Ministorum adepts, whipping up the crowds of workers into ever higher degrees of devotional frenzy. Amid the drifting clots of air traffic, augmetic cherubs in chipped gold-and-red armour floated listlessly, weeping continually from gilded tear ducts.

‘Madness,’ breathed Crawl, absently.

‘Lord?’ asked Aneela.

‘Nothing. Keep driving.’

They passed around the bole of a tattered, rockcrete-grey hab tower and up higher, threading into ganglia of converging transit lanes. Soon another edifice loomed before them, dark as pitch and illuminated from within by pale blue lumen-points. A tarnished iron skull hung over the fortified gate, its eyes empty and gaping.

The guards waved them through, and Aneela drew up to a pair of polished obsidian doors. Crawl got out, to be greeted by two guards wearing dark chainmail armour and bone-white helms. They bowed low, sweeping the tips of electro-halberds across the stone floor, and behind them the doors swung soundlessly open.

Crawl marched in, passing under a lintel marked with the sigils of the Adeptus Terra, the serpent banners of the medicae guilds and obscure icons of lesser ordos, all crowned with an Imperial twin-headed eagle set in bas-relief.

He was greeted by an obese man draped in robes of pale blue, blotched with grease and clinging to the folds of flesh beneath. His hairless head was pale, his lips red, his eyes piggish. The man folded thick fingers before him, each one clustered with iron rings. An augmetic earpiece glinted from behind rejuve-smoothed lobes, a wire thread with pearl-like cogitator nodes. He wore the amulet of an medicae-general on his sloping chest, marking him as psycho-screened and cleared to oversee ordo clean-up work.

The bulbous man bowed.

‘Inquisitor,’ he said, turning to usher Crawl in.

Crawl nodded, walking on. ‘How goes it, Gulagh?’

‘The air is hot. The pilgrims disgust me. I have more labour than I care for.’

‘Did I hear that right?’

‘The air is pleasant. The pilgrims are an inspiration. My labours are a blessing.’

‘All we wish for is the truth.’

The two of them passed within the complex, entering snaking tunnels of slag-grey rockcrete. Just as in Courvain the atmospherics were recycled, sealed off from Terra’s smog outside. They passed surgical chambers, each one antiseptic, lit brightly with lurid sodium lumens, most with their medicae slabs occupied. Menials shuffled past in the tight-twisted corridors, bowing and pulling plasticky green cowls over hidden faces. They carried the panoply of their trade with them: steel trays piled with instruments sticky with blood, swilling vials, skin-bleachers, eviscerators, bone saws, deep-vein needles.

‘They tell me you have a new acolyte,’ said Gulagh, leading Crawl deeper down.

‘Cracking ordo ciphers again, Gulagh?’

‘Oh, I hear things.’

‘She won’t be mine for long. Too good. Too keen.’

‘Ah.’

They entered along hall, its floor tiled, windowless and lit by hovering suspensors that whirred

from their archaic power feeds. Lines of medicae slabs ran down either wall, each one occupied by a cloth-draped body.

Crowl paused at the first one and lifted the fabric. The corpse underneath was female, young, tattooed at the neck, greasy hair pulled back from a thin face.

‘These are the ones from Malliax?’ Crowl asked, studying her carefully.

‘The very same.’

‘Find anything?’

‘Nothing.’

Crowl turned to Gulagh sceptically. ‘Nothing at all?’

Gulagh chuckled, and his many chins wobbled. ‘I never know why you come down here, inquisitor. None of the other lords do.’

He pulled a magnomonocle from his robes and wedged it over his left eye, making the lens-motors whisper. Then he bent over the corpse, pulling its eyelids down, opening its jaw, yanking at the empty gums. As he worked, he wheezed, and gobbets of perspiration twinkled on his folds of fat.

‘All of them the same,’ he said, pulling the sheet aside and working down to her ribs. ‘Hellgun rounds, single punctures. We’ve got one with a broken spine – who did that? Your troops are good shots, I’ve said it before. Otherwise, these are underhive scum. Rotten teeth, rotten bones, cancers, cataracts and rickets, but nothing much else.’

Crowl looked down the rows of corpses. ‘They don’t run away, not at first,’ he said. ‘They’re organised. Something’s driving them.’

‘What was their crime?’

‘Unsanctioned association.’

‘You don’t know, then.’

Crowl smiled. ‘My interrogator, the one you know all about, she spoke to one of the cell leaders. He told her they were getting ready for something, but he hadn’t been told what. They’re hoarding information from their own kind. Remind you of anyone? And they’ve got weapons.’

‘Who hasn’t? There’s a lasgun for every newborn down here.’

‘What an inspiring thought.’ Crowl turned back to the corpse. ‘How many of them are here?’

‘All you sent us. We’ve taken the teeth, we’ll take the hair. Any organs good enough to freeze I’ll send to the splicers.’

‘I count twenty-five.’

‘If you say so.’

‘I sent you twenty-four.’

Gulagh chuckled, wiping his podgy hand on the corpse’s shroud. ‘You counted them yourself, inquisitor? I think you do need more staff.’

Crowl didn’t smile. He paced down the lines of slabs, pulling the linen from the face of each corpse. The one at the very end was a mountain of slumped muscle – the first of the two abhumans – while the rest were just skin and bones.

Gulagh waddled after him. ‘They were brought in on standard transports. If there’s been a mistake—’

‘Detail,’ Crowl muttered, ignoring the apothecary-general. ‘That is the problem.’

He reached a body near the end of the line, and exposed its face. This one was a man, perhaps thirty standard, a little fuller of face than the first woman, hair cropped tight to his scalp, eyes ringed red. The corpse stared up sightlessly into the sodium globes above.

Crowl hesitated. 'I don't remember this one.'

Gulagh hovered at his side. He looked a little paler. 'It was a firefight, they told me. With guns. You really noticed every—'

'Everything,' said Crowl, reaching out to turn the head to one side. 'He's not from the chamber we cleared. Where's he from?'

Gulagh reached to the foot of the slab and pulled a cracked roll of parchment from an iron clasp. As it unravelled, the dry brown scratchings of scribe auto-quills became visible. 'Dispatch 56-76a-ed3/G, Malliax, your reference, your seal,' read Gulagh. 'Like I said, they came in with this batch, all together, piled on a grav-slab with their chests still hot. I don't know how you—'

Crowl turned to face the apothecary. His gaunt face had darkened, and Gulagh stopped talking. The fat man put the parchment down quietly.

'Say nothing, listen with utmost care,' said Crowl. 'I will take this one back with me. You will speak to your scribes and your dispatch menials. I will send a squad here in two hours, and I want a report for them to act upon by the time they arrive. If there's nothing for them to excise, I'll come back myself. I doubt that you want that to happen.'

Gulagh wasn't chuckling now. He shook his head, looking a little bewildered. 'Of course,' he said. 'Of course. But there's no record—'

'Two hours,' said Crowl, turning away from him and stalking back down the corpse-hall. 'That's all you have. Use the time well.'



## CHAPTER FOUR

Revus had not been made available, so Spinoza had been directed to the services of his sergeant-at-arms, Ergor Hegain. At first she had feared that might be some kind of slight, but on meeting the man, she began to think it a turn of good fortune. He'd greeted her smiling, his expression less dour than either of his masters'.

'Greetings, lord,' he'd said, saluting her. 'Welcome to the bloodline.'

'The what?'

'Been lords in Courvain since before the Beast.' He was still grinning. 'You're the latest.'

Spinoza regarded him, searching for any sign of disrespect, but didn't find any. Throne of Earth, he was being friendly.

'Not the last, I hope,' she said, as warmly as she was able, which was just as stiff and formal as the schola had drilled her and warfare had made her.

Hegain laughed. 'No doubt of it, lord. No doubt of it. I see that bloody great maul, and I heard the captain talk of it. You'll smite them, lord. You'll smite them to dust, Emperor keep you hale.'

He'd come with two of his standing troop – a man and a woman, both clad in ordo battle-armor marked with the skull-figure in white on grey. Together the four of them marched down once more to the hangars.

'Orders to escort you to Malliax Quintus, middle deep, cross-grid 45-45-S,' said Hegain, his hellgun swinging from its belt-shackle as he walked. 'Best to take the near-end tunnels. A Shade, if you will it. I can pilot it, if you wish that, but if not, I'd like to see you take the controls. If that is not to say too much. They told me you fought with the Angels of Death. Is that so, lord? I can imagine it, seeing the way you are.'

Spinoza smiled faintly. 'You do not fight *with* them, sergeant,' she said. 'They suffer you to be present.'

Hegain laughed. 'Is that it? Now you say it, but I do not believe it. I reckon you'd have given account of yourself. With that maul. By the Nine Wounds, I'd have liked to have seen it. You wish to pilot this? It is your command. But I can, if you have no desire for it.'

They reached the anchor station for a DF-08 Shade squad transporter, all angles and ramjet-housings. It was being prepped by a cadre of servitors and menials, fuelled and weapon-loaded. Unlike the Nighthawk it had been built for stealth, and was as sleek and ugly as a flensing knife.

Spinoza looked up at it. 'I'll take it, sergeant,' she said.



Hegain grinned again, and clambered up into the co-pilot's throne. The others hoisted themselves up into the cramped rear crew-bay, and the servitors withdrew, yanking hissing fuel lines with them.

Spinoza took her place, taking in the control mechanisms. She placed her hands on the two flight columns and pressed down, feeling the heavy machinery clunk back in response.

'You run this down the tunnels?' she asked.

'If the demand is there, lord. Only if the demand is there. They never see it coming. Not much fits down the catacombs, but this will. Quick as a whip, keep the lumens down, silent burn. You taken one of these before? You'll like it. Made for Courvain, like everything he uses. He knows his business, does Crowl. I took a bad hit on the last action, and he asked after it, and he knew all about it, and now I'm back to service. He'll look after you, he will, though you wouldn't know it, not when you meet him.'

'No,' said Spinoza. 'No, that's not obvious.'

She activated the engines, and the transporter rattled into life, belching blue-edged flames from the twin exhausts. Ahead of them, the outer hangar doors cantilevered open.

'The machine-spirit has the location,' said Hegain, clicking down a series of system-initialise switches. The cockpit shuddered briefly, and the clusters of picter-screens started to run with schematic readouts. False-colour targeting reticules swam across the forward viewports, linked directly to the chain-linked cannons slung under the hooked prow. 'You can follow this seeker-readout?'

She could. Imperial battle vehicles all shared the same basic template designs, most of them forged millennia ago, designed to make it possible to switch between equipment with next to no preparation. For one with Inquisition training and experience on the front line there was little in the Munitorum's colossal inventory that couldn't be mastered, and it took only a moment's mental adjustment to comprehend the Shade's location-marker system.

'At speed, then, sergeant,' said Spinoza, lifting off and angling the thrusters to power them forwards. 'You have the bio-overlay of the one we seek. The rest are irrelevant.'

'Understood, and that suits us well, lord. You already have a fine command of this, if I may say it.'

Spinoza applied the initial boost, and the Shade blasted clear of Courvain's black walls, shooting out into the smog beyond. She angled it down and over, tilting hard and dropping like a lead bolt. Just as before, the other air traffic scrambled to get clear, and a narrow path opened up for them through the tox-haze.

'Ha!' cried Hegain, enjoying the plummet. 'Very good.'

Spinoza gained full velocity quickly, sweeping and sliding among the massed craft before swooping down below the level of the lowest. The Shade skated along just above street level, scything over the heads of startled crowds. The foundations of the ever-present towers blurred past, shadow-wreathed and colossal. Ahead of her, targeting schematics flickered and updated, guiding the transporter deeper into the labyrinth.

'Approaching catacomb entrance point, lord,' reported Hegain. 'Beware it, if you please – the ingress can be—'

'I see it,' said Spinoza, beginning to enjoy herself. 'Like I said, sergeant – at speed.'

The Shade dived towards a long banking ramp, hemmed on either side by retaining walls. Above them soared stacked arches and transit spans, rising like thrown web-silk over the chasms below. At the terminus of the ramp was a gaping hole, a black shaft that seemed to swallow the light into itself.

The Shade plunged straight into the dark, its powerful forward lumens picking out a blackened, crusted tunnel that shot down steeply before angling back on itself and splitting into dozens of threaded ways. There were crowds even in there, skulking in the stale underworld, and they screamed and ran as the Shade boomed over their heads.

‘Into under-Malliax,’ reported Hegain, rocking against the thrust of the transporter. ‘Coming in close now, lord.’

‘I see that too.’

They were powering down a narrow capillary, the walls closing in on them quickly. Huge clusters of cabling hung like vines from the tunnel roof, thick with luminous growths. Old machinery, long abandoned, half sunken into the sodden floor, eaten by rust and smashed by tech-looters. Glimpsed in the rapid flash of the Shade’s lumens, the carcasses looked like skeletons of vast, broken beasts.

‘Now,’ said Spinoza, hauling back on the control column. The Shade juddered to a halt, hovering over the edge of a deeper well, fifty metres across, that dropped down vertically in a series of shrinking concentric rings. The crew doors slammed open, and the two storm troopers leapt out, crouching down and sweeping the vicinity.

‘Take the controls,’ ordered Spinoza, reaching for the door release.

‘As you will it, lord,’ said Hegain, maintaining the transport’s position as the cockpit canopy slid open.

Spinoza pushed clear and dropped down next to her troops. ‘Keep moving,’ she ordered her escorts, breaking into a run and drawing her ordo-monogrammed Accatran laspistol.

They were on the edge of the topmost tier of the well. Overhead, lost in the darkness, was the roof of the chamber, a hulking mass of rockcrete and natural spoil from the spire construction. To her left, just a few metres away, was the fall to the next tier down, overlooking the chasm. Eroded stairs, carved into the rockcrete, led to the levels further below, spiralling ever deeper like the bore-gauge of some immense drill.

Lost in the dank and the dark, hundreds eked out an existence there in gnawed-out hovels, a nocturnal realm of desperation. Most scattered like animals as Spinoza emerged, their rags swaying from skeletal limbs. She caught flashes of ghoulish faces, drawn with malnutrition and marked with pox-scars, before they raced off into the gloom.

Spinoza ran for the first stairwell and tore down it two steps at a time, feeling the slime-covered stone slip under her tread. She jumped down to the base and raced out across rotting rockcrete. The location marker on her retinal feeds turned red, zeroing in on the destination given by the abhuman’s testimony. She reached a steel doorway to an old storage chamber driven back into the curved wall, crowned with a heavy lintel marked with faded Divisio Malliax administratum runes.

Spinoza located the door’s locking mechanism – a heavy iron box with an intact bolt-unit – and blew it out with a single shot. The door creaked open, its hinges straining, and she kicked it in, applying a morsel of power-boost from her armour’s battle-matrix to lend the movement extra heft.

‘Surrender yourself,’ she warned, striding into the chamber beyond, scanning with the laspistol.

The unit had been clawed into the bedrock of the shaft’s edge, running back straight from the entrance portal. Its roof was low and arched, and damp spores clung thickly to ancient walls. Spinoza’s scanning augurs picked up trace heat signatures, but the place was empty. Towards the distant rear of the chamber, another metal door swung lazily on rusted hinges.

‘Secure the entrance,’ she ordered one of the storm troopers, the male, and gestured for the other one,

who had a squad callsign of Zeta-8, to follow her.

She reached the listing door, wrenched it open and ran down a narrow corridor beyond. The tunnel was barely tall enough for her to fit through without stooping, and her breath echoed hard in her earpiece. A sudden mental image of millions upon millions of tonnes of earth, rock, plasteel and adamantium, all bearing down on her, briefly intruded into her mind, and she dismissed it.

‘Surrender yourself!’ she warned again, kicking through foetid pools of oily matter, her armour lumens rendering the walls of the tunnel in stark flashes of white.

The air grew even hotter. Sweat ran down Spinoza’s collar-seal; Zeta-8 nearly lost her footing amid the treacherous clutter strewn across the tunnel floor. They broke into another chamber, square-shaped and low-roofed, daubed with bloody angel-shapes on the mouldy walls. A shaft ran upwards from the far corner, accessed via an iron ladder welded to the walls. Spinoza skidded over to the opening, angling her weapon up at it, and saw a pair of boots ten metres above, just cresting the end of the ladder.

She fired twice, sending las-beams scything up the well, but her prey disappeared over the exploding edge and into another chamber beyond. Spinoza clambered up, reached the summit and hauled herself over the edge. She emerged into a larger hall, still subterranean but now lit by dirty lumen-strips hung on long chains. There were people again around her, hordes of rat-like underhivers, blinking at her sudden appearance before they realised the danger and broke into a confused stampede. Off in the crowd, one man was already running, his tattered cloak fluttering as he barged his way clear.

Spinoza and Zeta-8 pushed their way through the press of scrawny bodies, shoving them aside to gain a clear shot. Spinoza punched out with her free hand, feeling the snap of fragile bone, gaining a split-second avenue. She took aim at the man’s thigh and fired. The las-bolt ripped through flesh in a puff of blood, and he staggered, crashing into those about him.

Spinoza was about to go after him when Zeta-8 suddenly called her up. ‘Lord,’ she voxed. ‘New target – two nine four.’

Spinoza dropped to one knee, sweeping her laspistol up to the coordinates given – a high gallery some six metres overhead, running along the left-hand edge of the underground hall. She caught a glimpse of what looked like carapace armour, close-fitted, cameleo-coated, blending almost perfectly into the dank rockcrete wall.

‘Hold!’ Spinoza warned, but the figure was already moving – a confident sprint, far faster than the stampeding crowds down below.

She fired, taking out the gallery a metre ahead of the running figure. Without missing a stride, the figure vaulted across the collapsing struts and landed on the far side.

‘Attend to the subject,’ ordered Spinoza to Zeta-8, moving to the new quarry. She ran along the length of the hall, veering through the panicking masses. At the end of the gallery was an open circular portal. The figure dived through it. Spinoza reached the gallery’s only access stairwell and raced up the corroded rungs. She plunged through the empty hatch and out into a much wider roofed thoroughfare, still deep below nominal street-level but high enough up to be clogged with hundreds more bodies – pilgrims, beggars, priests, onlookers. Some enormous procession was taking place along the avenue, and crude effigies of the Angel Sanguinius swayed drunkenly above the throngs. Ecclesiarchy devotion-pods droned overhead, gouting incense and blaring out tinny audio recordings of sanctioned sermons.

Spinoza spun around, trying to see where her quarry had gone. Pilgrims blundered up to her, their eyes glassy and their faces streaked with blood, insensible to anything but their ecstasy. She pushed past them, searching desperately, and caught a glimpse of the carapace armour, now mottled with red-and-gold blotches, heading up through the crowds. She went after it, shoving and pushing and kicking out. The press of bodies grew closer and tighter. She smelt the stale wash of sweat and fervour, the sickly top-note of Ministorum censers, and reached for her crozius. Another pilgrim – a woman, her grey hair sticking out like thatch, her eyes black-edged and crazy – tried to embrace her, crying out something about the sacrifice of the beloved primarch. Spinoza smashed the butt-end of the crozius into her stupid, wrinkled face, not bothering to activate the disruptor field, and barely saw her crumple into a wailing heap.

It was no good. The downed woman was replaced by more of her kind, trampling over themselves, crashing up against her like a buffeting wind. Spinoza came to a halt, defeated by the crowd.

‘Sergeant,’ she voxed, sourly. ‘Your location.’

Hegain’s voice hissed back over the link immediately. *‘Closing in, lord. Coming in well enough. Tight tunnels, some of them, but we have a route. Hold fast, I approach.’*

Spinoza shoved back, clearing enough space for her to break free of the main tide of bodies. Somewhere up ahead, now too far to pursue, the armour-clad interloper was no doubt making their way to safety. Everything indicated a capable operator – an agent of Adeptus Terra, an arbitrator, or maybe something more dangerous. What had they been doing there? Shadowing them? Or after the same quarry?

‘Zeta-Eight – report,’ she voxed.

‘*Subject terminated,*’ came the reply. *‘Heartburst capsule, ingested immediately after immobilisation.’*

Spinoza closed the link and sank back against an ouslite column. She shackled the crozius again and waited for her pulse rate to stabilise.

The multitudes paid her no attention. No doubt most were drugged, either by the priests handing out sacred devotion-amplifiers or through the food they scavenged from the resident gutter-scrapers. All they thought of was the prospect of making it to the Palace in time, and all they saw were lurid dream-visions of the beloved primarch swimming in front of their addled eyes. There must have been a thousand of them there, packed tightly together like herd groxes. Statistically, the chances were that none of them would make it. They were easy pickings for the predators of the underhives, or the rampant diseases of the subterranean levels would overwhelm their off-world constitutions, or they would never find the path that led them through the warrens in time.

She tried not to scorn them. Their faith was direct, untroubled by nuance. Most of them knew what the odds were, on some level. They still came, and they still strived. Better to die in purity than live in corruption, as the old dictum went.

Overhead, the close air stirred. The boom of atmospheric thrusters began to compete with the drone of the crowds, and soon the cloaks and cowls of the supplicants were rippling and flapping. The Shade emerged from the north end of the huge hall, dipping low to avoid the suspensor-lumens. Spinoza watched it come, marvelling at how little attention even the hovering transporter got from the chanting crowds.

‘*Now I have you, lord,*’ came Hegain’s voice over the comm, just as the Shade angled for the descent, its engines howling and its landing-lights whirling. *‘I will touch down here, just here, if you*

*will it. Doors prepped for opening, watch the descending hatch-cover, if you forgive me for saying it. In all this, I thank Him that you are preserved, by His will. Here I come, steady, steady.'*

Spinoza couldn't help the smile – it crept like a thief across her face as the sergeant found new irrelevances to list.

'Your timing is exemplary,' she said. For all that, though, she had failed, and felt it keenly. Crawl would not be happy. 'Summon the others. We will at least take the corpse, if nothing else. Then home.'

The body taken from Gulagh's citadel lay on the slab, cold as ice, its flesh cut open to the bone, and Crawl looked down at it. Gorgias hung unsteadily over the cadaver's forehead, gazing intently at some detail with its single red eye before clicking away indeterminately.

A third figure busied himself with the scalpels and the flesh-pins – a skeletal figure, his bones protruding even under a thick covering of velvet drapery. Half-moon spectacles hung from the tip of a long nose, an outsize protuberance in an otherwise drawn face. His eyes were pink, his fingers long and augmented with iron surgeon-nails. As he worked, his breath came in contented whispers.

Only at the end of a long examination did his head rise atop the wrinkled stalk of a neck.

'So then,' said Crawl, who during the process had remained silent and contemplative, his hands clasped before him. 'Your verdict.'

Courvain's chirurgon-philosophical rubbed his chin with those fingers. 'Killed by a single shot to the torso, aimed from behind,' he said, his voice like a scraped hiss of torn flesh. 'Consistent with a single release from an Inquisition-issue augmented lasweapon, hellgun-type. See the burn-marks here? A standard beam is less focused, more diffuse. I can see why Gulagh thought it was one of yours.' He looked up. 'You are sure it was not?'

'How long have you known me, Erunion? This is not one of my kills.'

'Then there is the problem. Gulagh has made a mistake, and he will pay for it.'

'Perhaps, though he's already submitted his records to me.' Crawl reached for a thick tarpaulin and dragged it over the corpse's ravaged chest, leaving the face uncovered. 'He assures me this came in with our consignment. I'll maintain the pressure, but in truth I believe him. He's worked with us for years, and this is the first anomaly.'

'Then maybe,' said Erunion, cocking his chicken-like head strangely, 'it was a mistake. An honest mistake.'

Crawl looked hard at the dead man's face. 'There are as many honest mistakes on Terra as there are honest men. This one wasn't living in Malliax. Too healthy. He's been eating regularly, if not well. His complexion's grey, not white. I'd judge a mid-spire occupant, lower scribe level.'

'Agreed. Where does Gulagh's jurisdiction run to?'

'Six grid-zones.'

'That is a lot of hab-units.'

Crawl bent lower, rolling the head to one side and taking a good look at the cheek. 'Anything that might identify him?'

'Not much.' Erunion pushed his spectacles further up his nose, and the iron frames glinted in the low light. 'Note the depressions around the eye sockets. He's been using a picter-funnel to concentrate attention on a readout. His muscles are in a minor atrophied state, so he does not engage in manual labour. He shows precipitate signs of scurvy, sump fever and rotskin – which of them does not? – and

his palms are indented from the use of cluster comm-link columns.'

'No surface markings, subdermal identifiers?'

'Nothing, which is unusual in itself. If you are right, and he has been inserted into a mortuary batch to hide his origin, then whoever did this would have been able to scrub the more obvious signals.'

Crowl nodded. 'Dangerous, though. Gulagh may yet face the trials for it.'

Erunion giggled, an effeminate sound that made the wattles on his exposed neck wobble. 'Then he will be flaying his own menials to discover the truth.' The surgeon shuffled towards the end of the slab. 'But are we in danger of making something more of this than is warranted? Supposition: someone has killed a person of little importance, and wishes to keep the business quiet. The killer arranges for the corpse to appear within a routine morgue-dispatch, one that comes under your seal and is marked for incineration. Further supposition: the only individuals capable of arranging this are also members of an equivalent ordo, inquisitor-rank. No one else would have access to the requisite seals, and certainly no one else would be stupid enough to fake them. Final supposition: your corpses will be destroyed soon, and if you had not paid a visit to Gulagh to oversee your delivery, which I have always said is a strange practice and beneath your dignity, none of this would have been known or cared about, for no other individual, not even of high rank, would have dared or been able to scrutinise the detritus of an Inquisition-ordained episode. Conclusion: this is the product of one of your colleagues' private disputes, an individual with access to Gulagh's services, and no profit will come of pursuing it further.'

'I agree with the suppositions,' Crowl said, tilting the corpse's head to one side. 'I don't agree with the conclusion.'

'No, I did not think that you would.'

'My colleagues' games are of no interest to me,' Crowl said, still searching, still probing. 'But this is my domain here, my realm, and I don't take kindly to interference in it.'

Gorgias swept in lower, its residual spine-tail clattering across the slab's edge. 'Subdermis auspex *contra facies*,' it chirped. '*Iterum*, now-now.'

Erunion fixed the skull with a cold look. 'You think I did not scan already?'

Gorgias' eye flared up. '*Stupidus!* Again, do it.'

Erunion, incensed, made ready to swat the skull away with an electro-stave, but Crowl raised a calming hand between them. 'What equipment did you use?'

'Standard spectrum micro-augur.'

Crowl gestured for Gorgias to hover down, and the skull lurched back to its holding position over the corpse's forehead. 'If your suppositions are correct,' he said to Erunion, 'then this subject has been prepared for more than a cursory inspection. Perhaps there was a requirement for haste, though. Perhaps they missed something. Indulge me, surgeon – do what the skull recommends.'

Erunion shook his head resignedly, then limped over to a rack containing an array of arcane devices – brass-vaned and coiled, studded with bottle-green lens apertures, each trailed by thick segmented power cabling. He reached for a handheld augur and yanked it from its cradle, powering up the heavy cells within. Static crackled across the surface as the crystalline viewer clarified. 'This will destroy what remains,' he said, stiffly.

'Understood, Erunion. Do it now, please.'

The surgeon placed the device over the corpse's face and activated the energy field. A pool of green light flooded over the rigid features, picking them out in stark relief. Faint lines of smoke rose

from the grey skin, and the stench of burning gradually filled the chamber. Erunion moved the augur back and forth, adjusting the device's dials as he did so. From behind the slab, over where the cables snaked into a heavy snake's nest of tangled metal wiring, crystal-housed transistors pinged and chattered, and arcs of force snapped between conductor loops.

The scan intensified. The dead man's face began to char, turning black where the beam hit and sloughed from the bone beneath. By the time Erunion had completed the sweep, a heap of ash-dry flakes remained, wedged in the burned skull-curves. He deactivated the augur's beam and the device wound down.

Crowl waited patiently, though Gorgias was less able to contain its excitement and began to bob in agitation.

'Put the skull out of its misery,' said Crowl.

For a moment longer Erunion said nothing, but peered studiously into the augur's main viewer. He cycled back and forth across the stored data-screed, searching, comparing, looking for anything out of the ordinary. For a while there was just lurid green light reflected in the half-moon spectacles. Then, reluctantly, the chirurgeon placed a marker on the screen and froze the image.

'So there was something buried,' he said. 'An old ident-tattoo, scrubbed from the surface, but not quite erased beneath.'

Crowl took the augur. A faint image throbbed on the screen, barely visible amid the emerald image-grain. At first he could make out nothing intelligible, but long experience had habituated him to all the runes and markers deployed in his sectors of the world-city.

'So he was a scribe indeed,' Crowl said, deciphering the marks. 'Signals operative, if I read this right. Grade quintus, conditioned for orbital comms transmission.'

'Just so,' said Erunion, grudgingly, not meeting Gorgias' triumphant lens-glare. 'One of millions.'

'Perhaps,' said Crowl, taking the image-grab and shunting a facsimile into his armour's static storage. 'But these are Chartist guild marks, or my eyes are dying faster than the rest of me. They can be traced.'

Erunion pushed his spectacles a notch further up, and his pink eyes blinked.

'You asked for my counsel, lord,' he said sullenly, 'and I gave it to you. If you choose to pursue this lead then you will surely succeed, for I have never seen a scent you could not run down. But, in truth, I do not think this worthy of your attention. Give it to the arbitrators, if you must.'

'And what use would they make of it?' said Crowl, handing back the augur. 'I'll judge what's worthy of my attention and what is not. Gorgias, we have a trip to Mamzel Huk in store. My thanks, chirurgeon. As ever, your expertise has been invaluable.'

The servo-skull thrust up triumphantly, missing Erunion's head by a finger's width and causing him to duck in irritation.

'You listen too much to Palv's ghost, lord!' he called out as Crowl moved away. 'What's left of him is no guide – you know it!'

'Ah, but the best guides are the ghosts,' said Crowl, carrying on walking, a clucking Gorgias in tow. 'Sometimes I think they're the only ones worth listening to.'



## CHAPTER FIVE

As the old sun sank below the western horizon, Terra took on another aspect. The clouds of grey smog deepened to a thick black haze, shrouding the spire trunks and making the myriad lights glimmer softly. Prayer beacons rang out from the vox-amplifiers mounted on every cathedral cupola, and workers trudging from their daylight duties filed into the cavernous halls to attend the sermons of the priest-caste. Lamplighters filled the column-mounted gas-burners along the ceremonial ways, adding to the heat and muck that spiralled up into the distant heavens, a choking blanket that coated the high walls and stained the devotional frescos that lined the transit passages. The sunset bled down to a deep dark red, casting the jagged summits like bloody teeth against the world's end.

The noise never ceased. The shrine world of all shrine worlds was a planet in the grip of perpetual tumult, enveloped in the distributed roar of an entire species as it lived, bred, toiled and expired. Ministorum fervour engines emerged from their housings, bipedal monsters of steel and promethium, stalking through the lengthening shadows bleating against the ancient enemy and proclaiming the eternal reign of the Master of Mankind. The furnaces never stopped burning, the cargo-lifters never stopped coming, the prayers never stopped being whispered through cracked, chapped lips.

Spinoza watched the sun go down from Courvain's summit, standing up close to an armourglass viewportal. The vantage was not ideal – mightier and taller spires thrust up around the lesser edifice, framing the vista with gigantic walls of blackened adamantium – but the dying of the light could just be made out along the length of a single westward-running canyon, slowly fading to forge embers amid the immensity of its man-made enclosure.

She heard Crawl enter the chamber, and turned to bow. As the red light slanted across the room, he looked cadaverous, a lean shadow stripped from the urban wells below and brought up choking into the realm of the living.

The inquisitor waved away her bow and reached for a glass. Crystal decanters were arranged in a chaotic procession on top of a long inlaid cabinet, each one half full and surrounded by a variety of goblets.

‘Will you have one, Spinoza?’ he asked, pouring himself something dark blue.

‘No, thank you, lord.’

‘Crawl. And why not? You’ve been down in the grime – you should have a drink.’

‘I am still in service.’

‘Unto death, eh? Long time to wait.’ He took a long swig, then refilled the glass. ‘You’re stitched



tight, interrogator. I don't like that.' He drank again. 'You'll burn up quicker than a witch-heap, and that's no good to me.'

Spinoza drew in a weary breath. This was juvenile stuff, a tedious attempt to unbalance her. 'Do you wish to know the results of the day's labour?' she asked.

'Hegain briefed me,' said Crowl, walking over to an anomalously luxurious chair and sinking into it. 'But let me know if there's anything you wish to add.'

'Only my apologies. I will do penance.'

'If you really want, but I won't demand it.' He turned the glass in the light, watching as it caught the last rays of the ruby sun. 'You lost a subject, something got in the way. It happens. Hegain told me you were capable down there, and I trust his judgement. Tell me, though – what was the thing you hunted?'

'I have not had time to analyse the data.'

'For the Throne's sake, Spinoza, sit *down*. Tell me what you made of it – I'm not recording this for scrutiny.'

She walked over to the chair opposite and took her place. Thirst nagged at her – she had not taken much sustenance since returning from the underworld, and suddenly refusing a drink seemed like a poor option.

'Fast,' she said. 'Well trained, in good condition. How common is cameleo armour here?'

'Rare.'

'Then well resourced too. My escort thought they were aiming a weapon, though I did not see it and the subject did not stay to fight.'

'Why would they intervene in your business?'

'I judge they were a member of this cabal. We have only seen the foot-soldiers so far – they could not have organised so completely without more formidable troops.'

'Possibly. Or maybe they were monitoring them, just as you were, or maybe monitoring you. Or maybe something else. This dreadful planet, eh?' He took another sip. 'Here's the important thing – what are you going to do about it?'

'I have one more location known for cabal gatherings, taken from the abhuman. I have scheduled another raid, this time in force. We will shut it down and take whatever we can. We will not be quiet. If they show up again, as I expect them to, we will be prepared, and I will engage.'

Crowl thought on that, swilling the goblet before him. 'Very well,' he said. 'Though we're no closer to learning what they strive for. So far, they're like any of a hundred cults I have broken here – meeting in the shadows, whispering to one another, talking of a new order and freedom for all. They say they have weapons, and that is something, but for what? I feel a blindness with these people.'

Spinoza felt her impatience rise. 'They associate without sanction,' she said, as calmly as she was able. 'They pledge allegiance to this False Angel, whoever that is. That is crime enough.'

Crowl looked amused. 'True,' he said. 'And their deaths are richly deserved. But do not assume they're both mad and stupid, Spinoza. We've captured two of their lesser lights and killed two dozen more, but still the leaders remain elusive. Perhaps they give these lackeys to us – they can afford to. Consider what they long for most urgently, for they'll not wait for us to come to them. They'll be thinking, praying to whatever gods have turned their souls. We are part of those plans, so must move beyond them. All we have is a name – the rest, thus far, is worthless.'

Spinoza realised her fingers were pressing hard into the armrests. 'I have what you gave me, lord. Perhaps you will offer some guidance, if you feel progress is not swift enough.'

‘Your plan’s sound, Spinoza – I trust you.’

She nodded, suppressing the irritation that boiled away inside her, and tried to frame the words suitably. ‘Very well, lord.’

‘Crowl, please. But I see that you’re unhappy.’

‘Not at all.’

‘And a poor liar, which is a disadvantage in this profession. Tell me what irks you.’

She wanted to say, *You do, lord, with your impiety, your lack of resolve.* ‘I only wish to see the cabal broken.’

Crowl sighed, and reached for the decanter again. ‘You think I’m too cautious. I don’t blame you. You haven’t been here long, and I know what Tur was like.’ He drank again, a long draught. ‘I look at you and see myself, a century ago. I’d have been angry then, too. I’d have wanted to reach for the flames and fan them. Burn the whole world down, I’d have said, if it only catches a few of those we need to kill. It does you credit, Spinoza, and it amplifies my respect for you, but you’re wrong if you think I’m motivated by pity. I’ve lived here long enough to know what works.’

He leaned forwards, resting his arms on his knees.

‘Fear is like any other weapon,’ he said. ‘It can be exhausted. When you next go into the hive-spires, look at the people. They are afraid, terrified, all of the time. Every waking moment they’re gripped by anxiety. They fear the alien. They fear their neighbour. Any second of any day they might be hauled down to the scrutiny cells by an arbitrator or a priest or – Throne help them – one of us. They’re numb to it. We are numb to it. We forget what the fear of the guilty looks like, for we have made innocence impossible.’

‘But they should be afraid,’ said Spinoza. ‘They *should* be afraid. Afraid of us, if they need to be, for if they ever stop fearing their protectors then all that waits for them is...’

‘I know it.’

‘Do you?’ Spinoza caught herself too late, and after that she could only glare at him defiantly, the truth of her scorn now out in the open.

Crowl laughed – a low, dry laugh – and sat back in his chair. ‘That’s better, Spinoza. Say what you think.’

‘It is just that... your words,’ she said, trying harder. ‘I know you do not mean them, but–’

‘I mean everything.’

‘–if you were not of this order, I would have to...’ She looked down. ‘Is this a trial?’

‘No, not that. I’m not trying to catch you out. Far from it.’ Crowl placed his empty goblet to one side, his drawn face catching the last reflected light of the sunset. ‘When’s your raid scheduled?’

‘Before dawn, lord.’

He clasped his hands together, pressing the fingertips against one another. ‘I’ll take it over. They’ll be expecting you, if they have any sense, and a more subtle approach might be what is required.’

Spinoza felt her cheeks flush, and she bowed awkwardly. ‘If you wish it,’ she said.

Crowl laughed again. ‘Do not sulk, Spinoza – this is not a demotion. I have another task in mind for you – one that I’ll be very pleased to see you carry out.’

Journeymaster Agister Holbech padded down the winding passage towards his personal chambers, feeling the effects of a twenty-hour shift prey on his aging constitution. His belly flapped across an over-tight belt, his soft-soled shoes slipping atop polished stone flags. Pseudo-flames guttered low in

framed candelabras, an antique touch of nonsense that the Chartist guilds were fond of preserving in their private sanctums. Through narrow mullioned windows he could make out the night glitter of the eternal city running west, luminous under low-hanging cloud-banks. There was no moon. There was never a moon, not unless the rad-blooms higher up broke apart for a moment, gifting the terrestrials a fleeting look at the skies that had once been the species' inspiration to break out into the void.

He reached his chamber and absently tapped the nine-digit cipher into the door-slot. A micro-needle punched a miniscule incision into a pudgy finger, the analytical cyclers whirred, and the lock-lumen winked green. He pushed against the brushed steel surface wearily, and it slid to reveal a cramped and semi-lit interior.

Holbech lurched inside, throwing the day's tally scrolls onto a low sideboard. Dirty windows on the far wall offered a privileged vista of the nightscape outside – a landscape of jagged spikes, studded with lurid points of light from hab lumens, search-beams, furnace plumes and the glowing swarms of air traffic, all set against the stained churn of the ever-moving thunderheads. The air was hot, humid, like the break point before a storm, except that those clouds never broke – they just boiled and shifted, hemming in the heat, wreathing the world below in a gasping clutch of desiccation.

He was sweating, and he poured himself a long drink – refiltered water, laced with pure alcohol, flavoured with synthetic cardamom. Then he went over to a long couch, the leather real but patched, the steel frame speckled with rust. As he sank down onto it the joints squealed and the coils sagged.

He looked over his apartment, high up on the spire's western flank. It was a privileged position by most standards, but not as high as he'd have liked; not up into the opulent levels where the air was scraped through filters to excise the grit and the floors were cooled and there were living plants – living plants! – watered from cisterns that the parched multitudes below could have survived off for a year.

To Holbech's mind he hadn't quite achieved his potential – it was a thought that occupied his mind every night after a long shift, as he remembered his performance in the distant guild examinations or recalled the time he'd imagined himself competing for a seat on the Schedulists councils, or the wardenship of a major traffic node, or – and why should he not have dreamt of it? – the speakership itself.

Holbech took a long draught of his semi-palatable cocktail, and looked out miserably across the little realm he had been able to secure for himself. The stipend for a journeymaster was substantial by objective standards, for he was responsible for the safe berthing of hundreds of cargo-haulers every day, and yet still his hab-space was no more than ten square metres, two-thirds of the way up the decent zones of a middling spire complex on the edge of the mundane Salvator zone. He looked with regret at the things he had collected – the cheap vases, the parchment records of obsolete vessel-types stacked in bundles, the chairs, the tables, the broken vid-relayer with its data sets of Missionaria improvement sessions.

Then he saw the man sitting in the shadows, under the window, with the laspistol aimed at his head, and froze.

'Good evening, journeymaster,' said Maldo Revus, staying just where he was.

Holbech considered doing something, but not for very long. His antique Haus revolver was safely stowed in a drawer next to his cot, and even if he had had it by his side, he guessed that it wouldn't do much against his visitor, who was wearing a quite brutal amount of armour.

'How did you get in here?' Holbech asked, impressing himself with the relative lack of panic in his

voice.

‘The same way I get in everywhere. How was your day?’

Holbech felt a trickle of sweat run down his fat, shaved temple. ‘I have no coin here.’

‘You have plenty, much more than your stipend allows for. If I were here to take it, though, I would already have done so, so you should ask yourself again, why I am still here?’

Holbech began to speculate. The level of corruption in his subsector processing node was probably a little below average, and in any case implicated a regional judge, so there was little to grasp at. There had been that sordid business with the trainee menials two years ago, but that was the kind of weakness overlooked by all but the most fastidious of priests, and the man before him was no priest.

‘I do not—’

‘What work do your cadres do, journeymaster?’

Surely all knew this. ‘The usual business.’

‘Enlighten me.’

‘Processing lifters entering the Triad port zone. Bulkers, void-haulers, some pilgrim transports. Three hundred standard crew, all screened, all Astra-conditioned. No problems, no difficulties.’

‘Good to hear. I am an efficient man myself, journeymaster. It is good to meet a like mind.’

‘I am... glad you think so.’

‘Now think harder. Think about your signals staff, those at quintus grade.’

Holbech thought. ‘I have seventy-four—’

‘Are you missing any, journeymaster?’

‘You know it’s an Adeptus-level offence for me to give menial data out,’ said Holbech, warily.

‘And you know that I care less than nothing for your offence.’

‘I thought this was all done with. I thought Phaelias had what he wanted and the matter was closed.’

‘It’s not closed.’

Holbech started to become exasperated. He was not a mere nobody; he was a registered member of the Adeptus Terra, one of the exalted citizens of the eternal Imperium, and that gave him rights.

But then he looked at the man’s expression – just like the woman who had come before, the one who had spoken strangely and had those brown eyes that never blinked. Throne, where did they *get* these people?

‘You’ve been sent by Phaelias?’ Holbech asked.

‘Don’t worry where I’m from. Tell me about the scribe.’

‘It was days ago. I thought it was done with. I told the last one that he’d not turned up to his station for two duty-cycles, and that I had informed the superior and the communal dorm-master. That was it. I’m not his registered guardian, and I didn’t take the matter further. Sometimes people go missing. They say that there’s something loose in the underhives in Malliax, and perhaps that got him. Who knows? There are some bad people in this world. No doubt you know a few.’

‘His name?’

‘Hieron Valco. Of the Ketan-Theta lower combine.’

‘How long had he worked here?’

‘Two years. I barely knew him. No problems on his report-slate. He was diligent. He reported anything anomalous on the schedules, and that saved me a lot of grief.’

‘His task was to monitor the landing of ships? Pilgrim transports, lifters?’

‘Most of the time. And he had to scan the records and scrub them of errors before submitting to the

archives.’

Revus never moved his hand – it remained as still as if moulded in rockcrete. ‘Did he report anything of note before he disappeared?’

‘There are always errors. A big lifter touches down on a Triad platform every twenty seconds, twenty-four hours a day, and there are sixteen platforms in our jurisdiction. Everything is logged, then placed into Archive Gothic, then transcribed onto vellum by the scholiasts before being taken down to the scriptorium for storage. We have to check the schedules against the berthing records, compare the manifests, check for security alerts–’

‘Your work must be very fulfilling. How can I access the documents worked on by him?’

Holbech began to lose his fear again, and felt his drink warming up unsatisfactorily. ‘See, I thought you had already taken this information. The woman was insistent that–’

‘Remind me.’

‘You can’t get them. The scrolls were quarantined by the arbitrators after I reported him missing. I don’t know where they took them after that, but it’s given us pain, as the Schedulingists are demanding reconstitution of the missing archive lists, and of course we can’t do it.’

‘Which judge sanctioned that?’

‘You think I asked them? Might as well ask which one sanctioned you coming here and poking guns at innocent men.’

Revus thought for a moment. ‘When did we last make contact with you?’

‘You don’t know that?’

‘Answer the damn question.’

‘Four days ago. Like I said, I thought this was all–’

‘You’ve been helpful, journeymaster. That will be all.’

Holbech dared to take a sip of his drink. Warmed-up, it was even fouler than usual. ‘Nothing else?’

‘If I think of anything, you’ll know. One more thing – I was not here, we did not have this conversation.’

Holbech snorted. ‘Or you’ll file a report to the judges, eh?’

‘Something like that.’

Revus rose, moving out into the open, and for the first time Holbech caught a glimpse of just how powerfully built the man was – tall, bulky, his savage face a mass of scar tissue and tattoos. Holbech swallowed, and found his throat dry.

‘What’s this all about, then?’ he asked.

‘I ask the questions,’ Revus said, holstering his sidearm and walking to the hab-unit entrance. He pulled the door open and left, without giving a backward glance.

For a few moments Holbech sat, his heart still beating too hard, his armpits sweatier than before. He drank again, then again, until the glass was empty. Then he looked up again, back at the cityscape vista, the crooked spires glowing under a dirty sky.

‘Throne, I hate this place,’ he breathed.



## CHAPTER SIX

Crowl hunkered down, keeping his body low to the ground. The pain in his calves flared, and he considered another gland-burst of heiloquat. He was about to move when Revus' call sign flitted across his audex feed.

'Anything?' he asked, keeping his voice low. Ahead of him the squad of storm troopers crouched in the dark.

*'Subject's name is Hieron Valco,'* said Revus. *'Stationed at a Triad watchtower. Disappeared six days ago.'*

'Well done. Anything else?'

*'I have the location of Valco's hab-unit from the spire's central allocator. Do you know the name Phaelias?'*

Crowl thought for a moment. 'No. Why?'

*'Valco's superior had been questioned already. Someone else is interested in our corpse.'*

'Irritating.' Crowl shifted position slightly, easing the burn in his legs. 'Go to the hab, get what you can. We'll speak back at Courvain.'

*'By your will.'*

The link cut. Crowl's attention snapped back to his surroundings.

Ranks of empty promethium tanks led away into the gloom, overhung with a low ceiling of rusting iron. Empty cables swirled like entrails over a greasy floor. At the far end of the echoing hall was a fortified slide-portal, unmarked and unlit. Crowl observed the approach carefully, his eyes flickering from point to point. The storm troopers, a full squad of ten this time, led by Hegain, remained spread throughout what remained of the old manufactorum node, sheltering behind the tanks that had once held chem-solutions for the Jeroda Deredian industrial cluster away to the north. The node's walls were heavy slabs of buttressed adamantium, built to be sufficient to contain an explosion and shield the inhabited zones above and below.

Crowl activated a proximity scan, but it was baffled by the heavy layers of shielding. He opened a channel to his sergeant. 'Has all been put in place?'

'As you commanded,' Hegain replied, his voice low. 'Nerve-charges in place, spider-pattern, covering all ingress routes. A tidy job, now it's done. You'll be pleased when you see it. If you see it. If we do it.'

'Then I think it's time, don't you?'

‘Absolutely, yes, I do.’

Hegain gestured – a brief finger-ripple that sent five of the squad creeping up close to the portal, covered by the rest. Crowl advanced more steadily, shadowed as ever by the servo-skull.

‘Burn-bu–’

‘Hush,’ voxed Crowl sternly. ‘Not now.’

Gorgias dropped a little, its eye dulling to a sullen brown. Crowl silently drew Sanguine, running his finger down the curve of the long trigger, enjoying the weight of it in his palm. The lead trooper reached the portal, dropped down close and placed a tumbler-cracker over the lock-unit. The cracker hissed as it worked, spinning through the combinations, then clanked open. The portal’s clamshell doors shivered as the bolts shot back.

‘Go silent,’ said Hegain, moving up to point, his hellgun trained at the central join. He looked back at Crowl, bringing up the rear, who nodded, then motioned for two of his squad to haul the doors open while the others formed a semicircle around the portal, all guns aimed at its centre.

The chamber on the far side was pitch-black, stinking, silent. Hegain was first in, his hellgun-mounted lumen sweeping across a narrow, dust-thick space. Four more followed, then Crowl stepped across the threshold, his cloak sliding smoothly over the oxidised edge.

‘No one home,’ voxed Hegain, pushing further inside.

‘Don’t be hasty,’ said Crowl, sweeping the area with Sanguine’s ornate muzzle. ‘You smell it?’

Blood – the old metallic tang over a background fug of mould and decay. The chamber was low-ceilinged, claustrophobic, unlit and stuffy. It had once been a storage cell, fit for little better than heavy STC tox-crates, but hadn’t been in service for a very long time.

They pressed deeper, going carefully around the carcasses of old transporter platforms, keeled over and caked in dust. Crowl looked down and saw cracks between the floor panels. The space was hollow beneath, its original underpinning having rotted away.

‘Watch your step,’ he warned, following Hegain’s careful progress, taking time to scan into the void below.

They moved into a further chamber, a little wider, just as decrepit. The smell of humans was stronger here. A series of plasteel crates had been shoved together in the room’s centre to act as some kind of table. Open storage cylinders lined the walls, some still containing ration-packs, most empty.

‘What do you suppose that is, lord?’ asked Hegain, looking up at the far wall. ‘Never seen that before. I mean, I reckon I may have, of a kind, but there’s a bit more art to it, I think? Or maybe not.’

Crowl angled his armour-halo towards the indicated spot, flooding cracked plasterwork with a severe light-pool. The painted angel had been slapped on the wall in red, and for a moment he thought that might have been the source of the blood-stench, but spectral scans said otherwise. The figure took up the entire wall space. It was a messy, gauche daub – semi-abstract, like some tribal scratching on the curve of a cave-edge. It needed the dance of firelight to complete the effect.

He took a pict-record of it, and turned his attention to the table. Images were stacked on its surface, dozens of them. They were cheap lithochromes, pulled out from any one of a thousand picter workshops in the vicinity, rendered onto mouldering paper in watery colours. He leafed through them, taking in the catalogue of horror they documented – body parts extracted, eyes pinned open, ribs exposed, shutter-frozen screaming.

He put them down distastefully, letting the images flutter to the ground. Committing the crime to lithochromes was just another imposition of violence.

‘Take these,’ he ordered. Crawl moved away from the central table, into the gloomier corners, and stooped low. The floor – a badly laid screed of cheap ceramic tiles – was shiny with a black film. This was what he had smelt. He ran a finger through the film, lifting its glossy scrapings to the light. The blood was congealed, perhaps a long time ago. Whatever had taken place here, they could not have intervened in time to prevent it.

‘And samples of this,’ Crawl added, getting back to his feet.

‘By your will,’ said Hegain, gesturing to one of his troops to comply.

Gorgias had adopted a holding position directly in front of the painted angel, scanning repeatedly as if it could decipher something about the image from looking at it. Crawl moved his scrutinising gaze around the rest of the chamber. The place had the stench of desperation about it – a black hole, buried under the crust of civilisation, a place where elaborate pain had been curated. And yet...

‘Hold,’ he voxed, suddenly tensing again.

The storm troopers complied instantly, dousing all lumens and switching to void-sight scanners. Crawl cocked his head a little, relying on his natural hearing for a second, then switching to the ironwork augmetic implanted under his right lobe.

*Wait...* he signalled in ordo battle-sign. *Wait...*

He gestured to the floor, where greater cracks gaped between the tile edges. Some of those cracks were packed with grey-black dust, some were hollow. Seamlessly, every soldier in the chamber angled their gun towards the crevices.

Crawl narrowed his eyes, holding Sanguine two-handed now. He might have been mistaken. The narcotics could do that, which was why Palv’s ghost disapproved.

Then he heard it again.

‘Flush it out,’ he snapped, and opened fire.

A volley of lasfire in a confined space gave none of the sensory overload of a bolter volley, but it had a sinister whisper and an eldritch light-flash. Sanguine’s projectiles made the only solid sound, cracking up the tiles and spinning the fragments.

It was running. Spinoza’s shadow-figure, the one he knew would come, taking the darker road to remain hidden yet unable to resist the chance to get closer.

‘Follow it,’ ordered Crawl, running back the way he had come, firing down all the time, angling bullets between the narrow cracks and into the cavern beneath.

They pursued it all the way out, hearing the panting of human breath and the thud of boots on earth. As Crawl burst back out into the tank-chamber, he saw it break from cover, leaping from wall to wall, its body marred with the shimmer of cameleo coating. He fired again, his arm tracking the shadow-flicker, and the bullet grazed the curve of a chem-holder in a furrow of sparks.

Hegain’s squad was close on his heels, and they laid down a soak-pattern of lasfire. The shadow-form kept running, dancing between the glowing fire lanes and bounding off towards the way back out – a web of metal clamberways that twisted up towards a well of diffuse artificial light. By the Holy Throne, it was *fast*.

Crawl held up his gauntlet then, halting the volley, and the last of the lasfire aura faded away. ‘Subject is entering the prepared zone,’ he voxed as Hegain came to join him.

As the last word left his lips, the clamberways dissolved into cascades of nerve gas explosions, green-edged and puffy. He caught a final glimpse of the shadow-figure racing ahead of the explosions before its outline was lost in the daisy-chaining bursts. Hegain had laid the charges carefully,



funnelling anything caught in their matrix into a narrow kill-zone.

‘Now then, Spinoza,’ Crawl voxed, observing the sequential charges go off with some satisfaction. He wasn’t surprised that they hadn’t downed it, but that hadn’t been the objective. ‘Subject is running and heading for your position. You wanted a chance to take it down – here it comes.’

Valco had lived in the same spire as Holbech. Everyone who worked at the Triad communication towers lived in the same spire as Holbech. For all that vast crowds of people forever made their way across the causeways and transit lanes, the majority on Terra never once left the enclosure of their own giant spires over the course of an entire lifetime. They would be born in the industrial natal units, ripped from their mothers at the earliest opportunity to be sprayed with disinfectant and branded with time-and-location stamps. They would be educated in the spire’s indoctrination units in classes five hundred-strong, where priests and scholars bearing electro-prods would bellow out the lists of the fallen for memorisation and impress the sacred trinity of fears: the alien, the heretic, the mutant.

At the age of ten standard, most would be assigned work-details, taking into account any particular aptitude: a position in low-level manufactoria, food tank processors, engineering squadrons or refuse collection. The more gifted would be given assignments in the spire’s myriad security and control organisations, or service the tower’s colossal internal life-support systems. The most gifted of all would end up in Hieron Valco’s position – tiny cogs in the Adeptus Terra’s unimaginably vast web of administrators. Many more again would fall between the cracks entirely, living a precarious life in the grimy shadows, feeding on the unwary, hunted by the overburdened arbitrators, an existence little better than that of the beasts which had once shared Terra’s poisoned biosphere.

No matter their station, when death claimed them their bodies would be taken down into the furnaces, the organs extracted and the hair stuffed into sacking, and the rest fed to greedy flames that never went out. Their eyes, now floating in preservation vials and dispatched via servitor to recycler apothecarions, would never have seen a sunrise unfiltered by dirty plexiglass. Their skin would never have felt the brush of the world’s wind, their ears would never have been free of the endless hum of the spire’s engines and its forges.

So it was not far to travel from Holbech’s relatively well-appointed hab-unit to his inferior’s more mundane cell. Revus took the priority turbo-lifts down from the supervisor-grade tiers and into the bulk-living combines below. The elevator chamber ground its way down a centuries-old shaft, shuddering as it came to a halt at the requested stop. When the doors jerkily slid open, they revealed a standard artery corridor, ten metres across, its walls blotched with grease and lit by faltering orange lumen-strips. A few wary souls looked up to see who had arrived, and immediately looked away when they caught sight of Revus’ dun-grey armour. The only ones who didn’t shuffle off into the dark were the lame, draped across the floor with hands cupped for food donations, their milky blind eyes staring up at the ceiling. Old Missionaria posters curled from the walls over their heads, spotted with mould, blaring out *He Watches All and Hears All* and *Suspicion is Your Greatest Virtue – Feed It!*

Revus made his way along the arterial, turning down a smaller feeder corridor, then another, with every turn moving deeper into the gloom and the grime. Eventually he halted before a nondescript door bearing the marker SD-Erati-Mov-B 3458. A long brown stain ran the length of the plasteel, terminating in a pool at the door’s base. Revus ran a brief scan for body heat on the far side, detected nothing, and deactivated the standard lock. The door’s motor wheezed and pattered out, so he grabbed the edge and hauled the slide-unit across on its rail, closing it after him.

The space was empty. It was a single cell, windowless, a few metres square, a standard single-person living module. A cot ran along the far wall, over which hung the main storage units. Food-preparation stacks leaned against the right-hand side, and a small comms-unit took up most of the left. A low table was stacked with documents – bundles of Administratum-standard vellum sheets bound with snapwire and thick with official seals.

Revus squatted down and rummaged through them. All the bundles were schedules for lifter-touchdowns, meticulously written out longhand, with marginal notes and a few corrections in what he presumed was Valco's own script. Here and there, the reams of numerals were punctuated with snippets of text – *I find fulfilment in service, The greatest of His servants would not function without the diligent labour of the least*, the usual stuff.

He rose, blink-activated a trace moisture filter for his right eye, and scanned the chamber interior. He saw the faint impressions of boots on the metal floor. They would not have been Valco's – probably arbitrators. Even the clumsiest of them would have taken anything of interest away, whether working for this Phaelias, or working for someone else, or perhaps – you never knew – just doing their job.

Revus switched to an infrared filter and moved towards the cot. A dirty blanket, chewed by lice, lay disturbed on the thin mattress. A few pict-books – *The Authorised History of Astra Militarum Auxiliary Regiments in the Geres Subsector Vol. XXXIIa*, a disease symptom primer from the spire's Departamento Contagio, and a romance set on the reputed paradise world of Krieg with the convoluted title *My Wish to Generate Children with You is Only Exceeded by My Devotion to Him*.

Idly, Revus snapped open the cover of the latter, looking down at age-bleached images of starry-eyed lovers exchanging words of devotion as they sailed across a crystal-blue lake. He was about to close it again, when he noticed the narrow strip of parchment wedged between the cartridge and the plasboard cover. Working carefully, he teased the slip out from where it had been jammed. The leathery surface was creased and broken, no bigger than his thumb, but a single line of text could just be made out.

*Rhadamanthys.*

Revus pondered that for a moment. It was written in the same script as the margins of the lifter schedules, but hastily, as if to serve as an aide-memoire.

Then he heard the crunch of boots from outside. The noise was barely audible, a mere tread of synthrubber against pressed metal, but it was enough, for none of the combine's inhabitants would have possessed such footwear.

Revus rose, stowed the parchment and drew his hellpistol, keeping an infrared trace overlay on his helm's display. He turned to face the door again, taking a flash grenade and priming it. For few seconds, he heard nothing. Then it came again – treads, at least three or four, possibly more, moving down the corridor outside. He flicked the grenade's flash-delay down to a second and linked the timer to his visor's photosensitive coating.

They waited. Perhaps they were unsure of themselves. Revus did nothing, standing poised, one hand on his laspistol, the other on the grenade's pin. He heard his breathing, closed inside his helm, and relaxed it.

Then something grabbed the door from the outside and began to pull. Revus casually tossed the grenade through the gap and closed his eyes.

The flash puffed out, making his lids flare red even through the chromatic shield, and shouts of pain

rang out. By then he was already moving, bursting through the doorway and out into the corridor beyond. He spun around, opening his eyes to see four troopers from the Adeptus Arbites, all clad in black, all reeling and scrabbling to get their focus back. He kicked in the visor of the closest, cracking the trooper's head back against the wall, then swung round and punched his flattened hand into the larynx of another. Even before the bodies had hit the deck he'd loosed two las-bolts into the gun-hands of the remaining two troopers, causing them to drop their shotguns from shredded gauntlets. Four more shots followed, taking out their kneecaps, and then he was running.

Even before he'd cleared the next intersection he knew more were coming. He picked up the pace, running forward scans through the spire's immense interior to plot a route back to his docked Nighthawk. As he rounded a tight corner he caught sight of two arbitrators – more heavily armoured, carrying both mauls and long-barrelled pistols – taking aim. He ducked instinctively, and was showered with blown rockcrete as the corridor wall blew apart. That had been a kill shot.

Revus skidded down to a fire-crouch. 'That's how it is?' he muttered.

He fired in rapid sequence, hitting the lead trooper in the armpit-joint and knocking him onto his back. The second trooper withdrew behind a blown-open doorway and fired back, raking the corridor floor. Revus' proximity scanner picked up more signals coming from both behind and ahead. He bounced a shock grenade down the corridor and raced out after it. It went off just before the open door, slamming the metal back on the trooper sheltering behind it. As the arbitrator staggered out from his smouldering cover, Revus grabbed him by the helm and slammed him to the floor, finishing him with a crunching stamp on the neck.

Then he was running again, aiming for one of the main turbo-shafts leading upwards out of the combine zone. He reached the secondary shaft, where an open-doored cargo elevator stood waiting. Revus hit the chain-summons and activated the door-lock. Soon the metal box was clattering up the shaft. Revus knelt down to swap power packs, when suddenly the lift clanged to a halt. Something very heavy crashed onto its roof, denting the steel.

Revus snapped the power pack in and retreated to the far side of the elevator, angling his hellpistol at the concave ceiling. Whatever was coming through would be met by a fresh volley, and there wasn't much that could take concentrated hits at such range.

Then there was a crackle of hot energy, and half the roof sheared away in a blaze of light. Revus fired, but realised instantly that whatever was after him was not worried at all about las-bolts. He scrambled for the doors, getting his hands on the lock mechanism, but all too late. The chamber screamed with energy, the floor drummed, the walls flexed like skin.

He stayed conscious for a second, just long enough to see what had got him.

'Oh, *shit*,' he slurred.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Nerve gas ballooned out of every crevice, rushing into overlapping bursts of sickly green and boiling across the cracked floors. Spinoza, her face enclosed in a rebreather-helm, watched the deluge spill out.

She crouched at the confluence of three great subterranean corridors, hollowed out aeons before when the chem-works were still burning with industry. Unused grav-train tracks were scored into the upward-sloping floor, marking the paths through the maze. Crowl had set charges along all the routes, driving anything within them up towards her position.

For a moment Spinoza began to think that her master had been too zealous and that the nerve gas had enveloped the subject entirely, but then she caught sight of it – a dark speck against the emerald bursts, leaping from wall to wall like some enraged arachnid.

She took aim, and las-bolts seared into the gathering nimbus, slicing the gas clouds apart and smacking into the armoured shell of the oncoming target.

That hurt it. The cameleo-clad outline plummeted, disappearing under a rolling mass of green. Spinoza leapt to her feet, scanning for a follow-up hit amid the bluffs of dissipating gas. The target still occluded, she fired blind into the clouds, tracing the path the toppling body had taken.

Just as the last goutts blew themselves out, though, she caught sight of the target again, jumping back up against the tunnel wall, latching on to the greasy stone with handheld claw-locks and racing above the dissipating gas-tide. Spinoza fired, hitting it again – a glancing blow that shattered over its spine armour but didn't bring it down. Her quarry seemed to be able to defy gravity, and scampered along the curve of the tunnel's edge, near to the roof, over her head and into the confluence chamber.

'Damn,' spat Spinoza, racing after it, chasing it up the slope to the three-way intersection.

It should have been dropped. The gas should have got to it, and the las-strikes should have shredded it. What kind of damned armour *was* that?

Spinoza gained ground, getting a better look at what she was chasing. The target was a woman, shrouded in a scatter of cameleo-distract but still recognisably human-form. It was hard to make out her profile with any detail, but she must have been using claw-locks as part of her armour, and they must have been light enough not to slow her down.

Spinoza ran, firing again, trying to blast her from the walls. One bolt nearly did it, smacking into the target sideways and making her scabble down the inner tunnel curve. Spinoza aimed again, this time for the head, only noticing the micro-frag charges spinning towards her at the last possible moment.

She threw herself over to her right as the first one went off, and the blast hit her like a kick from an equine. More cracked out, and she was thrown across the rockcrete, smacking hard into the ground and rolling with the shock wave. Cursing, she skidded to a halt and sprang back up firing – but she'd lost ground. By then the target was scrambling up a steep incline towards octagonal hatch-portals leading up into the levels above.

Spinoza sprinted up the steep incline, firing as she ran, trying to wing her quarry before she made the portals, but the target slipped through the first of them and disappeared. Spinoza raced up the last of the slope, grabbed the metal rim of the same portal and dragged herself up.

On the far side was a clanging, clanking world of pendulums, chain wheels and grinding gear-housings. She had emerged into the base of a mech-hauler – an industrial elevator column running hundreds of metres up, scything through the close-packed underhive and travelling on up into the mass-dwell zones. The platforms that clattered up and down its length had been built for bulk supply delivery, and despite their decrepitude seemed to be still in use. Spinoza's target had already pulled herself atop one of the chevron-edged slabs and was now climbing further up the shaft.

Spinoza ran to the next platform in the sequence, jumped up onto it and punched an activation rune. The chains around the edge slammed tight, the wheels squealed, the whole structure shuddered, and then she was moving, swaying up the shaft as motive generators rumbled into smoke-choked life. Soon the walls were speeding by, a mass of old pipework and embedded machinery, most of it silted up and heavily oxidised. Spinoza knelt down between the carcasses of two empty supply hoppers, taking what cover she could, and tried to get a clean shot on the lead platform, but all she saw was the cross-braced underside of the thick slab shaking along, ten metres up.

They pursued one another for a few more seconds before the shaft walls on the right-hand side suddenly peeled away, exposing a vast hall stretching off into barely lit darkness. The target leapt from her platform, letting it rattle up the now-exposed chain-pulls, and sprinted out along a long, raised central gantry. Once she reached the shaft's lip, Spinoza did the same, racing hard, her lungs hammering, her armour systems whining at full-assist.

The hall was huge, a kind of food-processing nexus, and on either side of the raised gantry boiled enormous vats of protein broth, scummy and noxious. The air stank, and clouds of greasy vapour roiled up to the gothic-arched heights. In the slaughterpens below, skeletal servitors looked up in dumb surprise, their aprons stiff with blood, as the carcasses of emaciated battery beasts twitched limply in their metal hands.

The target was still running. Her cameleo-shroud was malfunctioning, and coated her in a swirling mess of fractured lens artefacts, but she could still run. Spinoza fired twice, nearly hitting her. They both raced out along the gantry, now arching precariously over the vats themselves – a slender line of metal hanging above the seething pits of boiling nutrient-swill.

At the far end of the hall were two pairs of massive doors, one closed, the other closing, grinding down on fat-streaked tracks as angled pistons hissed into extension. The target might make that gap – Spinoza wouldn't.

She fired again, nearly losing her footing on the gantry's sloping surface, and finally hit the target, sending a bolt fizzing into her right knee and sending her tumbling. Spinoza ran harder, now just twenty metres away. The quarry slipped as she struggled to rise, and nearly slithered over the edge.

'Surrender yourself!' Spinoza shouted, keeping her pistol aimed at the target and preparing to drag her back to safety. A boiled-alive corpse was no good to her.

But she never got close. With startling speed and strength, the target managed to wrench herself back to her feet, spin around and draw what looked like some kind of blade. The last set of doors slammed closed, sealing them in.

Spinoza drew her crozius, and kindled the energy field. Electric light flooded out, illuminating the full squalor of the glistening, dripping landscape around them. Noisome vapours swirled around them both, sickly and grease-pocked, while the screams of blind beasts being fed into the rendering jaws just kept on coming. Alarms had been activated somewhere, and far down below menials were running, but that meant nothing – the sole object of her attention stood before her, cornered at last.

Flecks of cameleo-effect still shimmered across a suit of black armour enclosing a taut physique. There were no marks of identification, just plates of matt ceramite, and her face was hidden behind a smooth helm.

‘I serve the Holy Orders of the Emperor’s Inquisition,’ Spinoza declared breathlessly, holstering her laspistol. The crozius flared on a spike of disruptor charge, flashing savage blue across the pressed metal of the gantry floor. ‘Submit now, if you wish to live.’

But then the target’s sword kicked into a life of its own, and the steel blade crackled with a sheath of lurid yellow-gold plasma.

‘Good for you,’ said the woman, crouching into combat readiness. ‘And likewise.’

Moments after dousing down the clamberways and climbing up from the chem-storage chambers, the signal came in. Crawl blinked it up to his retinal feed, and immediately knew what it meant.

‘Sergeant,’ he said, turning to Hegain. ‘I require two Nighthawks, full complement, immediate dispatch. I’ll shunt you the data.’

‘As you command. If I may, what is—’

‘Revus,’ said Crawl, striding along the tunnel leading to the planned rendezvous, reloading Sanguine as he went. The captain’s repeater-life sign had suddenly veered far from where he had been hunting, then switched to an automatic crisis signal. ‘Someone has been stupid enough to interfere with one of my people.’

‘Oh yes. You have the right of it. By your will, and done with all swiftness. But, can I venture it – the interrogator?’

‘Inform her when you can. For now, the priority is the captain.’

They walked out into a circular space, the base of a long shaft bored deep down into the underhives, its length strung with chains and swaying cabling. A Nighthawk hovered ahead of them, its engines already ramped up to full thrust, its crew-bay doors hanging open. Once the squad was inside, the gunship boosted upwards, its thrusters spitting flickers of gaseous flame.

They thrust clear of the shaft’s upper lip, booming out into the inhabited levels again. The Nighthawk swung round, pushed north, switching thrust to horizontal to gain speed. A series of high-arched bridges passed overhead, thronged with ground traffic. Massive braziers had been lit along the ceremonial transitways to an Imperial Cult oratory, three hundred storeys high and festooned with holographic images of the Angel Sanctified, and the air was shaky with heat, soot and flame. The chanting was audible over the transporter’s rumble – ‘*For Him was he slain, for Him was he slain*’ – over and over and over.

They climbed and banked, screaming through the bovine mass of slow-moving air traffic, shunting aside any too slow-witted to take evasive manoeuvres. Block clusters passed in a blur of velocity,

tower after tower, their vast faces studded with a million grime-flecked viewports. A few seconds later, the two backup Nighthawks came streaking out of an adjoining spire-canyon, swinging in behind Crowl's lead ship and falling into support formation.

'Something has gone awry,' voxed Crowl, using an open channel to all troopers within the three transporters. 'The captain has been detained by agents of the Adeptus Arbites. I don't know why, but the insult will not be borne. We will take him back. That is all.'

Ahead of them, flanked by two massive Administratum archive towers, the objective became steadily visible through the haze – a night-black spire, shot like a burned spear into the eternal city's clamour, lit by pale blue floodlights and encrusted with running columns of ebon skull-forms. Watchtowers crowded atop battlements atop heavy bolter batteries, all overhanging a lattice of intersecting transit causeways. A vast sigil cast from pure iron had been hammered into its crown – a set of scales, clenched by a gauntlet, superimposed onto a dark column. Watcher-drones circled around the summit, sweeping its precipitous shoulders with cycling detector-beams.

No civilian traffic went anywhere near it, and even the omnipresent columns of banner-bearing pilgrims veered away from its hundreds of jaw-like gates. The floodlit mantras *Lex Imperialis Supremis* and *Iustitia non Dormitat* blared out in letters ten metres high from veined marble entablatures, backed up by the immense rolls of the guilty hammered on age-tarnished plates of bronze. Imperial aquilae gazed out from every corner and every turret-tip, carved from obsidian, their eyes glinting blackly, watching all, seeing all.

Once within visual range, standard recorded vox-hails crackled over the Nighthawks' consoles.

*'Citizen! You approach a Fortress Arbites. Power down and prepare for scrutiny. By authority Lex Imperialis Sector MCMXXXIII, Subsector LXIII, Sub-subsector IX-XII, Augmentario Juridicarum Urbis Terra Salvator. In His example are our deeds made pure!'*

Several watcher-drones swooped in to intercept the oncoming ordo gunships, their bat-like wings sliding back to reveal electro-stun grapples.

'Take those down and maintain full speed,' ordered Crowl calmly.

The Nighthawks opened up with their rotary cannons, smashing the drones into scrap and roaring through the debris towards the cyclopean face of the spire. Moving in formation, they swept up towards the summit as the rockcrete neared. All too clunkily, the fortress' bolter banks switched to track them.

Crowl checked the locator signal for Revus, and shunted the data to the Nighthawk's machine-spirit. 'Two support craft to keep those batteries occupied,' he voxed. 'Pilot, you have your coordinates.'

The secondary Nighthawks pulled in close, now aiming a hail of fire at the closest of the turret-mounted bolter banks. The sloping ablative plates of the fortress erupted into explosions, splashing blooms of static as the gunships found their mark. The batteries cracked back in response, hitting the Nighthawks and rocking them on their axes, but for the moment failing to penetrate the bulk of the vessels' outer armour.

Crowl's craft punched ahead, loosing forward fire at a metal-framed, stained-glass window high on the fortress' north-facing edge. Blast shields were grinding their way across the ten-metre-wide orifice, but too slowly, and the armourglass shivered, buckled and imploded under the concentrated rain of rounds.

'Take us in,' ordered Crowl. 'Escorts – get inside before you lose your armour.'

Crowl's Nighthawk smashed clean through the tumbling mass of glass and plasteel, breaking into a

large hall on the far side. Its two protectors followed in quick succession, both now badly damaged and listing from the bolter assault, but still aloft. Once inside, the transports opened up their crew-bays and released the storm troopers. Thirty grey-clad warriors slammed down to the hall's floor, Crawl in their midst.

It was an avenue of remembrance – a long, shadowy nave lined with lists of fallen arbitrators and judges, their names accompanied with kill-tallies and records of justice delivered. Terra's fire-flecked wind screamed in through the shattered window, making the parchment devotion-tracts flap and the candles gutter. At the far end was a graven image of a Magister Iudex carved from basalt, eight metres high, his face lowered as he wrestled with an idealised serpent of insurrection.

Already running, Crawl calibrated the location of Revus' life-signal, calculated the optimal route, and shunted the tactical iso-schema to the storm troopers' helm-buffers. Pain shot up his calves like hot spikes, and he ignored it. Gorgias bobbed alongside, its needle gun exposed, its eye blazing an excited crimson.

By then alarms were sounding, echoing down the fortress' vastness and bringing its inhabitants racing towards the breach in their defences. The storm troopers travelled halfway along the hall's length before breaking left and blasting their way into an antechamber. The first resistance arrived – a team of enforcers bearing heavy suppression shields and power mauls. Crawl picked off the leader with Sanguine, sending a single round smacking through an exposed neck joint, and Hegain's squads disabled the rest, barely pausing mid-stride to select their targets, find the weak points and hit them with surgically aimed hellgun volleys.

They burned down two more levels before hitting the topmost cell-zones – the ones reserved for the most exalted prisoners. Retreating cell guards were swept aside at the entrance, their reactions and training no match for ordo-conditioned assault troops, and Crawl himself led the charge into the prisoner pens. Ignoring the rattling clamour of those in the long lines of cells, he strode towards the life-signal pinging behind a heavy plasteel door at the end of a long corridor. A lone storm trooper raced ahead, placed frak charges on the hinges and bolt-housing, then withdrew. Crawl and the others crouched down, and a heavy crump followed by the stink of cordite marked the destruction of the lock-bolts.

Crawl was first up and into the cell. The chamber was five metres square – bigger than some hab-units in the slum-zones – bare metal, but clean and lit with strip-lumens. Revus got up shakily from a bench as Crawl came in. He was clad in prison fatigues, his armour gone, an ugly weal across his grizzled face, but he did not look seriously harmed.

'What happened?' demanded Crawl, sweeping the cell for auto-weapons.

'It's not what you–' started Revus, groggily, as if drugged.

He never finished. Booms shuddered along the corridor outside, as if piledrivers had been started up, followed by cries of aggression and alarm. Crawl turned to see the flash of lasfire reflected in the corridor's polished walls. He reloaded Sanguine and hurried back to the cell door – just in time to see the body of a storm trooper fly across the broken doorway and crash into the wall beyond.

Gorgias flew through the gap, spun around and started firing, only to break off with a high-pitched shriek of surprise.

Then Crawl was through, ducking low and sliding across the corridor's floor, firing two-handed.

The aim was good. Even given a split-second to pick his target, he'd found it with both shots. He might have laughed, though, had he had the time, and if the pain in his muscles weren't so great, for it



didn't matter.

'Oh, *shit*,' he spat, just as his captain had done, and prepared to die.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Spinoza moved first, swinging the crozius as Chaplain Erastus had taught her – heavy enough to break bone, not so heavy as to leave her unbalanced.

The woman met the strike with her blade, and the two energy fields screamed together, spilling out a merged kaleidoscope of flying colour. They pulled apart, then crashed together again, maul against sword, the weapons snarling like beasts.

‘Submit now,’ Spinoza panted. ‘It will go better for you.’

The woman laughed. ‘Better for me? No, I do not think so.’ She swept back into the attack, whistling her blade low and flat, going for Spinoza’s legs.

Spinoza parried, and the two weapons blazed again. Spinoza pushed back, hurling the woman away, then went after her.

*She is fast, but I am stronger.*

‘You were shadowing us,’ she said, pulling Argent heavily in a loose figure of eight. ‘That is a dangerous game.’

‘Every game is dangerous,’ said the woman, giving ground, stepping back along the gantry’s length. ‘But you. You are blind and you are stupid. I will not be ended by stupid.’

The power fields whipped around them both, streamers of released energy like flails, dancing amid the blur of limbs.

‘Give me your name,’ said Spinoza, knocking her back another pace, and the closed doors beckoned. ‘The more you give me—’

‘The more lenient you are? Hah. I know your methods. Be watchful! You do not face *me* before.’

The woman suddenly switched gear, leaping over a crozius-swipe and barging into Spinoza. The two of them careened back to the gantry’s edge, their feet treading along the metal rim. Spinoza felt her boot slip over the lip, and shoved back hard, swiping out with her crackling weapon. Argent connected with the woman’s stomach, smearing plasma into her armour-plates and throwing her a pace back. Then she waded into close contact, driving, jabbing, using the maul as Erastus had always insisted.

The doors at the far end began to cycle open again. Fresh alarms were sounding. Something was happening, but she could not lose focus, not now.

‘What do you know of the False Angel?’ Spinoza demanded, her face glossy with sweat, her muscles burning.

‘No, do not try this,’ the woman said, scornfully, defending herself with a dazzling switchback, then giving ground again. ‘Do not give me such words. I *despise* you. I despise what you are. Your souls are eaten, I think, so no prayer is saving you now.’

The doors had split wide now, throwing a bar of orange light across the gantry. There were dark figures there, running onto the bouncing walkway.

*No. Not now. So close.*

Spinoza lashed out again, trying to slam her adversary to the deck, to lodge the crozius between the woman’s chin and her chest and pin her, ready for a knee to drive deep into her stomach and press the wind from her.

The move was seen. The target twisted away from her, sliding a boot against Spinoza’s and forcing it over the edge. As Spinoza cartwheeled, feeling gravity haul her over, the woman punched with her sword’s hilt, knocking the interrogator over the edge.

For a moment, all Spinoza saw was the distant ceiling. Her head went back, she felt herself falling, falling, and the heat from the vat below welled up like a cushion, dragging her down. She caught a final glimpse of the target, vaulting past her, breaking down the gantry, sprinting hard, and tried to grasp her, but failed, and went over, tumbling, towards the boiling slurry below.

Then she was caught. Before she could drop the full distance, something seized her free arm, gripping hard. Spinoza yanked up short, somehow keeping a grip on her weapon, and dangled below the gantry’s underside, swaying amid the fumes.

She looked up, startled, to see a man holding her. Before she could say anything, she was being dragged back up to the gantry decking, pulled over the edge, and a squad of soldiers was running past them, firing las-beams at the retreating target.

‘Who...’ she started, breathless, her heart hammering. ‘What...’

The man released his grip on her. He was huge, bulked out with plate armour and carrying an autopistol. He twisted off his helm to reveal a thick, ugly face with a full beard that sprang out from the armour-seal. Before Spinoza could make another move, she felt the pistol’s muzzle press against her forehead.

‘Name, rank, service,’ the man demanded, his voice throaty, aggressive.

She glared back at him, then managed to reach for her rosette, which she twisted in his direction. He looked at it, and slowly moved the pistol out of her face.

‘Just the name, then,’ he said.

‘Yours first.’

He laughed, a rumble that erupted from his barrel chest. ‘Aido Gloch. Interrogator to Lord Inquisitor Quantrain. See, I have one too.’

He pulled a rosette from under the shoulder-plate of his complex armour, and it dangled on a chain – an iron skull within a shield, bearing the sigil of the Ordo Hereticus in black obsidian.

Spinoza pushed herself upright, twisting around to see where her quarry had gone. The gantry was empty – the soldiers under Gloch’s command had pursued the target back into the shadows, back towards the mech-hauler shaft and the warrens of the underhive. More troops tramped past them both, swinging searchlights across the hall. Down below, menials were being accosted and slammed up against the walls of their nutrient vats.

‘What are you doing here?’ Spinoza asked, testily. She got to her feet, deactivating the still-fizzing crozius and shackling it to her belt.

Gloch remained squatting where he was, looking amused. ‘I could ask the same thing,’ he said, keeping his pistol in a heavy gauntlet.

Spinoza rolled her shoulders, feeling the effects of the long chase. Once again, the bitter taste of defeat swilled in her mouth. Part of her wished to walk away, but the man had saved her life. There were decencies to observe, even in the ordo.

‘Luce Spinoza, the Ordo Hereticus,’ she said.

‘Ah, Crowl’s new blood.’

‘Why do you people say that? New *blood*? Throne, it sickens me.’

Gloch started to smile, forced it down, and regarded her with some seriousness. ‘You know who that was?’

‘Clearly you do.’

Gloch looked thoughtful for a moment, then finally stowed his sidearm and got to his feet. Standing, he was daunting, a giant of nearly seven foot, only a fraction of that accounted for by his thick body armour. His face was scarred and lined, his beard grey-streaked. ‘How long have you been on Terra, interrogator?’ he asked.

Spinoza felt impatience rise within her. All she wanted to do was get out, get after that damned woman. She had been *so close*. To go back to Crowl, now, and admit another failure...

‘Long enough,’ she said. ‘You?’

‘My whole life, and I love it. Now, to come down here, alone. I’m not telling you your business—’

‘Damn right.’

Gloch shrugged. ‘She’s called Falx.’

‘The woman?’

‘A case-name. Quantrain’s been after her for weeks. You’ll have noticed she’s well trained.’

‘And what else?’

Gloch looked up, then around, then down. His troops were moving through the nutrient hall now, scanning, arresting, closing down processor units. ‘I can shunt the details to you at Crowl’s tower. You’ve seen these kills, the ritual ones? She’s always there, always close. The Angel’s Tears – I guess you know the name. I’ve not seen cameleo-plate for ten years.’ He started to chuckle. ‘I shot her once. In the chest, close as you are to me now, and she still got away. She’s got a tough hide, I’ll give her that.’

‘I might have broken that a bit.’

‘Good. Next time she’ll feel it more.’

‘What do they want?’

‘They’re unbelievers and killers. I don’t give a damn what they want.’

Spinoza felt the comedown of the long chase. Her muscles ached, her innards felt empty. ‘They’re going for weapons,’ she repeated, thinking back to the pseudo-abhuman’s agonised thrashing. ‘Throne, how has this been tolerated?’

‘Tolerated?’ Gloch lost his smile. ‘You really haven’t been here long, have you?’

‘This is His world,’ Spinoza insisted, feeling lightheaded. ‘It makes me want to vomit. In four days—’

‘Yes, in four days. We are aware.’ Some of Gloch’s troops began to return, limping along the gantry. He shot them a quizzical look, but the lead sergeant shook her head. ‘You want my advice?’ Gloch said. ‘Go back to your old crow. Tell him if he wishes to assist us in this, it’d be better to attend in person. You understand?’

That, at least, Spinoza could agree with. 'I'll tell him.' She turned, ready to stalk off, her cheeks hot. Then, grudgingly, she turned. 'And... my thanks. And, just so you know, I will pursue her. And I will end her. Then we will talk again.'

Gloch looked back at her. Another laugh had died on his chapped lips.

'See, now I believe you,' he said, bowing. 'Until next time, then.'

Crowl's storm troopers, some of the finest mortal troops in the Imperium, lay across the floor of the cell-zone corridor as if a Rhino had bludgeoned through them. Most were out cold; a couple had had their carapace plates ripped apart and slumped in growing pools of blood. Thirty hardened Ordo Hereticus soldiers, cast aside as if they had been nothing more than children playing at warfare with model guns and paper armour.

Crowl drew himself up to his full height. In normal circumstances that stance would have been imposing – he was a head taller than most human males, and his master-crafted armour added to that heft – but just then he felt little more substantial than the broken warriors who littered the floor.

He let Sanguine's muzzle drop – it would be of no more use here.

'Waiting for something?' he asked.

Before him, immense and wreathed in dying curls of plasma, loomed the destroyer of his men.

He was more than a giant. He was a leviathan, a juggernaut of gold and black, an armour-bound killing construct studded with blades and jewels and plumes. His battleplate was heavy, unsullied, carved into swirls and arcane symbology, and palpably crackling with ferocious energies. Massive shoulder-guards, rearing high over a lightning-embossed breastplate, enclosed a tall helm crested with a mane of black horsehair. In his right gauntlet he held a guardian spear, a glaive twice the height of a human-normal subject. The halberd thrummed with plasma snarls, vibrating down the heavy length of the shaft and making the steel walls around them swim with reflections. A long black cloak hung behind him, and for all the carnage he had caused, he was immaculate – untouched by blood or grime, as dazzling as a shard of ancient sun cast into the mire of the world.

There were stories told of such creatures as this, myths spun across the gulf of ten thousand years until they had swelled and burst beyond all reason. To live to witness one of the Angels of Death was a privilege granted to a vanishingly small proportion of humanity. To witness one of this select order was even rarer, something even the great lords of the Throneworld's mighty citadels and macro-cathedrals would barely dare to dream of.

It had been said by some that they no longer existed – just another casualty of the darkening of the long ages, a mere echo of a greater past that had long since sunk into oblivion. Perhaps, others offered, they had never had been real at all. Perhaps they had always been chimeras, phantoms dreamed up by desperate men in desperate times to make the night seem a little less cold.

There was a certain satisfaction to be found in proving such speculation wildly, unforgivably and indubitably false.

'Why are you here, inquisitor?' said the Imperial Custodian. Though nominally a question, it was delivered as a command, as if the speaker could countenance no response but acquiescence. The voice was as otherworldly as his physical appearance – deep, measured, betraying no accent but that of the most strenuous refinement of High Gothic. No mortal spoke like that, nor had they done so for millennia.

Crowl held his ground. The aura of extreme violence still made the air electric, and the guardian

spear had not yet been powered down.

‘You have my man,’ he said. ‘I look after my own.’

The Custodian considered that for a moment. His helm-face was a piece of artistry beyond anything Crowl had ever witnessed in battle-armor – a tracery of wings rising from a hawk-like vox-guard, enclosing twin jewelled lenses amid swashes of heavy gold. He found himself recalling the Ministorum images of Sanguinius, those adoring frescoes of the Angel himself, and wondered just how mind-alteringly magnificent a living primarch must have been if *this* were not the pinnacle of human martial splendour.

‘You would come here, then,’ the Custodian said, ‘in defiance of justice, and dare to take him from me.’

So this was the test. For all his long years of service, Crowl was not an excessively proud man. He knew perfectly well the myth-born god before him could end him with a single strike of that guardian spear. Even if it had been in his nature, though, there was no room for dissemblance here. This creature, so the legends went, had been built to perceive the nature of falsehood.

‘He is my man,’ said Crowl again, lifting his chin. ‘You want him, you come through me.’

The Custodian made no move. The halberd’s energy field rippled across the monomolecular edge of the great glaive’s blade, itself a metre long.

‘What are you named?’ the Custodian asked.

‘Erasmus Crowl, the Ordo Hereticus.’

‘What do you know of Phaelias?’

‘Nothing at all.’ Crowl took up his rosette and fixed the golden giant with a defiant glare. ‘But if you do, then you are bound by the authority of this mark to disclose it.’

There was something like a laugh then, rumbling up from the heart of that rococo armor – a deep and fleeting amusement at the audacity of it, echoing from the fluted lines of the crafted vox-grille. ‘I am bound by no authority but the Throne.’

‘Then that makes two of us.’

It took another second for the energy field crawling across the glaive-blade to flicker out, and even then Crowl could not be sure that it wouldn’t come scything across at him, whistling through the air faster than thought. A rosette could halt many things, but not, he guessed, that spear.

‘It is rare, inquisitor, that I leave the precincts of His Palace,’ the Custodian said. ‘When I consulted the augurs two dawns ago, seeking the path to truth among the maze of falsehood, there was no certainty in my mind. I might have sent a lesser servant. Even now, I do not know with any certainty why I did not do so, and chose instead to attend this hunt in person, for I am not habitually given to whims.’

‘I don’t doubt it.’

Finally, then – *finally* – the Custodian relaxed his stance, and his grip on the halberd’s stave relaxed. For the first time Crowl noticed the ranks of arbitrators clustered further down the corridor, their weapons trained on him, and it struck him how ludicrous that was. The Custodian himself moved as if there were no one there but the two of them – no prisoner, no stricken storm troopers, no troopers of the fortress, just two sanctioned agents of the Emperor’s immortal will.

‘I have many names, but you will call me Navradaran,’ the Custodian said. ‘Now we will talk.’



## CHAPTER NINE

Spinoza strode along the bridge, barely aware which way she was headed, knowing that she ought to summon a flyer but unwilling to contemplate returning to Courvain with so little to show for her efforts. Again.

She pulled her rebreather mask from her face, letting it dangle around her neck, and tasted the unfiltered air of Terra. It was more acrid than she'd imagined, a melange of promethium fumes, human stinks, mouldering organics, the pyres of the faithful. She drew it in deep, feeling its acerbic grit graze against her windpipe.

*This is my world now, she thought. I must immerse myself within it.*

She had only gone a short distance from the squalor of the processing plant and the twisting streets were already packed with humanity. Mouldering bridges soared far overhead, and bridges crossed over those bridges, and more and more until they overlapped into the blur of distance. The crowds merged and split, men and women pushing past one another, locked within the confines of transit conduits or processions, barely seeming to notice those around them, keeping their heads down and their faces hidden.

Spinoza pushed her way through. Where they were huddled and limping, she was erect, moving with the confident gait she had been taught in Astranta. They might have been another species, those masses, a sub-order worthy only of cultivating for some kind of brute sustenance.

An old man blundered into her path, not noticing her armour and her signifiers until too late, and she elbowed him aside. When he saw who had shoved him, his bleary eyes went wide and he fell prostrate.

‘Forgive me, lord!’ he croaked, cracking his forehead onto the rockcrete as if in penance, flecking the road with his blood. ‘I did not see! Forgive me!’

Spinoza looked down at him. He stank like all the others – the stale, ingrained stench of a body long unwashed.

*They are afraid, terrified, all of the time.*

She kept walking.

The bridge spanned a wide gap between mountainous hab-cliffs. The unnatural valley's foundations were far out of sight, its descending sides studded with diminishing points of low-power lumens. On the far side was a tripartite tower complex, ridged and buttressed with interleaving support structures. A triumphal arch had been raised before them, forty metres high, hewn from solid granite,

crowned with graven images representing the Four Defenders of Mankind: the Astra Militarum, the Imperial Navy, the Mechanicus of Mars, the Angels of Death. All of them were thick with a lichen-like patina, their edges worn away by age. As Spinoza got closer, she could see that the final statue, that of the Space Marine, had been defaced – the raven-beaked helm was scratched, as if a knife had been taken to the stone.

That made her angry, and she looked about her, suddenly furious that no one seemed to notice. The crowds just kept on stumbling to wherever it was they had to get to, their woollen cowls drawn close about their heads, their cloth-bound feet bleeding onto the rockcrete.

‘Do you not see that?’ Spinoza cried out, gesturing to the defaced statue. ‘Do none of you see that?’ No one answered. Those who heard her retreated quickly, bewildered and fearful, trying to push themselves back into the herd’s innards in case the fault was theirs. The greater mass did not even hear, lost in the eternal city’s background roar of engine-growl, bell-clang, procession-chant, forge-burn.

She kept walking, knowing she should just summon the damn flyer but still resisting it. It felt as if the entire planet were rearing up over her, sliding under her, swelling around her, dragging her down into its squalid and stifling embrace. There was no end to it – the hives towered overhead, crumbling and decayed; the pits went down forever, the searchlights swayed, the pyres smouldered. She felt nausea curdle in her throat, but left the rebreather hanging.

You could go mad on a world like this, and no one would ever notice. The euphoria she had felt when in sight of the Palace itself had long died, replaced by the dull pang of revulsion.

That was bad. That was unworthy – it would blunt her effectiveness and slow her down.

She paused. Ahead of her stood yet another towering edifice amid the forests of competing gaudiness – a tottering pile of elaborately decorated stone, arranged in a running series of gradually narrowing archways. The stone was blackened as if burned, crowned with pyramids of human skulls, grinning and eyeless. Columns swept up alongside either flank supporting more stands of statues – skull-faced angels, winged lions, coiling serpents with eyes of adamant. Hung from the peaks were heavy banners bearing the icons of the Adeptus Ministorum – the Terran ‘I’ barred with a death’s head-within-sun, the tear-and-chalice images of sainthood, Archaic Gothic passages from the *Lectitio Gouldiensis* and *Apocrypha Chymes* scrawled in tight-cut lines of script.

Driven part by curiosity, part by her need to escape the filth, Spinoza walked up to the open doors. There were no guards, and she passed under high gothic vaulting, her heels clicking on marble flags.

Inside the cathedral it was cool – mercifully cool. Ranks of alabaster pillars marched away into darkness, lit at their bases by racks of flickering votive candles. Pilgrims huddled in clusters, swaying to the dull rhythm of a drum beating down in the depths. Every so often a bell would toll, high up in the towers, its heavy resonance making the stone around her tremble.

She came to a halt before one of many hundred high altars. There was no peace in that place – priests with blood-red robes were screaming from hovering pulpits, making the congregations scream back in terror and exhilaration. Servo-cherubs buzzed like blowflies in the smoky heights, bumping into one another and spilling more incense in clots. Ahead of her, the altarpiece soared up high, a confection of blackened gold depicting the Nine Primarchs in various warlike or devotional poses.

That was familiar, though at first she couldn’t place why. Then she remembered a similar set of icons, taken from the same Missionaria template no doubt, that had been placed in the chapel of her



schola on Astranta. She remembered the lessons that had gone along with it.

*And so the Emperor created the Nine Primarchs to guard against the Nine Devils of the Outer Hell, and they were victorious, and now sleep, watching over Mankind lest the Terror return.*

As a child, it had never been clear to her who had created the Nine Devils. She did remember asking Sister Honoria why the Emperor had not created a hundred primarchs rather than match exactly the numbers offered up by the Outer Hell, and had received no answer but a lash from the electro-lance for her trouble.

After she had left childhood behind, she often reflected on those words – *lest the Terror return* – wondering just what degree of horror would be necessary to bring them back. She knew that there were those who even denied the divinity of the Emperor and His pantheon, like the Imperial Fists she had served with, who had revered Dorn's memory but never called him *god* or *angel* – and perhaps she had even been tempted by that severe philosophy at the time, for all that it was surely heresy, since it explained with typical Space Marine bluntness just how bleak the prospects for the species could become. No falsehood, no deception, just defiance.

She reached out to one of the racks of candles and took a thick slug of tallow. It took a while to light from the taper. She placed the guttering candle high up, out of reach of all but the healthiest and tallest, watched all the while by insolent servo-skulls with Ministorum bandanas draped over their cranial humps.

‘I shall not waver,’ she breathed, bowing low before the sacred image. ‘I shall not enquire, I shall not doubt, for enquiry is the doorway to heresy and doubt is the harbinger of weakness. I shall pray for the soul of my master. I shall not despise those whom I protect. I shall love the works of His hands, and this, His world, more dearly than I love my life, for there is only service, and there is only sacrifice.’

Then she bowed again before the altar. She ignored the whispering throngs that hovered around her, afraid to come close but too fascinated to pull away, drew herself up to her full height again, and made the sign of the aquila.

Then she drew in a deep breath, replaced the mask over her mouth and nose, and turned to leave. If not invigorated, the worst of her enervation left her. She strode back out into the blood-grey smog, her gait a little freer.

Once she had left, the crowds pulled in closer, mumbling and stumbling, reaching for candles of their own to offer up in hope of cures. One of the servo-cherubs bobbed down from its high vantage, its augmetic eye-lens hissing as it adjusted focus. It hovered over the candle that Spinoza had left there, and its systems chattered. With a robust puff, it blew the candle out, reached out with a fatty hand and stuffed the tallow-lump into its mouth. Then it bobbed off, chewing stupidly, floating under the high arches, before being lost in the shadows of the high nave, just another meandering blip amid a constellation of fumbling automata.

Crowl and Navradaran moved away from the cells, shadowed initially by a cadre of black-clad arbitrators. Most of Hegain's detachment had been left alive by the Custodian's assault – they had been felled artfully, their threat nullified but their bodies capable of recovery. No doubt the Custodian had been fighting well within his capabilities, doing what needed to be done and no more, and that was something significant to take away from the encounter.

The two of them left the apothecaries to their work and ascended the Fortress Arbites' levels,

travelling by creaking chain-lifter to the pinnacle. At the summit their escorts left them, and they entered an armourglass pyramid framed with adamantium spars. The space was planted liberally with hothouse flowers, the floor burnished bronze. A verdigrised statue of the primarch Rogal Dorn stood in the centre, flanked by stands of ferns and orchids. The dome's atmosphere was clammy, and rivulets of moisture ran down the inside of the pyramid's sloping walls.

Crowl looked at the riches, the abundance of natural growth, and a part of him recoiled. 'Strange,' he remarked, 'how judges always seem to have access to coin.'

Navradaran walked over to the pyramid's eastern face, pushing past the overhanging foliage, his heavy boots clinking on the metal floor.

'I ask you again, inquisitor,' he said, halting as he reached the great sloping armourglass panels, facing the eternal city in all its murky grandeur. 'Why did you come?'

'I gave you my answer,' said Crowl, drawing alongside him and looking out at the same view. They were a long, long way up. Jagged pinnacles rose above a seething mat of grey. A cargo-hauler was burning its way slowly north, underslung with cargo modules, trailing lines of inky residue behind it. Over to the north, the clouds were building into turbulent snags of darkness, as if they might break into rain.

But it never rained.

'They would not have harmed him,' said Navradaran. 'Not once they realised whom he worked for. You would have got him back, sooner or later.'

Crowl smiled dryly. 'Your faith in them exceeds mine. What did you want him for?'

'He had entered the Triad spire.'

'Triad is a long way from the Palace. I thought you never left it.'

'Where then does His Palace end?' asked Navradaran.

'*The Imperium Entire is His Palace,*' said Crowl, remembering the line from the catechisms. 'I always supposed that was figurative.'

'Know this – if there were a threat capable of harming His realm, I would travel to the edge of time and space to run it down.'

'What threat?'

Navradaran turned to face Crowl, his wing-marked helm glinting dully from the weak sunlight. 'A thousand ships enter orbit every hour. A million eyes watch them, and yet even the most vigilant may be blinded. Twenty-one days ago a formal request was made to the Provost Marshal to halt all Terra-inbound vessels and subject them to Tier Four scrutiny.'

Crowl raised an eyebrow. 'Now? Before the Feast?'

'The request was granted.'

'Who made it?'

'Inquisitor-Lord Hovash Phaelias, the Ordo Xenos.'

'So that's who that is.'

'You had not heard the name?'

'I don't mingle much. What was he after?'

'I wish to learn this. The inquisitor and members of his retinue last made traceable contact with authorities eighteen days ago. Since then, silence. But then, after the silence, something else. There have been bodies left, close to the inner walls of the Palace where none but the sanctified may tread. Mutilated bodies, marked with excruciation. This is a great blasphemy. I sent servants to scour the

approaches. They found nothing, but heard tales of flesh-gangs working in the underhives. The False Angel – you know this name?’

‘I’ve heard it.’

‘Now we reach the limits of what is known. An inquisitor orders orbital quarantine, for reasons unknown, then disappears. Organised killing begins, with signs of ritual debasement, and stories of heretical movements grow in number. I place these events together.’

‘Correlation does not imply causation.’

‘Your pardon?’

‘An old superstition. Go on.’

‘I took it upon myself to study the eyes that watch the voidcraft. Phaelias believed that something of importance had been due to arrive from orbital transfer, and if he was correct in this then the Chartist guilds were capable of corroborating it. We listened, we waited. I commandeered the services of this precinct-fortress, and that brought us to Triad. When my agents reported the intervention of an outside force in Holbech’s jurisdiction, I believed it might be him. When I encountered your captain, I remained of that conviction.’

‘So you forcibly took him in.’

‘He disabled six of those under my command, crippling two.’

‘That’s what we trained him for. You’ve spoken to him?’

‘We had barely begun. He was... defiant.’

Crowl smiled and pressed his fingers of his right hand up against the armourglass, watching the condensation bobble over the ceramite plates of his armour. The hauler had almost disappeared by then, sliding into the smog-sea that its own burners fed. More atmospheric bulkers appeared on the eastern horizon to replace it, members of an endless procession, eternally moving from maw-depot to maw-depot.

He couldn’t see the street levels below – too far down, occluded by the urban fug. For a moment, locked away in such rarefied air, he might forget who existed in those lightless metal valleys, jostling, sweating, scrabbling for air.

‘But that’s not enough,’ he said, softly.

‘What do you mean?’

Crowl turned back to him. ‘You tell me of bodies and of heretics. My interrogator chides me for chasing scraps like these, and I have the commission to do it. But you. *You*.’ He let his gauntlet fall from the streaked glass. ‘You are as close as I will ever come to the gods of old. What have you seen? What did your augurs tell you, to bring you out from the Palace?’

Navradaran did not answer immediately. When he did reply, the voice was just the same as it had been before – deep, rolling, muffled behind that great golden mask.

‘I wish to know what became of Phaelias,’ he said. ‘I wish to know why there is a mockery of the Angel breaking flesh as the Feast approaches. If you discover these things, you will tell me.’

Crowl smiled to himself. ‘How will I find you?’

‘The Feast concludes in four days,’ said Navradaran. ‘On the final day, the elect will march upon the Eternity Gate itself for the final rite of remembrance, and then all my vigilance must be there. So you have that long, no more.’

‘A simple task, then.’ He turned away from the cityscape and ran his eyes across the sweltering plant-life. ‘I will take my troops back with me. I trust the judges here will wish to let any outstanding

grievances drop.'

'There are no grievances.'

'Then our business here is concluded.' Crowl extended a hand. 'Whatever else transpires in this, it was the highest honour to meet you.'

Navradaran looked down at the proffered gauntlet, bewildered. He made no move to follow suit.

'Four days,' he said, turning away.



## CHAPTER TEN

Spinoza did summon a flyer, and it came for her within ten minutes, weaving through the swarming skies. The pilot did not ask what she was doing so far from the last drop-point, nor why she had neglected to report in immediately after the failed action. Spinoza considered asking for news of Crowl and Hegain's kill-team, but decided against it. Either the pilot did not know, which made the enquiry pointless, or he did, in which case it was shameful to ask.

They took off, turning east, and powered up into the labyrinth once more. The day was waning, though there was no lessening of activity in the multilayered web of accessways and transit corridors. As the mottled grey sky fell away to a dull gloaming, a massive land-train trundled out of a tunnel below and across a many-tiered viaduct, spewing soot from banked smokestacks as its armoured tracks churned. Bulky cargo-cars clattered past, one after the other, following the heavy locomotive-unit as it powered along the long bend, across more soaring arches and into another tunnel mouth several kilometres back into the urban sprawl. Spinoza watched the land-train travel as the flyer climbed higher. By the time they had passed out of range, angling past the shoulder of a twisted comms-node the height of an upended starship, its progress had shown no sign of ending. They might have hovered over that thing for an hour or more and the massive payloads would still be trundling past, just one of thousands of scheduled supply drops for the insatiable appetites of a famished planet.

They flew back to Courvain, taking the route she was now getting used to – tight through the hive-spires, skimming across the lightless chasms between those mountains of rockcrete. Spinoza pressed her face close to the viewportal, watching specks of humanity marching below. Shift-bells were toiling now, summoning workers from their stations. The communal refectories were opening, and the duty-watches in the cathedrals were changing over. Just as always, the vox-augmitters were hammering out the same messages, and she saw a mechanised throne-walker staggering along at the head of one of the many processions, bearing a cardinal in purple robes. His choristers were heavily altered, with grille-speakers for faces and spiked banner-racks for arms, and they all limped and swayed along, accompanied by pilgrims scourging themselves with barbed neural-whips. Gun-servitors prowled at the procession's edges, their body-cannons tracking anything that got close.

Crowl's fortress appeared again in the forward scopes. The flyer slowed, then entered the hangars. Once they were down, the pilot hurried to open the doors, saluting as Spinoza disembarked.

'I require the keeper of records,' she said. The pilot bowed, and said he'd show her the way.

They went up from the hangar level, climbing narrow spiral staircases cut deep into the black matter

of the fortress, lit only by the bumping pale suspensors that glided over their heads. Once at the destination, the pilot bowed and left her at the doors. She pressed her palm against the authorisation seal, felt the pinprick of a blood-taker, and waited a moment for the analysis to complete.

The doors clunked, clicked, then slid open, revealing a tall lamplit chamber, circular like a well shaft, more than thirty metres across and rising up in a series of terraced levels. Every wall, every surface, was covered with bundles of dry parchment tied with ribbons and sealed with brown wax. Archive servitors, little more than torsos, sinewy arms and fibre-bundles, whirred up and down the rack-faces on long chain-pulls, their spindly claws reaching for records, replacing them, spinning around, plunging through the chamber's central void.

As Spinoza entered, she saw a withered woman clad in faded, patched robes. Half her face was augmented, and the rest was aged by service under artificial light and deprived of what passed on Terra for fresh air. Her shrunken face was dominated by a circular oculus that cycled and focused continually. Ironwork fingers the length of a child's arm protruded from the frayed hems of her sleeves, and her stooped stance was dragged even lower by a heavy linked chain of office hung across bony shoulders. Thick cables ran from plugs in her back and into the jaws of a ring of cogitator columns, keeping her shackled to her station on the floor of the chamber. Whenever she moved, the cables shook and pulsed with strobing slivers of darting electro-pulses.

'Then you're his new one,' the old woman said, smiling to reveal two lines of grey teeth.

'You are the keeper of records?' Spinoza asked.

'I am.'

'You carry records of serving Ordo Hereticus personnel?'

'Of course. Whether they're correct, whether they're out of date, whether they're forged – could you tell?'

'You will show them to me.'

The woman chuckled, and the sagging flesh under her robes wobbled. 'He told me you'd be stiff. Schola-trained? So was I. A long time ago.' She shot Spinoza a shrewd look from her one filmy real eye. 'But the manner won't get you far here, girl. This is Terr—'

'Show me the records.'

The woman chuckled again, shaking her head, and shuffled over to the first of the cogitator columns, her cables dragging. 'I was Yulia Huk, once as young and stiff as you. I like it better here now. It's best, when you find your place. Come, take a look.'

She had moved in close to one of the cogitators and extended her spike-fingers into its activation nodes. The column shuddered, gouted a wisp of steam, and began to valve-up.

'Speak the name to me, girl,' said Huk, licking her dry lips and concentrating on the pict-screen stuck out from the cogitator's central hub like an insectoid compound eye.

'Two names: Aido Gloch, interrogator. Quantrain, inquisitor.'

Huk chuckled, and punched at a heavy runewriter keyboard with her unplugged hand. Every input caused the unit to chunter to itself, and green-tinged arcs of electricity spiralled between copper spheres hung high above the stations.

'So this is a waste, is it not?' Huk chided, completing the enquiry then turning back to face Spinoza. Once it was done, neural pulses flickered out across the dome, and the archive-servitors started to work, boosting up their chain-pulls to seek parchment bundles. 'Everyone knows those names. Inquisitor-Lord Flavius Quantrain – I could fill your prayer-chamber with screeds on him, and you'd

never squeeze inside to read them.’

‘Then he operates on Terra?’

‘Of course he does. And I know the name of his interrogator too. I know a lot of names. And he has a retinue the size of a small army, and he is in the favour of the High Lords, so if you have a problem with him then best you tell Crowl quickly, and then keep your head down and your armour on.’

Spinoza looked up at the servitors. They were little better than meat-lumps with needle-limbs, diligently probing and siphoning through the rustling leaves before pulling the required documents out and throwing them into their back-mounted storage hoppers.

‘No problem,’ she said. ‘I merely wished to confirm his identity.’

‘Throne, child, he is known everywhere.’ Huk unplugged herself from the cogitator and licked the end of her oil-greased node-fingers. ‘What do you want this for? Just ask Crowl. He can tell you it all. Sometimes he pretends he doesn’t know names. I don’t know why. But he remembers them all – the ones who crossed him, the ones who were honest and the ones who told lies. He is fair, is Crowl.’

Rassilo had said that too.

‘The inquisitor has not made contact with me since this morning,’ said Spinoza. ‘I will no doubt speak to him when he returns.’

Huk laughed then, a vaguely horrifying sound like felines being skinned. ‘Ha! You’ll keep it up. I like that. But don’t let that neck get too stiff, or it’ll crack.’ She limped back across from the cogitator column, just as the first of the servitors began to drop down bearing heavy piles of parchment, filling up a shaky-looking gurney. ‘He’ll test you, because he wants to see if you can weather it, and I don’t doubt he sees something interesting there under that stiffness. Right now, all you see is this place and its shadows, and he does not talk like the ones you’re used to, and you think this is some kind of purgatory, but you and I were made to serve in purgatory so the others don’t have to. They will all die for Crowl, in here. I would, if he asked me. But he hasn’t yet. And he wasn’t always alone like he is now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Come now, you think things have always been this way?’

The last of the bundles slapped down onto the gurney, and Spinoza saw how many of them there were. The dust hung in clouds above them, fine and settling, kicked up as the chained servitors sped back up into the heights of the archive to their endless task-rotas.

‘You will send them to my quarters,’ Spinoza said. ‘There are other names I need reports on, and I will send you requests.’

‘Do that!’ said Huk, sounding delighted. ‘The more obscure the better.’ Then she came closer, and Spinoza smelt her odour – a mix of congealed machine unguents and halitosis. Huk extended a metal hand towards her, though fell short of actually touching. ‘I hardly remember the schola now,’ she murmured. ‘Perhaps, when your time allows, if you come again, you can remind me how it was. I was there, just like you. I was Yulia Huk, before... all this.’

Spinoza looked down at her for a moment. It was hard to know how to reply.

‘You will get my requests in due course,’ she said, turning. ‘Until then, you have your work.’

The Nighthawk’s engines throbbed arrhythmically as it powered out from under the Fortress Arbites’ shadow. Like the other two, it had taken bolter hits on the way in, and would require lengthy remedial work in Courvain’s tech-bays before reuse. All three of them, flying in formation through the towers,

were half-empty – most of Hegain’s troops, including the sergeant, required medicae attention and had remained in the precinct-fortress until that could be completed.

The sun hung low in the western sky, a filmy red disc burning like a sore among the smog-curtains. In the distance, where the colossal Mechanicus enclave of Skhallax City entangled itself with the basilicas of the Order of the Ebon Chalice, palls of ashen smoke were rising in thin columns. Looking at them through the Nighthawk’s narrow viewports, Crowl couldn’t tell whether they were sacrificial fires or residue from the forges. Probably both – right now the entire world seemed determined to burn whatever it could find.

Far to the north, past Skhallax’s burn-off chimneys, he could just make out the greater mass of the Outer Palace zones, where the march of the hab-spires was replaced by the Ministorum’s temples and ceremonial plazas, piled atop one another like coralline outgrowths, suffocating the old under the accretions of the new in a maze of competing holiness.

Of course, ‘new’ was a relative term. No cathedrals had been built on Terra for over four thousand years. Keeping the old ones from falling in on themselves was task enough for the millions of Ecclesiarchy work-gangs, toiling eternally in the crypts and the aisles and the slowly sinking foundations while the priests swung censers and slaughtered offerings on their ancient altars.

‘I wonder, Revus, if anyone noticed,’ mused Crowl, watching the hump of the Palace’s distant parapets slip out of view, ‘when we stopped building.’

Revus, sitting opposite him in the Nighthawk’s cramped interior, grunted something noncommittal. Gorgias, dormant for the moment, hovered inert at the rear of the chamber, occasionally bumping into the inner hull-beam as the craft moved.

Crowl turned to his captain. The red light slanting in through the viewports made his face look more damaged than it was. ‘Oh, don’t take it so hard. I think he actually liked you.’

Revus grimaced. ‘I thought they never left the Palace.’

‘So did I.’ Crowl sat back in the metal harness, pulling his cloak over his knees. ‘And what do we make of that – a Custodian outside the walls, hunting a missing brother of the ordo. I don’t think I quite believe it.’

Revus nodded, and rubbed his jawline. The bruising was steadily creeping across his stubble-hard chin, making the pale flesh look more tattooed than it was.

‘And who cares about Hieron Valco?’ Crowl went on. ‘Seriously, who cares about Hieron Valco? There must be a hundred bodies washing around down in the sewers that never get found. And now we chase down one, just one, and the bloody gods of old come back to stalk us.’

‘Rhadamanthys,’ said Revus.

‘What?’

‘Rhadamanthys. A name. I found it in Valco’s hab-unit.’

‘Did the arbitrators take that from you?’

‘No.’

‘That’s something, then.’ Crowl thought on it for a moment. ‘The orbital quarantine, that’s what the Custodian was interested in. Maybe we don’t need Valco’s complete records. Maybe that’s all the information he thought was important. It’s a ship.’

‘Heard of it?’

‘I’ll have a scan run of transporters waiting for dispatch. You never know.’

Revus nodded. ‘You’re sure? It could be a person.’



‘Or a weapon, or pet canine, but, no, no, it’s a ship. That’s what Valco did. That’s *all* he did, his whole life – recording ships. Getting killed was the most interesting thing that ever happened to him.’

‘And by someone who could get the body into an Inquisition morgue.’

‘You think it was Phaelias?’

‘No idea.’ Revus winced a little as the Nighthawk banked, cutting the restraint-straps into his wounds.

‘Nor I,’ said Crowl. ‘But I shall have to enquire further about this inquisitor, in whose name so much effort has been expended.’

‘Maybe Spinoza knows of him.’

Crowl gave an equivocal expression. ‘Maybe. I’ll ask her.’

Outside, the sky was steadily darkening. It was still hours before dusk, but the pyres were beginning to have a cumulative effect, ushering in an unnatural sunset to precede the real one. Calls to prayer blared out across the fading skyline, tinny from the vox-augmitter banks used by the priests, overlapping one another and mingling with the dolorous clang of great bells.

‘Have you told her yet?’ asked Revus.

‘Told her what?’

‘Why you wanted her.’

Crowl drew in a long breath, and listened to the fervent clamour. ‘I don’t know why you think I would.’

Revus didn’t look like he agreed, but made no objection. Ahead of them, the hive-spires flanking Courvain came into view, grimy brown against the smear of the ash-filled sky beyond. The Inquisition fortress itself hunkered down between them, dark as tar, shunned by the otherwise congested air traffic lanes.

‘We lost two of Hegain’s command,’ Crowl said, his voice low.

‘I know.’

‘If they have living relatives in service, let me know.’

‘I will.’

‘And yourself, Revus? They told me you were not mistreated.’

‘I’ll be fine.’

Crowl nodded, still looking out of the viewports. Courvain was looming before them now, its turrets glinting from the pyres, its armoured windows gaping like pits into nothingness.

‘I’ll think about telling her,’ he said, watching the hangar doors swing in closer. ‘When all this is over.’

Spinoza studied for the next three hours, locked in her cell, surrounded by the sheaves brought up from the archives. Huk was right – Quantrain appeared in a vast number of cases. He had been decorated for service many times, always in ceremonies held in the Inner Palace. The hierarchy of the Inquisition was an exercise in gathering obscurity – the more senior an operative became, the less they were visible, retreating into a subtle world of quiet conversations in gilt corridors and rumoured interventions over formal dinners. Quantrain had reached this apotheosis, it seemed – a player of the great games within the Sanctum Imperialis itself, operating through a network of capable agents, no doubt furthering a gradual move on the ultimate goal of a place on the High Lords’ council table as Representative.

If Quantrain was an arachnid-like figure, then his aides were all too visible, Gloch foremost among them. Perhaps, given a dynamic enough master, she could aspire to similar levels of notoriety. Despite all the coded jealousies in the files, it was clear to her that Gloch was admired. Quantrain was admired. Tur had been, too.

The chime at her door went off, and she jerked her head up, dragged from soporific and dangerous thoughts. How long had it been since she'd slept?

'Come,' she said, pushing the paperwork aside and rising from her study-unit.

The door hissed back to reveal a familiar silhouette, just as dark, angular and rangy as it ever was. At least the damned skull wasn't hovering over his shoulder, although perhaps that demented soul spoke more truth than either of them.

'I'm sorry, Spinoza,' Crowl said, stooping to enter. 'Truly sorry.'

That wrong-footed her. 'Ah, for—?'

'You never received your promised support.' Crowl stalked over to her cot – the blankets pulled tight, the devotion-books placed neatly on the thin pillow – and sat on the edge. His long hands flexed as he gestured for her to sit, then placed them on his knees. 'You probably heard – Revus ran into trouble, and it took me away.'

'I do not expect you to chaperone me, lord.'

'It's a twisted thicket out there, Spinoza. One path leads into another, and then to nowhere, perhaps, and then back out again.' He looked at the stacks of parchment. 'Extra study?'

'I encountered one of Inquisitor Quantrain's agents.'

'The giant?'

'Aido Gloch.'

'They must have fed that one grox-flesh as a child. Wholly unnatural. What did he want?'

'The woman – the target of the pursuit – they call her Falx, and they are hunting her too. She is one of the cabal, connected to its masters, so he said.'

'I don't suppose he offered to join forces?'

'I did not raise it.'

'Good. This will not be a priority for them. Quantrain has fingers in all sorts of places, but I doubt he'd ever show his face down here. Although, you can never be sure who'll suddenly come out of the tunnels.' Crowl smiled ruefully. 'See, I met a Custodian today. The first of my life, and in all probability the last.'

'I thought they never—'

'Yes, it's been a day of surprises. And that's why I needed to speak to you.' Crowl leant forwards, and appeared to wince as his shoulders moved. 'These gangs, they're killers and I wish to run them down just as much as you, but something else is happening. Revus has been doing some work for me after an unusual object turned up in a processing morgue, and it's begun to worry me. There was a body, a scribe charged with recording landing records, and something he noticed seems to have got him quite badly killed. We have the name of a ship, one he thought was important, and I need to look into it. One of my colleagues from the Ordo Xenos had the same thought and has now disappeared too – hence the appearance of this Custodian, who would not tell me precisely why he was taking an interest in all of this, which is to be expected, but makes me worry even more.'

Spinoza took it all in. 'Do you have a location on the ship?'

'It's called the *Rhadamanthys*, and it's still at low anchor. It achieved orbit nineteen standard days

ago and is due for departure in three weeks. I've been doing my own studying. From what we can tell, it's totally unremarkable – a deep-void bulk carrier owned by a major import cooperative and chartered to the Guilles Frethe corporation. I'm aware of no great corruption in this organisation, beyond the usual necessary to turn a living. Their proctoress-ordinary has been conducting an affair with a canon of a Ministorum compliance chapter for two years, and there are staff members with close links to cartels controlled by the Chartist Speaker, which all seems prudent enough if you want to negotiate landing permits. But that's the name we have. It's all we have. I want to take a closer look.'

Spinoza looked down at the floor. 'And you wish for me to join you?'

'Yes, that would be good.'

Despite herself, that was welcome. 'And the Angel's Tears?'

'They're important, like I say, but what leads do you have, right now?'

'There is work to be done.'

'Exactly. And I could use you, Spinoza. I could use that damned maul, which I suspect you wield quicker than anything I could.'

'I do not wish this Falx to evade me,' said Spinoza.

'Understood, but do not let it become personal. They win a small victory every time they insert a splinter under our nail. You understand?'

'She is dangerous.'

'So are you.'

Spinoza looked up again, and met Crowl's steady grey eyes. 'What do you hope to achieve?' she asked.

'I have no idea. Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. That's the chance of it.'

It was impossible, just then, not to contrast that with how Erastus had been. A Space Marine was a soldier, and everything he did was as a soldier did – objective defined, target isolated, result understood. This was speculation, hunches, based on little more than a feeling. Perhaps that was how it had to be, though she doubted Tur would have agreed. Different wars, different tactics.

'But you must have some idea,' she said.

Crowl hesitated before replying, as if weighing up how much to take her into confidence. 'The Custodian didn't say much,' he said eventually. 'Only that the elect of the Ministorum will reach the Eternity Gate in four days. Why did he say that? I don't know. Everyone on Terra is aware. There will be millions there to see it, and hundreds of thousands of guards watching them, and guards watching the guards. The Companions will be there, Titans and enforcers and assassins. It will be the most absurdly militarised point in the galaxy for that one day, and you would have to be quite insane to contemplate taking advantage of it.' He met her gaze, and his own was as hard as ouslite. 'But then, there's a lot of that about.'

'They are getting weapons,' Spinoza said.

'From somewhere, yes. But would it not be the greatest of chances, if our friends in the Angel's Tears were connected to this new thing? That would be neat and helpful, and I don't think life is neat and helpful. It's never been that way for me, anyway.' Crowl exhaled, and his tight cheeks flexed, betraying the fine-lined limits of rejuve therapy. He got up, pulling his cloak around his armour. 'I have a transport being primed. Will two hours rest suffice?'

It wouldn't. She was still suffering the effects of the long warp passage, exacerbated by the exertions

of the past few days, compounded by the enervating effects of Terra's destructive environment. Ten hours would not have been enough.

'I will be ready, lord.'

'Cro—' he began, then smiled in defeat. 'Very well. It'll be good to have you with me.'

Then he was gone, limping through the doorway with a brush of cloak-hem and a thrum of power armour.

Once the door was closed, Spinoza looked over at the cot. The pristine blanket had an indentation on it now, a faint rumple in the coarse wool. That might have been an irritant, had she planned on making use of it. But that had never been her intention.

She pushed the parchment stacks aside, the ones from the archives that she had been willing to show her master. Underneath were the folios given to her by Rassilo.

'Enhance,' she commanded, and the overhead suspensor lumen swelled into brightness, illuminating the script of a tattered leaf entitled 'Crowl, E., O.H. – What We Know, and What We Do Not.'

Spinoza leaned forwards, resting her elbows on the metal slab, and resumed her study.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Making the leap from solid earth and into the void beyond had once been beyond the dreams of the insane. Generations of soil-dwellers, scratching about amid the dirt of aeons, prisoners of gravity, had looked up at the stars and called them gods, knowing that they would forever be far out of reach.

No longer. Though so much else had been forgotten, the means to break the bonds of the planetary was still commonplace within the Imperium, so much so that even a modestly endowed mercantile combine would have a dozen system-runners in its orbital sheds, plying the short hop between terrestrial landing stages and local orbit, ready to rendezvous with the true giants of the deep. The atmosphere of the Throneworld was nigh as congested as its urban surfaces, scored and re-scored by the crossover trails of a million near-space vessels. There had ceased to be much significant difference between the atmospheric and the true-vacuum zones – they were just steadily rarefied sections of the same world-city, extending up from the darkest chasms, out beyond the turrets and into the high-air stations, and then further out, back into darkness, up to where the mighty orbital plates slowly gyrated in the harsh light of an unfiltered sun.

A vessel blasted off from a sanctioned landing site on Terra every millisecond, so they said. Another landed to take its place not long after. They arrived full, they left empty. The Throneworld did not trade with the rest of the Imperium – it consumed it. Goods were sucked in from every corner of every segmentum, dragged out from the holds of the leviathans that carried them, seized by the ravenous populace and devoured, and it was never enough. A million cargo-lifters might touch down in a single hour, and still thousands would starve. Any delay in the endless circular passage, and tens of thousands would die. Like a hopeless opiate addict, the populace could never be satisfied, never given enough. The birthplace of humanity now squatted like some obscene, famished infant at the heart of its web of stellar kingdoms, ingesting the last dregs of energy out of the straggling fringes and gulping them down into greedy oblivion.

Courvain's voidcraft were housed in their own sector of the tower. Crowl maintained two Spiderwidows in his armoury for orbital transit – void-capable Inquisitorial variants of the Storm Eagle gunships used by the Adeptus Astartes. Like all else in his armoury, the vessels were night-black, armoured and emblazoned with the sigils of the Ordo Hereticus. Their marker-lights were a pale blue, the livery picked out in cold silver. A Spiderwidow carried few heavy armaments, lacking space in the enlarged plasma-housing for anything but engines and assorted sensor-baffling archeotech, but retained wing-mounted lascannons and a pair of heavy bolters at the prow.

It was the deep of the Terran night when the main hangar doors kicked off steam, their pistons activated, and drew back. Warning klaxons blared out, followed by spinning alert-lumens. Powerful searchlights shot up into the night sky, giving a warning understood by all atmospheric craft in the vicinity.

Seconds later, the Spiderwidow's turbines roared into throaty life, and it lifted off the apron, its fuel lines and stabiliser cords snapping free. Superheated air thrummed over the rockcrete, and the massive craft roared up and out, tilting on exit from Courvain's dark flanks and boosting into a steep climb.

Crowl sat back, watching the air traffic scurry to make way. The cityscape was ominous in that light – a wall of sheer black, punctured by the meagre scatter of lumen-points – but it soon fell away, exposing a featureless screen of occlusion ahead.

Spinoza, seated beside her master, watched the vastness of Salvator dropping away fast, a web of gold and yellow, broken only by sporadic plume-flame and the dull glow of active forges. For a few moments, she could make out the glittering margins of the Palace itself on the northern horizon, bathed in a blood-gold aura, its immense walls rising above even the tallest of the surrounding spires.

Then they hit the cloud belt, and the Spiderwidow rocked hard with turbulence. Aneela, Crowl's pilot, grappled with the control columns, her jaw set hard under the visor of her flight-helm.

'You're fine with this, Spinoza?' Crowl asked, calm as ever. 'You can say if you're not.'

The question itself was an insult, but she tried not to let it show. 'Absolutely.'

'I've had the equipment checked.'

'Do not be concerned. I have no fear.'

'Like your old friends. So they say.'

From further back in the cramped cockpit, Gorgias hissed something like a laugh. '*Timor nullius!* Oh, good. *Homicidium* on the way.'

'There's always that chance,' said Crowl.

The last of the cloud cover ripped away, tumbling behind the Spiderwidow's punishing backdraught. As the air thinned, Aneela switched power to the plasma drives, and the chassis locked itself into transitional judders.

With the toxic rad-zone behind them, the stars at last came out – a dazzling belt of rawlight strewn across the velvet darkness. After so long down in the grime, seeing that purity nearly made Spinoza cry out loud. *This* was the element she loved, where war could be conducted in the open, in the vaults of the heavens where the fires wheeled.

Except this was not empty space. Over to their left, the vast curve of an orbital plate gently turned, its withered grey armour stretching off into darkness. Defence stations loomed further up, each the size of cities, studded with gape-mawed novacannons and graviton world-enders. A colossal grand cruiser bearing the livery of Battlefleet Solar crawled off into the middle distance, escorted by wings of frigates. Between those giants swam shoals of lesser craft – fleet tenders, guide-tugs, the hundreds of orbital lifters, all of them fat and clumsy, riding on dull red cushions of plasma-glow.

'Do you have a fix?' Crowl asked Aneela.

'Clear,' Aneela replied, swinging the gunship around and setting course across the planet's face. 'You'll see it soon.'

With the Spiderwidow's angle steepening, Spinoza could look back down over the seething mass of cloud that swathed the planet's atmosphere. The world's arc looked like some eerie desert, underlit

by piercing swells of colour leaking from the masked city below. Great circles, continent-spanning circles, glimmered dully, tracing out ancient patterns of conurbation, still intact even after millennia of rampant growth, regrowth and decay.

One zone was more brilliant than any other, overwatched by the most turbulent of storms, circling and boiling like a rad-inferno, as wide as half the hemisphere, unsettled and flecked by spasms of lightning.

*He is there. Buried deep, but He is there. Even the elements pay tribute. Even the planet mourns.*

They climbed higher, and the horizon fell away, curving at the edges. The sun, for so long weak, became a yellow-white hole in the void, brilliant and dazzling. More defence stations swam into view, antique monsters, floating like castles in the void, their walls still blackened from munitions fired ten thousand years ago. Truly massive voidships lurked on the edge of sensor range, far too huge to enter the patrolled orbital zone and attended to by flocks of scurrying lifters. They were virtually invisible, those giants, hulking out in the frigid wastes, their scale only given away by flickering marker lights in the deep.

‘Coming into augur-margins, now,’ reported Aneela, steering the Spiderwidow under the shadow of a defence cluster and out past the gravity distortion of a second orbital plate. ‘Do you wish me to run silent?’

‘No, not this time,’ Crawl replied, looking a little distracted by the spectacle unfolding around them. There was something irresistibly stately about it, the choreographed interplay of so many archaic edifices, rotating silently, standing eternal vigil over the ravaged globe below. ‘They know we’re coming.’

Spinoza glanced down at her control console, and caught sight of the target on a pict-screen – a mid-size deep-void carrier, no more than four kilometres long, comprising ridged modular sections slung under a hunched command cluster. It was a washed-out earth-brown, its variegated sides both charred from repeated warp entry and bleached from the undiluted glare of too many suns.

‘We have initial hails,’ said Aneela, sliding out from the plate’s pull and into the open void. The *Rhadamanthys* appeared on the real-viewers, a lump of light little bigger than the stars beyond it, but growing fast. ‘How do you wish me to respond?’

Gorgias began to get excited, and bobbed up and down as if caught in a grav-trap. ‘*Hereticus-majoris. In stellam negatoriam*, hunt them, hunt them. All will be *infernis*.’

Crawl ignored the skull.

‘Give the captain cordial greetings and request boarding rights as per standard protocol.’ He swung around in his seat and looked at Spinoza. ‘Time for you to suit up, I think.’

Captain-General Thalek Arjanda watched the vid-relay picts of the Inquisition vessel entering reception hangar nine. He watched his first officer Fliox receive the guest and take him inside. He watched them walk through the passageways and up the spiral staircases. It didn’t take them long – just a few minutes – not enough to learn much. The guest was tall, cloaked, almost pallid. He carried himself like they all carried themselves – as if everything in their line of sight were guilty, ripe for the fires.

This one had extremely fine armour, though. Must be worth some coin, Arjanda thought. He could do something with that, and they’d pay for it in the outer reaches.

And then, all too soon, the approach lights blinked on, the bridge door chimes sounded, and he had

to rise and do his duty. He pushed himself from his command throne, dusted down the last evidence of a hasty meal and risked a final glance in a handheld mirror, just to check no crumbs clung on to his protruding moustache and forked beard.

Arjanda was of the old-school mercantile captain type, dressed in fine cloth and wearing real-leather boots, over-the-knee and buckled with real steel. A long waistcoat had been stretched over his old-age girth, straining against a row of bronze-gold buttons. His gloves were catskin and smoothed by use, and his half-length cloak had a gold thread inlay bought after a lucrative run to Tentrion nine standard ago.

The effect normally helped him cultivate an aura of authority. Crews liked working for a captain whose success was obvious – they shared in it. Now, though, faced with this walking shade, one who didn't have to scrimp and deal and connive to scramble in order to procure his finery, he felt suddenly puffed up and vulnerable.

Perhaps no one ever felt differently, faced with one of *them*. No one with any sense, anyway.

Arjanda picked up his jewelled walking cane and strolled towards the rear of his expansive bridge, where the doors were now opening and Fliox was ushering the spectre inside. On either side of the incoming party, banks of cogitators locked in thick metal cages chattered away, attended by both free-crew and indentured menials. Above them was a high domed roof, marked with tarnished silver astrological patterns and old Navigator House sigils. Ten metres down was the narrow strip of real-viewers, manned by augur-servitors and showing the pale grey arc of Terra's upper atmosphere.

'My greetings to you, lord inquisitor,' Arjanda said, bowing. 'I trust the passage was trouble-free.'

The inquisitor inclined his pale head slightly. His movements were precise, weighted like a swordsman's, refined. Up close, the artfulness of his armour could be clearly seen – it was like a skin of black plates, silver-lined, barely audible but clearly tight-packed with power. His hair was slicked back severely from a high forehead, his lips thin, his eyes hollow. When he spoke, the voice was unusual – dry, precise in diction, infused with more Low Gothic contractions than might have been expected.

'Were you expecting trouble, captain-general?' Crawl asked.

'Not at all. Not here.'

'Tell me about your ship.'

Arjanda swallowed. He could feel sweat beginning to prick at the base of his spine. He could sense Fliox hovering, the rest of the crew looking up at them when they dared.

'This old thing?' he asked, risking a half-laugh. 'Four hundred years old, so she's got some life in her yet. Never had any trouble. Never been impounded, nor held to combat-majoris. We've had some run-ins with pirates over the years, but they never did much more than scrape the paint. You can take a look around her, if you wish.'

'What cargo do you carry?' The inquisitor never moved his eyes away. There was something terrible lingering in those eyes, something that was hard to pin down but was most definitely resident and which made Arjanda feel faintly nauseous.

'All sorts.' Arjanda gestured towards one of the cogitator banks, where a plugged-in menial was busy clattering on a runeboard. 'You can see the manifests if you wish. Mostly foodstuffs, taken from the Crag Belt. We can haul industrials, chem-vats, fuels. It's all documented.'

'Do you carry weapons?'

'That would be prohibited, lord. We're not a sanctioned Navy transport, and we don't have the



licences.'

Crowl smiled, a chilling expression. 'Any lapses, captain? Any time you have made some mistake with the scholarship? Such things are possible, even for the diligent.'

Arjanda stiffened, hoping that sweat had not broken out across his balding pate. 'Never,' he said, hoping it looked reasonably convincing. 'Never. Look at the logs.'

Crowl nodded, with an expression on his face that betrayed just what he thought of the veracity of the *Rhadamanthys*' own logs. 'When did you make orbit?'

'Eighteen days ago, standard.'

'Inbound from?'

'Hesperus.'

'Carrying?'

'Ninety per cent grain derivatives, for processing on-world. Eight per cent sundry industrials – I can give you an inventory. Two per cent empty.'

'That's a lot of empty.'

'We were let down by a supplier. We had to move. You can't keep the Schedulers waiting, or they—'

'No delays en route?'

'One small wait in-system, off Luna. There were hold-ups in the stack.'

Crowl nodded. 'They were running Tier Four scrutiny. Were you boarded?'

'We were.'

'Who by?'

Arjanda began to get flustered. The questions were delivered politely, softly, but they were relentless, one after the other. 'A scour-team from the Provost Marshal's division. I forget the names. Fliox? He will retrieve them for you.'

'Did they find anything?'

'Of course not.'

For the first time since arriving on the bridge, Crowl finally took his eyes away from Arjanda's and ran his cold gaze across the cramped and cluttered space. He looked at the battered bridge stations, the faded metalwork, the chipped bulkheads. Every glance seemed weighted, as if calculating how efficiently he could destroy it all.

Arjanda clutched the handle of his cane, and felt the ivory tip bore into his clenched palm. No one dared speak. The crew pretended to work, but their tension was palpable.

Eventually, Crowl drew in a deep breath. It looked like that pained him a little, for the ghost of a wince flickered over his austere features.

'You offered to demonstrate your voyage data,' he said. 'So then, show me what you've got.'



## CHAPTER TWELVE

A Threadneedle boarding capsule was a hateful thing, designed by a lunatic and outfitted by sadists. The concept had been derived from the posthumous writings of the heretic tech-priest Xho-Xho of Targaron V, who it was rumoured had taken his inspiration from an unsanctioned dissection of a failed boarding torpedo variant STC, radically reducing it in size and scope and adding novel aspects of his own devising. The Mechanicus looked dimly on such acts of initiative – hence the writings being abruptly posthumous – and quietly ensured that the design lay unlooked-at in the hidden archives of Mars for three thousand years. Only in the mid-41st millennium, as the long arc of the war began to turn and the imperative of desperation sparked interest in the previously forbidden, did radical members of the Priesthood uncover the blueprints again and begin to consider turning them into actuality. What became known as Project Chaldea was originally intended for use in individual ship-boarding actions by the Adeptus Astartes and certain factions of the mechanised skitarii, but Xho-Xho's design parameters were never robust enough for that, and so it was repurposed for use by the specialist elements of the Adeptus Terra – the assassins, the spies, the Inquisition.

Spinoza herself knew almost nothing of this chequered history, but as she felt the innards of the despicable machine rattle, kicking her against the strapped-tight bonds of the restraint cradle, she mouthed a series of profane curses against whoever or whatever had created it.

She could see nothing. All she could hear was the roar of the plasma burner, which filled the tiny space and made her ear protectors swell. Her limbs were swaddled hard about her, and the torpedo's walls were less than a hand's width from her face. Above her head were the tight-crammed electro-mechanics, chittering and hissing as they reacted to the stream of incoming data. The machine-spirits of these things were vicious souls, as crabbed and spiteful as the devices they had been interred within, and Spinoza felt sure they made the ride deliberately uncomfortable.

A genuine boarding torpedo was ten times the size of a Threadneedle, and did its work through brute force and melta charges. This thing went slower, like a knife in the dark, and operated in void-silence. The first Spinoza knew of the impact was a gentle crump, followed by the deployment of whining armour-scalpels. Augur-bluffs whirred into action, disabling any sensor arrays in the cut-zone. The machine shuddered, shivered, then crept forwards again, indicating that a breach had been secured. Spinoza listened to the tortured sounds of rending metal, then heard the damnable plasma burner finally wind down. There was a final spasm of activity, then the interior of the tube was flooded with red light and the outer casing cracked open.

With relief, Spinoza blink-commanded the restraint harness to unsheathe. The synthleather straps snapped back into their holders, and she was able to shove the hatch open. Struggling for a moment, wriggling against the hard interior and pushing with her heels, she eventually crawled out, going on hands and knees until she was free of the capsule and could look about her.

The Threadneedle had entered as instructed – in an abandoned compartment under the *Rhadamanthys*' main bulk storage halls. The incision in the vessel's outer hull was less than two metres in diameter, and the temporary gauze of a void-seal shimmered across the breach. The torpedo may have been hateful, but it had done its job – flying in under the watch of the conveyor's sensor grid, worming inside and then making good the damage. As it lay in the dark, its smooth exterior coated in crystalline frost, Spinoza gave it a grudging kick of acknowledgement.

That brought Gorgias swaying out of the rear compartment, its eye a disorientated lime-green. The skull collided with a beam overhead and spun around, needle gun primed.

'Silence!' hissed Spinoza, gesturing for it to calm down. 'Your sense-grid is scrambled. Focus now. Crawl said you would be useful.'

Gorgias pivoted back round, dipping down to face her, and she saw just how old the remnant-bone was among all that scaffolding of Mechanicus motive-units and augur-housings. The thing's spinal trail clattered over her forearm, linked metal sliding on the ceramite.

'*Interio?*' the skull demanded.

'So it seems. How do you feel?'

A brief pause. Then the eye bled back to its habitual blood-red. 'Crawl *ingressus, ergo* hurry-hurry.'

Spinoza edged forwards, gathering data on their position. She was fully armoured and helmed, and for all its combat advantages the enclosed headwear did nothing to dispel the lingering sense of being buried alive.

The compartment was only a few metres long, one of thousands of buffers between the interior units and the main hull-skin. Ahead of her was the interior access portal, thick with rust and clearly not used in a long time. She pulled a tumbler-cracker from her gauntlet, clamped it on to the lock-bolts and waited for the seal to break. Once done, she had to haul the hatch open manually, its motors having long since corroded away. Then she was through.

The interior of an unloaded bulk carrier was cavernous, echoing, unlit, nearly as empty as the abyss outside. Spinoza crept across the deserted plasteel deck. Above her soared mighty section dividers – huge walls ribbed with adamantium and marked by elevator-tracks. The construction was modular, and twenty-metre-high classification runes marched into the darkness at regular intervals. It was hard to imagine the volume filled by the millions of containers that the *Rhadamanthys* would have carried when loaded – now it was tomb-like.

Spinoza started scanning, using her helm's inbuilt auspex capability to flood the walls with variant soak-tests. Gorgias went ahead of her, its lumen-points like stars in the dark.

Every so often, she came across a seal printed in ultraviolet – a sign left by the arbitrators on their scheduled scrutiny sweep. They had been thorough, ticking off each bay in turn, then stamping it with an auspex-visible seal of purity. Back when the arbitrators had been present, of course, the hauler would have been laden.

'*Nihil,*' chattered Gorgias, powering on ahead, then swerving around a bulwark and further into the gloom. 'Dum-de-dum.'

'We are just beginning,' said Spinoza, but in truth she began to share the same misgivings. Crawl had

brought them up here after investigations of his own, ones in which she had had no involvement. Perhaps his judgement was sound, but there had been too little time with him to truly tell. It was wholly unclear what they were looking for. If there had been something to hide, it was unclear to her why the arbitrators would not have discovered it – a Tier Four sweep was a serious undertaking, conducted by serious operators whose life depended on not making a mistake.

Despite her misgivings, they covered the ground fast. A hauler's crew was small in number – just a few dozen in most cases – and there was no reason for them to be present when the ship was empty. The skull ran wide-angle scans as they headed back down the length of the ship, rack after rack, chamber after chamber.

Soon enough, the final units beckoned – shabbier than the rest, faintly stinking of their last cargo. The metal decks were strewn with a few lost grains of freeze-dried wheat, rotting in the shadows. Spinoza edged around the corner and spied a chamber much like all the others. Diligently, she ran her array of scans.

Once again, nothing. She tallied the scrutiny marks, one by one. Everything had been checked. Wearily, she turned, looking for Gorgias. The skull was hovering halfway up the far wall.

‘Enough,’ she voxed, beckoning for it to come down. ‘We do not have much time.’

Gorgias stayed where it was. ‘*Iterum.*’

‘There is no point. I have already run scans.’

Gorgias whirled around to face her, its eye flaring an angry crimson. ‘*Stupidus! No universa arma augur matrix, no, no.*’

Spinoza halted. ‘Do you have something?’

The skull began to bob agitatedly. ‘*Locus hic.*’

Gorgias was over twenty metres up. Spinoza reached for the controls of the nearest elevator, patched into them, and the wall-mounted tracker flickered into life. She stepped onto the platform and shuddered up the wall's face on rack-and-pinion tracks. She reached Gorgias' position and stared at another blank section of wall. It was exactly as the others had been, and marked with the UV seal to boot.

‘This is cleared,’ she said.

‘Blindness! *Iterum.*’

Spinoza fixed on the UV seal, and pushed it through the full spectrum of visual checks. It came out identically to all others – until the last one. Spectral analysis brought up a different profile. It looked the same, had the same credentials, but the ink was chemically different.

Gorgias had started butting into the wall-panel where it hovered, then moving upwards and trying again. Carefully, Spinoza began to move along the elevator platform, testing at the edges. The panel was just like the rest – twenty metres wide, ten tall, with grooves to take the edges of slotted container units. When the arbitrators had been here, it would have been pressed right up against the side of one of them, buried under the mountains of cargo.

Her auspex readings showed nothing. Everything reflected back, giving her nothing. Frustrated, she pushed hard against the panel. It didn't move, but there was a faintly audible click from the far side. Spinoza looked at Gorgias, who looked back.

‘Move away,’ she warned, bringing out her crozius and activating the energy field. Argent snarled, throwing illumination up the gloomy walls. Bracing herself, Spinoza brought it up to the join running along the top of the panel, gripped the maul two-handed, and pressed it into the structure.

Energies flared up instantly, scattering against the steel. The panel-edge resisted for a few seconds before the extreme heat started to tell. It cracked, blistered, then blew. Spinoza almost stumbled as the entire fascia swung inwards, triggered by the destruction of its locking brace. Argent's energy field flooded light into the space beyond the casing.

Spinoza remained static for a second, startled. They should have been staring into the solid innards of the brace-wall, but instead a whole new chamber had opened up before them. The walls, the floor, the ceiling – all were thick with blood. The stains were old, dried a dark red-brown but dyed deep into the metal as if fired in an oven. There were other marks on the walls: gouges, as if energy claws had ripped through the outer skin, and burn-marks, and the glimmer of what looked like spatters of acidic residue.

'Foulness,' hissed Gorgias, swirling around inside, its picter-lens clicking rapidly. '*Hereticus-majoris-extremis.*'

The space stank like nothing Spinoza had ever encountered. Some of it was the blood, locked in its sealed unit for a long time, but that was not all. There was something indescribably disgusting in the stagnant air, something that made her want to gag. Saliva pooled in her cheeks, and she swallowed it down.

'What was *in* here?' she asked, half speaking to Gorgias, half to herself. The chamber was empty, but her esoteric scanners were now running off the scale. They would require analysis – nothing in them made any kind of sense.

Then she saw the red light, blinking on, off, on, off, down in the corner of the chamber. She knelt down, bringing her head closer and switching off the auspex overlays.

A tripwire beacon, rigged to the blown door-lock, now transmitting.

Spinoza turned on her heel and jogged back to the elevator platform controls.

'Aneela,' she voxed, keeping Argent activated as the platform began to grind down to deck-level. 'Prep for immediate dispatch, inform the Lord Crowl, and ready arms – we are discovered.'

Crowl took his time, peering into the convex pict-screen, watching the phosphor runes scroll past in blurry sequence. The lists of manifests, routing stations, warp stages were all routine, nothing that would arouse the suspicion of even the most exacting of assessors. No doubt the arbitrators had been all over this already, but you never knew. They might have boarded a hundred vessels before this one, and even psycho-conditioned scrutineers could feel fatigue.

He could sense Arjanda hovering at his shoulder, breathing heavily, padding back and forth, trying not to let his agitation become too obvious. The captain was very scared. His crew were very scared. That was to be expected. Once he might have put that down as a marker of some kind of guilt, but he'd long since learned the truth of what he had already told Spinoza – everyone was scared of an inquisitor, the criminal and the innocent alike, which made their job harder, not easier. Spinoza didn't seem to have fully grasped that truth yet, but it was to be hoped that she would do, in time.

His thoughts strayed to his new acolyte, and for an instant the ranks of ship-data swam out of focus. He remembered first discussing her with Revus, months ago. The data on her had been hard to get hold of, but Huk had been creative in her enquiries. They had all worked hard for him, the bloodline, and that was some small comfort in a world of disappointments.

Should his conscience have been pricked a little more? Maybe, maybe not. He had been languishing in a moral void for so long that recollecting old decencies came harder than ever. Still, for all Tur's

influence lay heavy on her still, there were promising signs.

‘Can I be of any assistance, inquisitor?’ came Arjanda’s querulous voice.

Crowl turned the dial over to the next screen, never taking his eyes off the grease-streaked glass. More runes flickered, line after line of them.

‘How long was your delay off Luna?’ he asked, casually.

‘Two days,’ said Arjanda.

‘It took two days?’ asked Crowl, finally looking up at the captain.

Arjanda shrugged, a weak affectation of levity. ‘I did not tell them their business.’

Crowl returned the console. ‘Here, now. I’ve looked at your internal records of movement within the solar system. It’s just as you say, but now I find something unusual – perhaps you can help me. Your augur records show close tracking of another vessel at local time/date marker 456-56-13. This vessel’s location I can extrapolate from the augur logs as somewhere out in void sector 4569, a long way beyond Luna. And yet the location of the *Rhadamanthys* on that same time/date marker, according to your own location recorder, puts you within five thousand kilometres of the Luna holding shipyard Chraeses. So either your augur range is incredibly long, or one of these two records is mistaken. Which is it?’

Crowl looked up to see Arjanda visibly shaking. That was not terribly unusual. What was more unusual was that the captain-general was holding a pistol two-handed, pointing it at Crowl’s head. Sweat was now pouring freely down the man’s face, making his elaborate moustache slick where it met his puckered flesh.

The rest of the sentient crew had also drawn their firearms – mostly shotguns and obsolete-format lasguns, the kind of thing you’d expect a freighter crew to use.

‘Throne, I wish you had not come here,’ said Arjanda, looking as if he might burst into panicked tears. ‘Do you think I *want* to do this? Do you think I *want* to damn myself?’

Crowl pondered how to react. His fingers were inconveniently far from Sanguine, but it was not the weaponry that concerned him so much as the fact they were daring to deploy it at all.

‘You realise what you’re doing?’ Crowl asked, quietly.

‘Damn you, yes I do!’ shrieked Arjanda, trying to control his shaking arms. ‘Whoever you sent down into my hold has just tripped a proximity beam, and I can’t let you go now. Any of you. They’ll find me, you understand this? *They’ll* find me, and *he* will find me, and I can’t... I *won’t*...’ The muzzle was trembling now, rocking back and forth as the man’s muscles tightened. ‘I’ll die first! I’ll die first. Nothing you can do to me would be worse. *Nothing.*’

Crowl looked past the gun’s barrel at the tortured face beyond. ‘You’re a good man, are you not, captain-general? You love the Imperium. I can sense it, but you’ve become part of something that scares you. You should give me some names now, for in your situation that is a kind of heroism.’

Arjanda started laughing. His shoulders rose and fell, rocking with the bitter peals. ‘I don’t care! If you’d seen what I’ve... Holy Throne, I am damned to purgation anyway, and we are all damned to purgation, and you are too, so what does it matter that—’

Crowl had waited patiently for the moment, silently glanding a burst of motovine. When he moved, the stimulant kicked in, reacting to the interface chemicals in his armour and making his movements blistering. He swept Sanguine out of its holster and loosed a bullet into Arjanda’s shoulder, sending the man tumbling to the deck even before he noticed the acceleration. While the captain roared in pain, Crowl got to work on the crew, ducking under the panicked shotgun discharges and punching out

with his armoured fist. Two of them rushed him, firing wildly. He swerved around the bullet-lines and crunched his fist into a face, then jabbed an elbow back into an exposed neck.

Then the rest were running, scrabbling for the rear doors. Crawl caught one of them by the neck and slammed him down onto the deck, breaking his back. Sanguine accounted for another – a single shot through the back of a head, an explosion of blood and a scatter of falling bone fragments.

He swirled around, his black armour glinting, and faced the rest of them. Cut off from escape, their terrified hands now clutched at their weapons again, and they backed away, trying to get an angle to fire. Crawl gave them no opportunity – the motovine made him terrifyingly fast, and he leapt into the air, his armour's systems boosting him, reloading as he flew.

He crashed into the last knot of them, kicking out to crush the sternum of the closest, grabbing the hair of another and smashing his face into the cogitator bank, firing with ruthless precision to end another two. He tore apart the remainder like a vengeful spectre of the Old Dark, his cloak twisting around him as he moved, ending the screams one by one with heavy, punishing strokes. The very last of them tried to run, to leap down at the sloping armourglass viewports as if he could somehow shatter them and tumble into the void, but Crawl caught him, hauled him back, seized his head and neck in an armlock, and twisted. The sick crack echoed around the bridge, followed by the thud of the broken body hitting the deck.

Once done, Crawl took a breath. The blood drained slowly down over the cracked bridge stations. Only the servitors still worked on, slaved to their terminals, their slack-jawed expressions never altering.

Crawl looked Sanguine over, brushed the ivory clean, reloaded it, and moved over to where Arjanda still writhed in pain. He crouched over the prone captain, placed a balled fist on the man's wound, then pressed down.

'Say nothing, listen with utmost care,' Crawl told him in a low voice. 'You are condemned to die, you know this, but it can yet be painless. Your name need not be entered into the rolls of the damned. You have family? They need not suffer. I can take you from this place, protect you. Work with me, and it can be a good death.'

Arjanda began to laugh, and bubbles of foam spilled from his agonised mouth. 'Even if I... believed you...' he blurted, wincing from the web of pain.

His eyes went bloodshot, and his body began to twitch. Crawl pulled back, watching the captain's face turn purple. His gunshot had not caused that level of damage – the captain had ingested something to end his suffering. That, above all other compromises he had made, was detestable.

'A name,' said Crawl, gazing down at the jerking body. 'Just give me a name.'

Arjanda managed a final, contorted expression of regret. 'He'll *know*. Even on... the other side. *He'll know*.'

And then he gasped up a slug of vomit, arched his back, veins stiffly protruding, and messily died. As his body finally went limp, something clanked against the metal. Crawl saw the captain-general's cane rolling across the deck. He reached for it, and noticed that clustered jewels at its tip were flashing softly, just like a transmitter.

Then the bridge lumens suddenly plunged into a cloudy red, klaxons went off, and the pict-screens began to flash up warnings.

Crawl moved towards the nearest monitor, pulled up a diagnostic readout, and saw just how long the freshly overloaded plasma drives had before they blew the ship apart.

He shot the dead Arjanda a withering look.

‘You contemptible bastard,’ he said.

Spinoza sprinted up the corridor, feeling the decking flex under her boots. The walls were shaking down, and rivets slammed out of their housings like bullets. One winged Gorgias, sending the skull crashing into the far wall and blurting out confused High Gothic curses.

‘Lord Crawl!’ she voxed again, more urgently this time. Aneela hadn’t been able to raise him, and the ship was coming apart. From somewhere a long way off, a dull rumble gathered pace, vibrating up the deep shafts to the enginarium and sounding like a distant roar of massed bovine herds. It would only get worse – she’d seen a plasma breach on a major freighter before, and what was left of the hull didn’t leave much for the salvage teams.

She reached an intersection and swung around the corner, running hard, feeling the air heat up behind her. The vibrations underfoot became more severe, cracking the pressed-metal decking and sending hairline fractures snaking up the walls.

When she finally reached the bridge level, the entire structure around her started to sway, and lumen-units blew apart in showers of plastek. The doors were closed and locked, so she swung Argent heavily into the join, crunching through the bolstered ironwork and searing it with disruptor-flares. Three more swings smashed the left-hand panel back onto its hinges, and she shoved it aside and broke in.

Bodies lay all across the deck, slumped across terminals and thrown down into servitor pits. Much of the roof had already collapsed, and hung in a tangle of girders from a disintegrating dome-ceiling. Cogitators were destructing in sequence, gibbering wildly out of control and then exploding in gouts of black smoke. Amid it all was Crawl, hunched over a still-functioning terminal and clattering intently on a runeboard.

‘Lord Crawl!’ Spinoza shouted, racing over to him. ‘The ship is primed to annihilate! We must leave now!’

‘A moment, Spinoza,’ Crawl said, never taking his eyes from the screen.

Spinoza stared at him for a moment. More echoing cracks resounded from the decks below, building up to the crescendo that would finally compromise the ship’s immense substructure.

She hastened over to the bridge’s prow, above where the decking sloped sharply towards the single line of armourglass real-viewers. ‘Aneela,’ she voxed. ‘Report position and status.’

Nothing but static hissed over the comm-link. The energies boiling away in such close proximity had blown what remained of her receptive range.

‘Lord, we have to—’

‘*A moment.*’

An explosion burst out from behind the broken doors, sending both tumbling through the air. The far end of the bridge decking rumbled up like thrown cloth, exposing a gaping void beneath, soon filled with the rush of kindling fires. The roar from below ramped up in volume and proximity, tracing a path of destruction from the deeps up to their level. Only seconds remained.

Spitting a curse under her breath, Spinoza seized two micro-krak grenades, primed them and hurled them at the armourglass panes below. Then she stowed her crozius, strode over to her master and prepared to physically haul him from the terminal. By the time she reached him he was finally moving, reaching for his mag-locked helm and twisting it into place.



‘You look agitated, Spinoza,’ he said, just as another blast rocked the rear wall, bulging it into a lattice of cracks and provoking secondary fireballs all down the right flank of the bridge-space.

‘Now, lord,’ she insisted, pulling him towards the downward slope. The micro-krak charges went off in sequence, smashing the armourglass into a welter of fire-flecked shards. The bridge’s atmosphere immediately blew out of the breach, hurling both of them down the slope, through the glass and the curtains of guttering flames, and out into the void beyond.

Even helmed and armoured, the shock was terrible. Spinoza felt herself spinning wildly, lost in a whirl of limbs and stars. For all that her armour attempted to compensate, the sudden plunge into frigidity took her breath away, and she felt her heart racing. For a moment, as the debris wheeled past her and her sound-world disappeared into a claustrophobic drumbeat of snatched breaths, she could latch on to nothing at all – just circling stars and a sensation of horrific dislocation.

Then the snow-grey arc of Terra’s horizon swam up across her visual field, followed by the immense shadow of the burning *Rhadamanthys*. She saw Crawl, barely visible in his black armour, sail past her, arms outstretched as if to catch something.

The Spiderwidow loomed up out of the void below them right on schedule, its crew-bay doors open and its thrusters jetting expertly to gather them up. Crawl went in first, before Aneela brought the gunship around to capture Spinoza.

The interrogator hit the far side of the crew-bay at speed, bouncing from the impact and nearly cartwheeling back out into the void. Crawl, already shackled in place, grabbed her as she sailed past, pulled her upright and shoved her unceremoniously into a restraint harness. Gorgias, propelled by its own thrusters, shot into the narrow compartment just as Aneela closed the outer doors and swung the gunship around. Pumped air began to siphon in, restoring the growl of engine noise and the crash of impacting debris.

‘That was *too close*, lord,’ she chided, strapping herself down, furious at the needless delay.

‘I had full trust in you,’ replied Crawl, perfectly relaxed.

The Spiderwidow was now travelling at full speed, boosting clear of the void-hauler, its cockpit lowering and its plasma drives burning hard. A second later, and a huge blast wave caught them, hurling the gunship into a swirling dive. Heavy clangs made the hull shiver and buckle – big objects were hitting them, careening into them before spinning away planetwards. Their enclosed world tilted on its axis as the grav-compensators lost traction and the Spiderwidow corkscrewed. That lasted for what seemed like many minutes – a wave of impacts that would surely smash the gunship apart and send them all burning up into the toxic airspace below.

Eventually, though, the onslaught abated. Aneela righted the gunship and set them on a stable course. The comm-link crackled open, and her matter-of-fact voice broke out from the cockpit above.

‘That’s created a stir,’ she reported. ‘We have incoming patrol vessels, and a battleship’s turning to gunward.’

‘Evade them, Aneela,’ ordered Crawl, reaching up for the seal on his helm. ‘Get us down before anyone gains a lock. They’ll put this down to an accident.’

Spinoza twisted her own helm free and glared at her master. Adrenaline pumped hard around her system.

‘So was it worth it?’ she demanded, trying hard not to shout the words out loud, half wishing she could reach out and throttle him.

Crawl looked back at her, and smiled.

‘Very much so, Spinoza,’ he said. ‘At last, I think we’re getting somewhere.’



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Despite her growing exhaustion, sleep did not come easily. Even insulated within Courvain's thick walls, the clamour from the world outside remained audible. After an hour of attempted mind-calming meditation, Spinoza donned her robes again, left her chamber and went to one of the tower's many viewing balconies.

It was close to dawn, though the skies were still dark, underlit only by the thousands of fires. The drumbeats had become incessant – a rolling, beating clamour that echoed and re-echoed down the twisting emptiness between the spires.

Spinoza leant against the balcony's railings. Even in the hour before sunrise, it was still humid. Her throat was dry, and swallowing only brought more filth into her system. Overhead, the permanent cloud cover was angry with reflected flame, a shifting mass of bloody turmoil broken only by the ink-black profile of the world-city's extremities.

Far below her, the causeways were now entirely occupied with teeming crowds of pilgrims, roaring out their devotion in increasingly frenzied tones. They knew that time was running out – if they were still languishing in Salvator by now then they had little chance of fighting their way anywhere close to the Palace approaches in time. Most of them did not know the way, in any case. If given no guidance, they would soon wander into oblivion, dropping off the face of the world and into one of its many pits of forgetfulness.

The airspace above them was filling up steadily, too. Gaseous blimps plied smoky paths between landing stages, trailing pennant banners with injunctions against vice and exhortations towards piety. Ministorum flyers hovered low on straining grav-plates, their vox-augmitters now tuned exclusively to Sanguinala-specific screeds. More effigies of the fallen primarch, some many metres high, tottered through the sweaty bedlam, given crude masks of gold paint and sporting crooked wings.

Spinoza flexed her muscles, one by one, going through the rituals she had been taught on entry to the Inquisition. It was hard now to conjure up the raw excitement she had felt in those early days, having been plucked from obscurity and taken up into a world of terror and wonder, shown the things that had caused her to experience unmatched ecstasy, as well as the horrors that had made her retch quietly in private.

She had never considered herself a candidate. There had been others in the schola more obviously suited to the rigours of the Holy Orders, or so she had always supposed. The ones who had highborn family to sponsor them, pulling strings within the cat's cradle of Imperial diplomacy. For her, the wild

orphan without connections, brought into the precincts on a military transport with only the recommendation of an Astra Militarum colonel to her name, the choices had seemed more limited. As her devotion to the rituals had grown, her first ambition had been for the Missionarus Galaxia – inspired by the tales of adventurous piety, she had dreamed of travelling out into the furthest reaches of the galaxy, fuelled by faith, bringing the Emperor’s Light to those wretched scraps of humanity temporarily lost from its embrace. That would have been a worthy life, one that rather than merely guarding the realms of humanity actually expanded it.

It had been rain-soaked night on Astranta when the alternative summons had come. The agent had been burly, armour-clad and taciturn, as if words were not his preferred tools of trade. The schola’s masters had woken her and taken her to the Chambers of Discipline in the north keep, the ones that overlooked the tide-crashed rocks of the Ironfell coastline.

‘Do you love the Emperor?’ the man had asked her, and she, shivering in her nightshift, her fists balled against the cold, had said, ‘With all my mind, with all my heart, with all my soul.’

That, at least, had not changed. Throughout the following years, after leaving the storm-wracked world of her instruction and enduring the tests and the trials, that devotion had not wavered. When she had killed her first human – the two of them alone in that cold cell, his face hooded, her only weapon a blunt knife – she had repeated the mantra to give herself the strength to do it. When she came into contact with her first xenos, a coiled horror of purple segments and curved talons chained up in the cages under Regita’s dungeons, she mouthed the words to herself to keep from vomiting. As she became hardened, tempered, turned from an earnest scholar of the Imperial Cult and into one of its most potent weapons, the words never changed.

*With all my mind, with all my heart, with all my soul.*

They were singing the same thing now. Faith was cheap, for the desperate. It was only valuable for those with the strength to understand its purpose. The mania that gripped the throngs below could so easily be turned, channelled into devotion to another power. That was what the orders of the Imperium existed for: to keep the fire of fervour stoked, but also to keep it directed. The masses believed through fear, and that kept them safe, whatever Crawl might preach.

At the thought of her master, her stomach twinged with distaste, and she chided herself. In his own way, following his own method, he was as devout as her. He had to be. If he were not, then he would not have survived here, for this was the heart of it all, the sun around which the faith of quadrillions orbited.

Crawl would call her soon. With the dawn, he would meet her and Revus, and they would plan their next move. It was impossible to argue now that his instincts had been wrong – something terrible had been carried on that void-hauler. And yet, and yet...

Somewhere out there, mingling with the billions, *she* lingered. Falx. That was business left unfinished, a stain on her honour that could not be left hanging. If Crawl cared little for such things, then she did. Time spent with the Angels of Death had taught her that, in the final resort, when privation left no space for the more rarefied human emotions, what remained were the primal aspects of the species – rage, honour, endurance.

Far in the east, the pattern of black-and-red began at last to bleed away. In an hour or so the horizon would discolour into grey, creeping like a spill of protein-sludge across the heavens until every surface was bathed in its sickly drear.

Terra was more endurable at night. The towers rose more sheer, the statues were more grave, the

arches were more sweeping, bereft of the signs of decay that mottled the stone. In the dark, the cleansing dark, it was possible to imagine how it had might have been when He was still present in the mortal world, walking with His people, bathed in the gold blush of pristine eternity.

Crowl would call her soon. She would have to return to her cell before the summons came, attempt to gain an hour or two of sleep, and then steel herself for whatever task would be given her.

But not just yet. For a moment longer she lingered, looking out over the heart of the shrine world, its wretchedness and its magnificence, drinking it in, wondering what she would have thought on that freezing night on Astranta if the taciturn man had told her she would be *here*, now, doing these things, as far from the edge of the galaxy as it was possible to get.

She liked to think that she would have been pleased, that she would have been able to seize the chance, and understand what an honour that was, and how few living souls could dream to achieve so much.

She watched the multitudes of the eternal city, and heard the screams of awe and anguish, and saw the pennants snap in the hot, hot air.

Crowl would call her soon.

The drums never stopped.

*With all my soul*, she thought.

Crowl entered the archive chamber, and Huk turned to greet him. She smiled toothily, and her cabling scraped as she shuffled over to him. Above them both, the servitors rattled and hauled up their long chains.

‘She came down here,’ Huk said, holding out her ironwork hands.

Crowl took them, and nodded. ‘Yes, she told me. I hope you were helpful.’

‘Always.’ Huk shot him a look of childish reproach. ‘And now you are here too. It has been a very long time.’

‘When the time allows, you know I wish for nothing more.’

Huk snatched her hands away. ‘Just information, then, you want.’

‘On this occasion. Inquisitor-Lord Hovash Phaelias, the Ordo Xenos.’

‘You don’t know the name?’

‘People always seem surprised.’

Huk shot him a conspiratorial smile. ‘You don’t miss much.’ Then she limped over to the cogitator stands. ‘Why do you want to know?’

‘I wish to find him, if that remains possible. So, everything we have, please.’

Huk inserted her augmetic node, and the servitors began to alter course, sweeping up to parchment shelves, whiteless eyes scanning the rows of vellum data-tags.

‘Is it the Feast yet?’ Huk asked.

‘Soon.’

‘I would like to see that.’

‘I do not think you would. Better to remain here, I think.’

Huk scowled, twisted in her robes and jerked the cables tighter. ‘Ach. Sometimes, sometimes, the hate for them is too much.’

‘They serve a purpose.’

‘Don’t we all?’

‘For good or ill.’

The servitors began to return, dumping sheaves onto a waiting gurney. Crowl reached for the topmost and began to leaf through it. The documents were mostly of the thick vellum used by Adeptus scribes for their scholarship, wrapped in fading leather covers, blackened at the edges by old fires, neglect or simply age. All were stamped with the blood-red classification seals of the Inquisition, and most had scribe-marks annotating the margins. Many of the varied typefaces were archaic, almost unreadable even to him, reflecting the hidebound practices of the arcane copyists and their guild training.

‘He seems to have kept himself to himself,’ Crowl murmured, looking through references to Phaelias in official almanacs.

Huk chuckled. ‘A crime?’

‘In my mind, a positive virtue.’ Crowl skimmed over more of the paperwork. ‘I’ve more names here. He had a large retinue.’

‘All ought to.’

Crowl raised an eyebrow, then carried on reading. ‘Slaro Argorine, abhuman, henchman grade thirteen. The muscle, I suppose. Noode de Quin, a hierophant from the Night Worlds. Veronika Skeld, crusader, interesting. Bors Dalamor, weapons specialist. Niir Khazad, assassin, Shoba death cult. Inducted Guardsmen, drawn from several regiments. Jerro Vaskadre, savant. Throne, he had an army. Where have they all gone?’

Huk edged closer, peering down the lists, mouthing the words as she read them. ‘Where was he located?’

‘Not ordinarily resident,’ said Crowl, turning to other documents. ‘One of the wanderers. Terra proved unexpectedly dangerous for him, but I suppose we knew that already.’

Huk withdrew from Crowl’s side, returning to the cogitators, where she hauled on levers, dimming the floating lanterns, summoning more servitors. Crowl carried on reading for a little longer, selecting some documents and taking them out of the folios. Once he had accumulated a handful, he threw the rest of the leather-bound tomes back into the gurney and brought the bundle over to Huk.

‘See that Spinoza reads this,’ he said. ‘I will be absent from Courvain for a while.’

Huk bowed, and accepted the bundles. ‘I’ll have them copied. Where do you go now, or is that forbidden knowledge?’

Crowl smiled sadly. ‘What would be the use, Yulia?’

‘I could imagine it. I imagined it when you went to the Palace, in the days when you told me things.’

‘That was a long time ago.’

‘Shows how often you come down here.’

‘I will do so more often. When all this is done with, we’ll talk. I’ll tell you tales.’

Huk beamed, her grey mouth glinting from the metal within. ‘You promise?’

‘When all this is done with.’

Crowl left her then, and stalked back towards the doors. As he went, Huk gazed after him, almost hungrily. Only once the doors were closed did she turn back to the servitors, three of which hung on their chains before her, their jaws hanging, their withered skin as dry as cured leather.

‘To work again, then,’ she muttered, shaking her scrawny head.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘And so some things are now clear to me,’ said Crowl.

Revus and Spinoza faced him across a hexagonal flecked-granite table in his private chambers. Crowl thought the interrogator looked tired, perhaps unsurprisingly after the events of the previous night. Perhaps he was driving her too hard, though there would be little chance of respite in the days ahead. She would have to endure it, just as they all did.

His captain looked as stone-faced as ever, his brief sojourn in the arbitrators’ domain seemingly having inflicted no fresh scars.

Despite the coming of fragile dawn, the chamber still burned with thick candles, dozens of them in elaborate iron frames. A polished skull sat in the centre of the table, black with age but reverently cared for. Legend said that it had once belonged to Inquisitor Axio, first of the bloodline, though that was of course impossible to prove.

‘Before the *Rhadamanthys* was destroyed,’ Crowl said, ‘I was able to study some of the ship’s sensor logs. The hauler had, as the captain told me, been detained for the Provost Marshal’s scrutiny, and nothing was found. At that stage, it was still fully laden, and so there was more chance of missing something, though the crew weren’t going to take that chance.’

Crowl reached for a decanter of opalwine, and offered it around.

‘No, thank you,’ said Spinoza.

Revus shook his head.

‘There was a discrepancy in the logs,’ Crowl said, pouring himself a goblet. ‘The internal location records showed just what the captain told me – it had entered the solar system, was detained off Luna for inspection, and then gained orbit two days afterwards. But the ranged augur logs told a different story. They recorded an encounter with a sub-warp vessel on the first of the two days the *Rhadamanthys* was supposed to be undergoing scrutiny, one that then locked on a trajectory for Terran orbital space. One of the records was thus incorrect. I will assume that the location sequence was the one at fault.’

‘Altered,’ said Spinoza.

‘You have a suspicious mind, Spinoza. So here’s the thing – whatever was carried on the *Rhadamanthys* was transferred to this second ship prior to the scrutiny teams arriving. The crew did what they could to clean up the mess, but didn’t have time to complete the task. They sealed the chamber and slapped on a counterfeit sigil, trusting that the overworked arbitrator units wouldn’t

notice. There was, after all, nothing much to see, so any cursory scans wouldn't have revealed a signal, as you and Gorgias discovered.'

'They didn't make much of a job of it,' said Revus.

'They didn't have the time. The Custodian Navradaran told me that the request for Tier Four clearance was made two days before the *Rhadamanthys* was due to achieve orbit – just before it had the chance for this rendezvous in sector four five six nine. That order originally came from Inquisitor Phaelias, who's still missing. So here's what I believe took place. Whoever wished to use the *Rhadamanthys* to bring this – we'll say – illicit cargo to Terra was uncovered, at least partly, by Phaelias, who launched an investigation and imposed the scrutiny cordon. The importers could not risk the cargo being discovered and so made arrangements to have it transferred to a vessel with a better chance of evading the blockade. In the meantime, Phaelias pressed on with enquiries, and has either been neutralised or is still active in pursuit. Despite his diligence, the cargo, we can assume, made it as far as Terra. The *Rhadamanthys* was allowed to continue to hold orbit, since the diversion of so much genuine loading would have drawn attention, and in any case they had no reason to suppose anyone would take an interest in it after the arbitrators had cleared it for entry.'

'Unless someone were to notice the discrepancy between the two logs,' said Spinoza.

'Such as, for instance, a quintus-level Scheduling scribe with a penchant for correcting errors,' said Crowl. 'Perhaps he made too much of a fuss, highlighting the *Rhadamanthys*' contradictory submitted timestamps on arrival at Luna, and wouldn't let it drop – so someone with an interest in making all of it go away decided to quieten him.'

Crowl took a sip of opalwine, and its warming liquor ran thickly down his throat. He hadn't eaten yet, and felt the need of sustenance.

'Should we report this?' asked Spinoza.

'Report what?' asked Crowl, smiling dryly. 'Valco's records are gone, the *Rhadamanthys* is gone, Phaelias is gone. They – and we – are doing a decent job of covering their tracks.'

'And we don't know what happened to the cargo,' said Revus.

'Not quite,' said Crowl. 'My apologies, Spinoza – you were right to be frustrated on the bridge, but I was not lingering in order to vex you. A ranged augur record may contain data on ship types, displacements, even names. That was our last chance to gain intelligence on the transfer, and I was working to extract what I could.' He took another sip. 'At first, I believed that nothing would be retrievable. There was a short data-burst stored in the augur record, buried in the block-header, part of the standard exchange when a tracker beam finds its mark, but it was nonsense. Just alphanumeric runes in a sequence I didn't recognise – 00726174686F – just where the vessel ident should have been, if any had been picked up.'

'You still recall the sequence?' asked Spinoza, taken aback.

'Detail,' said Crowl. 'A specialism. But then I had another thought – difficult, with the place falling apart, but stress can induce a certain mental clarity. I'd assumed that this ship was an Imperial vessel, responding with an Imperial signal that would be understood and transliterated by the *Rhadamanthys*' receiver systems. But there are non-Imperial ships in Terran orbital, many thousands of them. What if it were Martian? And if so, then the answer was obvious. The *Rhadamanthys* would have left the ident in its native raw format, an encoding that predates the Imperium by many thousands of years – sigil pairs in hexadecimal notation. On return to Courvain, I was able to locate the key and unfold the sequence. My first attempt was unpromising: *Oratho*. Then it became clear that the initial zero was a



terminator, and that the sigil-pairs had arrived in reverse order. That gave me the true name – *Ohtar*. So it's a Mechanicus ship.'

Revus nodded. Spinoza looked more sceptical. 'Then we have a name,' she said, 'but how can we use it? They won't have put the landing data into records we can access.'

'No, of course not,' said Crowl. 'But we know the destination was Terra, and on Terra there are limits to where a Mechanicus vessel can find safe harbour and still remain secret – in theory, they are vessels of a distinct sovereign empire, and are treated as such. The main Martian embassy temples are within the Palace and would not have the facilities to receive an incoming voidship, not to mention the levels of security over that airspace. But outside the walls there is Skhallax. It's big enough, it's ugly enough, and you could hide a flotilla in there if you really had to.'

'Skhallax?' asked Spinoza.

'Mechanicus enclave, south of the Outer Palace wall,' said Revus.

'A city within a city,' said Crowl. 'Built to enable the Priests of Mars to oversee the rebuilding of Terra following the Great Heresy, but they never left. Nominally under the control of the Administratum, but in practice the Fabricator General runs it as his private fiefdom.'

'I did not think such things were tolerated,' Spinoza said.

'You'd be surprised what the High Lords will tolerate. The situation hardly aids us – an Inquisition rosette doesn't carry much weight in there, whatever the treaties dictate – but we have to get inside. My suspicion is that Phaelias made the same decision, which would explain why nothing has been heard of him since.'

'They will know you are coming,' said Spinoza. 'The orbital authorities might accept that the destruction of a void-hauler was accidental, but *they* will know someone was on board. If the captain was able to get a signal away, then they might even know your identity.'

'I never gave the captain a name,' said Crowl. 'But you're right – they'll know someone was sniffing around, and they'll be searching for who that was. And they have no compunction over killing an inquisitor – we know that at least.' He drained the goblet and poured himself another. 'This is what I propose. Spinoza, go after the False Angel again. Make as much noise about it as you can. Take Hegain, take as many troops as you need. If you can run down this Falx, so much the better. I want it to appear as if all our efforts are bent towards these flesh-gangs. It is a worthy objective in any case, and if it brings you into contact with Quantrain that is good, for his connections will spread the news. I will go to Skhallax. There's not much to be accomplished there in numbers – we'll have to go carefully in the tech-priests' realm.' He looked at his acolyte. 'You said you picked up readings in that cargo-chamber?'

Spinoza nodded. 'They are stored, and I will analyse them.'

'Supposition?'

'I do not know.' She paused. 'Some kind of radiation? Chem-weapons? They might have been unstable, hence the signs of use.'

'Talk to Erunion,' said Crowl. 'That sounds like something he'd enjoy looking into.' He drained his goblet and pulled himself to his feet. After the exertions on the void-hauler, the movement was stiffer than normal. 'I need not tell you we do not have much time. In two days the whole planet will be disabled by this damned Feast-fever, and even moving around will become difficult. But I have faith in you, both of you, for we are engaged in this thing now, and secret-hunting is why we were made.'

He pushed the goblet away. He was drinking too much of that stuff, and it would revert to the old

poison all too soon if he overdid it.

‘So, hunters,’ he said. ‘It begins again. May He guide your paths, and lead us all into glory.’

After the conference, Spinoza went back to her personal chambers. It was late morning by then, but felt far later. She needed to collect herself, consider how she was to enact the tasks given to her, study the files from Huk that waited on her desk. The command to run down the flesh-gangs was far from unwelcome – that was the work she had urged Crowl to prioritise from the start – but there were no fresh leads. She could go out into the labyrinth again, hoping to find something, and perhaps some scent would emerge, but the time remaining was ticking down rapidly.

She reached her cell, activated the lock and went inside. Her limbs dragging, she made her way over to the cot – unslept in – and lowered herself down onto the coarse blanket. For a moment, she allowed herself to relax, resting her head on the bolster and closing her eyes.

Images cycled through her mind. She remembered the lithochromes Crowl had taken from the den in the underhives, the bloodstains and the frozen images of torture. Then she saw the inside of the cargo chamber on the void-hauler again, just as bloody, its horror augmented by the stench that was so hard to place. Then she saw the masked face of Falx, glistening from the condensing fat droplets filling the air like rain, crouched to pounce, her sword shining. Then there was Gloch, hauling her to safety, then Rassilo, smiling at her in the warmth and splendour of her private apartments.

*This is Terra, child. One gift given, another returned.*

The chime went, startling her out of her gentle slide into slumber.

Spinoza cursed, feeling her body tremble back into full wakefulness. She needed to get *some* rest, *some* time. ‘Who is it?’ she asked.

‘If you please, lord. Yessika.’

Spinoza swung her legs over the cot’s edge, blinked twice. ‘Come,’ she said.

The girl entered, slipping through the gap warily. She was as pale as before, as sickly as before, her shift hanging over its bony frame. She stood before Spinoza for a moment, uncertain. She carried nothing with her.

‘What is it?’ Spinoza asked.

‘I thought you...’ Then she trailed off. ‘You said that...’

Spinoza waited. ‘Are you well?’ she asked eventually. ‘You are not being maltreated?’

Yessika shook her head. ‘Something to tell you.’ She looked around then, as if suddenly fearful she were being overheard.

‘Go on. We are alone.’

‘He is *sick*, interrogator,’ said Yessika, very quietly. ‘He is very sick. I spoke to those who serve his chamber, and they showed me what they make for him. Medicines. That’s all he takes now, they told me. It’s getting worse.’

Spinoza regarded her carefully. ‘Why do you tell me this?’

Yessika began to look worried. ‘I thought that...’ she started. ‘I thought you wanted me to. I wish him no harm, though. No harm at all. The ones that serve him close, they wish him no harm either, but they’re worried, because the doses are growing, and they know that it can mean no good. If he goes, then—’

‘He is not going anywhere.’ Spinoza got up, moved closer to Yessika and tried to give her a smile. She reached out and smoothed a stray line of tangled hair from her dirty face. ‘You must know that an

inquisitor is a precious asset to the Imperium. Each one is worth more than an entire world. If he is taking medication, then he is healing. That is how it works.'

'But they say—'

'I did wish you to share this with me. If you learn of any other things that concern you, then you must always feel free to come to me. You will do this, yes?'

Yessika, who had looked conflicted until then, brightened a little. 'That's all I have for now. I can keep an eye on it, though. Vider, she serves in the upper refectory, she knows more about the household business, though I do not like her, but I will try to listen when she speaks to Gerog, because they are close I think, though they try to keep it secret.'

As Spinoza listened, it was like being given a tiny glimpse of the labyrinthine politics of Courvain's menial levels. No doubt there were rivalries and jealousies in the shadows to rival anything in the grand palaces of the Lords of Terra. Yessika prattled on for a while longer, and Spinoza let her. The girl was obviously lonely. As Spinoza had been taught in the earliest months of her long instruction, that offered up opportunity.

'You have been valuable, Yessika,' Spinoza said. 'I will find some way to give you a reward, when I can. Keep your eyes open. Let me know if you discover anything else. It is our task, yours and mine, to keep the inquisitor safe — you understand this?'

'I do.' Yessika's eyes were wide and guileless. 'He wasn't always alone, they say.'

'They do indeed,' said Spinoza, guiding her back to the door. 'Now do not tarry — you will be missed, and I do not wish to see you punished for this.'

Yessika slipped off just as she had arrived — a slip of grey, light as dust, scampering warily back into the shadows of the corridor outside.

Once she had gone, Spinoza closed the door again, sat back on her cot, and thought on the news. It might be worth knowing, it might not. An inquisitor of Crowl's seniority was likely to have augmetics, physical implants, chemical-balance alterations. All of that required constant attention from an apothecary, just to keep the balance stable. In all probability, that was all that was happening here.

In all probability.

The chance for sleep had gone now, though. She was alert again, thinking through the implications, such as they might be. She pressed the secure command bead at her armour's collar, ready to do what she had been putting off for too long.

'Yes, lord?' came the grating voice of a duty officer, though it wasn't one of Courvain's.

'Spinoza, Luce,' she said, coldly. 'Code sequence beta-beta-chimeric.'

There was a click, the sound of shuffling parchment, the clunk of an algorithmic engine completing.

'Very good, lord. Audex cipher accepted. I shall put you through.'



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Crowl and Revus took a Shade from Courvain's fleet and piloted it north west, out of Salvator and out towards the approaches to Skhallax. As they gained loft, a scatter of dirt-caked spires ran away towards the gradual rise that culminated in the Palace, a faintly visible smudge of darkness on the horizon. The night's fires had gone out by then, but the last remnants of smoke twisted up into the heavens like greasy tresses.

Gun-barges now hovered over all the major thoroughfares, their bolter banks steadily tracking anything within range. They were ugly things – old hulls, dragged out of semi-dormancy for counter-insurgency work with weapon-racks capable of levelling city blocks. Higher up, amid the tox-haze, Imperial Navy fighters were busy blank-strafig imaginary targets, sweeping back and forth ahead of the controlled airspace of the Palace itself in tight-held formations.

The cloud mantle had darkened, curdling like spoiled milk and twisting in eerie patterns where the hot wind ruffled it. Flickers of pale lightning danced along the horizon. The air felt heavy, close, ripe to detonate. The soaring faces of oratories and cathedrals gazed out over the fervid atmosphere, their gables studded with rows of eyeless statues. Those static figures had seen it all – the invasions, the reconstructions, the purges, on and on, cycling across the millennia in a black comedy of repetition.

Revus, at the controls, said nothing. Crowl, happy not to break the silence, prepared the Shade's augurs for deployment. A dormant Gorgias hung back behind the cockpit seats.

Soon the towers of Skhallax became visible through the murk, first as a series of dull red lights in the gloom, then in the stepped outlines of ziggurats and forge-temples. Temperature gauges in the Shade's cockpit rose a little higher. Revus lowered his speed, brought the craft down a few hundred metres, hugging the shoulders of the hab towers.

The place was many hundreds of square kilometres across, a scar of off-world edifices intertwined with the jungle of habitation-blocks at its fringes. A confection of manufactoria, refineries and ritual sites for the worship of the Mechanicus' strange theological construction the Ommissiah, Skhallax had risen up over thousands of years of alternating growth and stagnation, its great factories built atop the shells of older factories, its complex systems of cabling and pipework and power generators and heat exchangers patched and repaired but never fully replaced. Now most of the structure was deemed sacred, an ossified relic to be tended, not extended, and over the most recent centuries, in keeping with the long slide into decrepitude across the entire planet, it had begun to degrade into a swamp of corrosion. Its steep flanks remained caked in the dark red skin that all Martian architecture employed,

though Terra's grinding winds had bled most of the colour out of the highest walls, slowly eroding its distinctiveness and imposing its own uniform pall of pale grey.

The Shade's chronos ticked over to midday, a time when favoured parts of the Throneworld experienced a modicum of filmy sunlight, but Skhallax remained dark. Churning fumes rose up around it like steadily intensifying layers of gauze, masking the full extent of the structures within. The earth trembled, as if massive hammers rotated in the deeps below. Flames writhed out of exhaust pits like the geysers of Old Earth, raging for moments, or hours, or days, before suddenly gusting out again.

At its heart, swathed by the roil and the tumult, jutted a cluster of monolithic columns, blunt-edged, brutal in construction, all bearing the Cog Mechanicus illuminated in bloody-edged lumen-glow. Aside from the Palace and the truly colossal halls of the Ministorum itself, no greater structure than Skhallax had been raised on this hemisphere of the Throneworld, a permanent reminder of the prestige of the Red Planet's ancient rival hegemony.

They got closer. Crowl began to run low-level scans, cross-referencing the Shade's records with data from the augurs. The site was so enormous that it was not obvious where to start looking, but even in such a place there would be limitations on the possible. Bringing down a sub-warp vessel of the *Ohtar*'s void-profile required an appropriate landing stage, and that was not something Skhallax had in abundance, for it had never been designed as a space port. There were a number of likely locations returned by the augurs, though one stood out – a long way from the red-eyed centre, out west past a hunchbacked line of refineries, lodged amid what looked like semi-abandoned works on the enclave's border.

'Silence now, I think,' said Crowl.

Revus swung the Shade down lower, activating quiet protocol. The gunship's lights blinked out, its auspex-baffles activated, its engines throttled back to a whisper. Amid the tumbling smog-banks, it might have been just another drifting shadow. That was well, for they had entered proscribed space, liable to interdiction from the Mechanicus guard-drones that patrolled the rim of their esoteric kingdom.

Crowl gazed out of the cockpit. Precipitous walls, weathered and rust-laced, rose up tight against the sweep of cracked raised transitways. Beyond the outer bastions were the first of the old manufactoria, crowned with lattices of scaffolding over the heavy segmented walls, broken up by the thrust of exhaust chimneys and great cooling towers. Long jets of brown steam hissed out of hidden grilles before dissipating into the thick brume like oil sinking to the sump.

They had not yet crossed the threshold. The Shade ghosted low, skirting the border, watching as the mountainous edifices steadily fell into greater states of disrepair. More than half of Skhallax seemed to be moribund, on the surface at least. Perhaps there were intact workings further down, deeper into the world's core, where descending a hundred metres could mean going back in time by a thousand years. You never knew, not with the Priesthood of Mars.

'Detecting no shadows,' Revus reported, maintaining a metronomic speed and keeping them comfortably within the palls of shifting smoke.

'You have the location,' said Crowl. 'Take us in when you're sure.'

There was no movement visible on the walls. No crawlers burned their way between the rotting engine sheds, no phalanxes of infantry stalked the high parapets under the watchful eyes of robed tech-priests. It looked deserted.

'Ants,' said Revus.

‘What?’

‘Don’t kick the nest.’

Crowl grunted in agreement, and turned back to the view ahead. A landscape of heavy-boled pipelines ran ahead of them, punctuated by burner towers. Further into the gloom were the first landing stages they’d detected, raised on cross-braced scaffolds and overlooked by lumpen, slope-walled control towers. The complex looked as mournful and neglected as the rest.

‘Not too close,’ said Crowl, shunting a precision-mark from the Shade’s machine-spirit. ‘Take us down here.’

Revus dropped yet further, now virtually skimming the tops of the cracked rooflines below, before reaching the dropsite. Swinging the Shade’s engines over on their axes, he set the gunship down in a deep shaft between the forest of horizontally aligned pipelines. The largest of them was over ten metres in diameter, and snaked off into the distance, bound by enormous brace towers.

The engine hissed out, and the cockpit vibrations shuddered away. Crowl took up Sanguine, Revus his hellpistol. Down at ground level it was as dark as night, and the hunched shells of the architecture loomed into a fire-tracked sky.

Crowl descended, touching down lightly onto a stained deck of riveted iron. Revus crept ahead, his helm’s lenses lit faintly with a blush of blood-red. A revived Gorgias swayed into the air above them both, its lumens glowing softly.

Crowl sniffed. All he got was the thick stink of promethium, tight and caustic. The place didn’t look like Terra. It didn’t sound or feel like Terra, and it certainly didn’t smell like Terra. Less than two hours’ flight from Courvain and they might have been on a different planet.

‘*Extraordinarius*,’ whispered Gorgias.

Crowl activated the location markers on his retinal feed, triggered a proximity detector and glanded a small amount of a moderately effective painkiller.

‘No argument,’ he said, moving out into the dark.

The Titan staggered down the long avenue, its weapon-arms festooned with pennants and its motive-units growling with steam and smoke. Rockcrete rippled under its crushing tread, the air around it shimmered with engine-heat. Its dog-snarl head hung low, slung under a thick cowl-carapace. Mega bolter and turbolaser arms swung in counterweight rhythm, encrusted with a boiling coating of ritual oils.

Behind the Titan came the battalions – first skitarii, macroclades arrayed in phalanxes of gold and red, an eerie precision to their massed marching. Behind those, esoterica from the Martian auxilia, secutors and myrmidon destructors, gouting steam of their own from closed mouthguards. And then, to emphasise the essential unity of the bipartite domains of mankind, the Astra Militarum, whole regiments of them in their varied, chequerboard livery, crawling in squares of infantry, flanked by the shaking hulls of mobile armour and followed by rows of tracked artillery pieces, their high-ratcheted gun barrels daubed red and their turrets bedecked with flags.

They moved up from the fortresses of the Lion’s Gate space port, through the great avenues overlooked by the requisitio-basilicae of the Departamento Munitorum, cheered on all the way by thousands of carefully choreographed citizens. Every viewing balcony was taken, thronged with generals in ceremonial robes, adjutants with augmetic monocles, commissars-general in real-leather greatcoats and high-peaked dress hats.

Flights of Thunderbolt heavy fighters scored overhead, their engine-roar making the spire flanks shudder, booming through the inter-tower chasms before releasing clouds of vivid red ink bombs that tumbled earthwards in bloody tentacles.

The procession marched on, moving into the sacred Ways of Mourning, passing the linked citadels of the Estates Imperium, the pleasure palaces of the Courts Exquisite, the hyper-habs of the Administratum Centrum Subsector Solar, and the saturnine relay hubs of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. From there it headed out towards the many-columned processional angling towards Dorn's Redoubt, the plazas of the Nine Primarchs, and then along the arrow-straight road towards the Outer Palace, where the assembled prefects of the Imperial Household were waiting to formally greet them in ranks a thousand deep.

From high up, Spinoza watched them march. The air around her was fragranced with something floral, the chamber filled with the soft chiming of a mirrorharp. Menials glided between the guests with empty expressions on plastic faces, decked in sharp-hemmed robes of nightshade. The viewing window was a crystalflex portal rimmed with butter-yellow gold. All those present at the spire's summit were senior officers in the Terran court hierarchy – Administratum directors general, Novators of the Houses, subsector ambassadors. They looked down on the crawling columns in the streets below with idle disinterest. The hum of conversation, hushed to mask a hundred conspiracies, went on unabated as the Mars-pattern Warhound led the crushing display of Imperial strength onwards to its destination.

'I was not sure whether to come,' Spinoza said, looking uncertainly at the plate of sucrose-dusted sweetmeats handed to her by a golden-eyed youth with flawless pale blue skin.

'I'm glad you did,' said Rassilo, chewing steadily, her hair glimmering under the soft lighting. 'That was why I left the contact details in the file. So you'd have an outlet, if you needed it.'

'And you thought that I would.'

'I didn't know. Have some of this food. It's real, all of it.'

Spinoza put the plate down. 'Did you know he is sick?'

'He's been in loyal service for over a century. We can postpone the drain of time, we can't destroy it.'

'Is it known?'

Rassilo shook her head. 'Not for certain, not by me. I did wonder, but then we're all carrying secrets, are we not?'

'Why did he want an acolyte?'

'He did not have to specify a reason.'

'And has he always been alone, then? The files were redacted.'

'He has not always served on Terra.'

'And... relations?'

Rassilo raised a plucked eyebrow, and her rejuve-stiff face creased a little. 'Family. Now you say it, it sounds quaint – something a hive-worker would cherish. Do you think that likely, having met him, knowing what he does?'

'And yet he is flesh and blood. Such things have been known.'

'Why would you ask it, child?' Rassilo reached for a silver goblet in the shape of a diving cetacean, and took a delicate sip of a clear liquid. 'You look tired. I trust he is not working you into the ground.'

Spinoza looked back out at the procession, still grinding its way towards the distant Palace heights.

At such a distance the individual soldiers were impossible to make out, merging into regimental squares, like immense human tiles sliding over an iron-grey ground.

‘I care not for rest. I have not hunted well, not yet. I must adjust to this terrain.’

Rassilo laughed, but not unkindly. ‘What’s your quarry?’

‘A False Angel to set against the true one. His gangs are running through the underhives. We kill a few, we discover more. They are ritual killers, some kind of blood cult, but their master eludes me.’

‘They mutilate their victims,’ said Rassilo. ‘They leave the excruciated bodies to be found by the authorities. Something in the pain of it – a rite? – fuels their devotion.’

Spinoza turned to look at her. ‘You are tracking them too.’

‘The Feast brings them out of the dark. Maybe the same ones as yours, maybe an allied cabal. But I’ve not seen work quite like this, not here.’

‘I encountered an operative – Aido Gloch. You know of him?’

‘Quantrain’s interrogator. Yes, by name,’ said Rassilo.

‘He was hunting a woman he called Falx. She was well trained, well equipped. If there are more like her, then it is to be taken seriously.’

‘If Quantrain is involved, then it already is.’

‘I do not feel we are close enough to them. Time is running out.’

Rassilo’s gloved hand hovered over a plate of sweetmeats before deftly selecting one of the more outlandish – a lurid green confection studded with nuts. She ate it, slowly chewing, her attention taken by the spectacle of the procession.

‘There was a time when I enjoyed Sanguinala,’ she said. ‘A celebration of dominance over the dark. That’s why they light the fires, to push the shadows back. Now even this is threatened, and it angers me. For *one day* we should be able to rest, eh?’ Rassilo smiled grimly. ‘A void-hauler exploded in orbit. Destroyed completely. An accident, they’re saying – a plasma drive breach that flooded the engines. To have these accidents now... I don’t have much faith in accidents. There’s fate, there’s will – these are the drivers.’ She put her goblet down. ‘I think you’re right, child. I think your judgement’s sound, which is no doubt what he wants from you. For what it’s worth, my agents believe the Boreates hives are at the heart of it, and I’ve sent more in. Consider hunting there – you may have better luck.’

Then she drew closer, placing her hand on Spinoza’s, the leather glove over the ceramite gauntlet.

‘I respect your master,’ she said, her voice lowering. ‘More than you know, and I will not oppose him either openly or in secret, but know this – if you need anything, if you need greater force of arms for this purpose, which is vital, then you have the means to contact me. Do not hesitate – you promise me this?’

Spinoza looked back into Rassilo’s calm, severe face.

‘If it is needed,’ she said, finally reaching out for some of the food, ‘yes, I promise.’





## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

‘These are projectile impacts,’ said Revus, squatting down to examine further.

The sky, such as it was, had long since disappeared. They were travelling down long alleys overlooked by the hulks of old storage hoppers. Above them rose abandoned conveyor belts, criss-crossed over one another with the old tracks hanging like entrails from the racks. Dust and debris had settled everywhere – scales of rust, clots of old ash from the forges, swarf from the machining sheds.

Crowl limped over to the captain. It was not the first sign of fighting they had seen – a turbine housing had been almost completely destroyed, its protective shell melted into grotesque stalactites.

‘But not ordinary bullets,’ he said, studying the marks.

‘Galvanic charges,’ Revus said, running his finger down the impact edge.

Crowl ran a trace heat-scan over the marks, and received the same answer as before. ‘A couple of weeks old,’ he said, looking at the results. ‘Maybe more.’

They pressed on. The chambers, dark and hot, echoed with emptiness. Infrared overlays on their helm-feeds showed vast halls soaring away, most empty, some clogged with old machinery of unguessable purpose rotting in the shadows. Massive, static chains hung from track-lifters mounted on the distant ceiling.

They reached a pair of doors, jammed open with the skeletal remains of something – a servitor, perhaps, wedged amid the crushing jaws. Its body was a mess of blown metal and burned organics. They stepped over it, and the dark grey clouds became visible again, framed between jagged ziggurat flanks.

The first landing stages were up ahead – a valley floor a hundred metres wide, nestling between mountainous overlooking parapets and dotted with observation towers. More platforms rose up beyond, elevated on lattices of heavily oxidised girders.

Crowl deactivated the infrared scans and swept the area ahead for movement. A mournful wind, breath-warm and stagnant, stirred the clutter underfoot.

‘More of it,’ he said, pointing to a series of blast-marks on the nearside walls.

Revus nodded, venturing out onto the first of the stages. The red-brown dust reached his ankles. Gorgias swayed up into the air, his sensors clicking.

‘Up ahead,’ it voxed. ‘*Pulpitum superus.*’

Crowl and Revus moved across the empty stage, then the next, before reaching a ladder scaffold leading up to the first of the elevated platforms. Once up on its lip, Crowl immediately saw the

difference – the debris had been blown clear of this one, exposing a bare, blast-charred rockcrete apron. The platform was as empty as the rest, but a ship had come down recently, leaving the carbonised scars of its landing.

Crowl scanned the residue while Revus scouted ahead, shadowed by a wary Gorgias.

‘Same time-marker,’ Crowl noted. ‘Give or take.’

‘This is where they unloaded it,’ agreed Revus.

Crowl looked up. On the far side of the stage were two great hangar doors of corrugated metal, marked with flaking chevrons and still partially open. The doorway led back into the enclosed interior, a chasm cut into the heart of a mountain.

‘Then we follow the trail,’ said Crowl, setting off.

The opening was just big enough for them to squeeze through. More blast-marks discoloured the exposed adamantium panels, clustering more thickly now. Crowl reactivated his infrared overlay once enclosed by the dark again, and saw the thick streaks of black glistening on the floor.

‘Blood?’ he mused.

‘Oil,’ said Revus.

‘Much the same thing, here.’

They crept through the shadows, back within the caves of iron. Hauler-claws hung immobile, though their joints were no longer fused rigid from inaction – some of them had been employed recently. Another doorway beckoned, its frame twisted and broken. From the chamber beyond came the echoing growl of active machinery.

‘Now we go carefully,’ said Crowl, leading the way, holding Sanguine ready.

They went down, following the orthogonal lines of the regular corridor-patterns. Signs of struggle grew more frequent – they passed the contorted remains of skitarii guards, their cloaks ripped apart and their innards scattered. Long-barrelled guns lay discarded, some still clutched by their operator’s claws.

‘It’s getting more intense,’ said Revus.

‘Fighting among themselves?’ Crowl speculated, skirting a decapitated Mechanicus foot-soldier. ‘Or fighting what was brought down?’

‘The voidship couldn’t have been that big. How many troops could they have crammed in?’

Crowl remembered Spinoza’s unease. *Chem-weapons?*

‘The Mechanicus receives one of its own ships,’ he said, ‘carrying something men are prepared to die to protect. Wherever it goes, there is blood.’

Gorgias, high above them, voxed a sharp warning. ‘*Proximus,*’ it whispered. ‘Martians.’

They went on in silence. The next chamber was truly colossal, opening up to a high shaft that rose and rose, its eventual terminus indistinct. Narrow ledges ran around the shaft’s rectangular walls, one after the other in series. As they crept across its chamber’s base, Crowl detected movement and froze. Revus had already trained his pistol, but the targets were too far away – a pair of stilted figures limping along one of the ledges, two hundred metres up. They gave no indication of having spied them, and eventually disappeared into a portal on the far side of the shaft.

‘Skitarii?’ Crowl asked.

Revus nodded. Then they slipped through another portal and into a much smaller space – a chamber in the form of a geometric interior, its walls and roof angular and highly finished. The walls were covered with more blast-marks and black stains. On the other side of the chamber, twenty metres

away, was a further portal, this time barred and sealed.

‘I can break it,’ Revus said.

‘Hold.’ Crowl looked around, scanning the walls. The vertices glimmered back at him in grainy false-colour. ‘There’s something here.’

He moved closer to the left-hand wall, stooping low, before running his fingers over the surface. In the metal, barely detectable, was a shape, scraped into the paintwork. Amid the rest of the debris it was easy to miss, but then it had been designed that way – a relic-sigil, one of several hundred used by members of the Inquisition’s various branches.

Revus backed up, watching over the two portals. Gorgias floated over Crowl’s head, observing.

Crowl pulled a combat knife from a sleeve at his calf and pressed it against the panel edge. Dust cascaded, but it remained solid. He tried the other side, probing carefully. Eventually the tip of the knife slipped into the join, and he carefully levered it open. On the far side was a narrow void, hollowed out by what looked like plasma-burns. Nestled within the melted metal was a skull-shaped bead the size of a thumb, carved from what appeared to be onyx.

Crowl took it, rolled it in his palm. ‘Vox-capsule,’ he said.

Gorgias hovered lower, fascinated. ‘Ordo Xenos,’ it voxed.

But then Revus was backing up further, his weapon trained on the closed portal. ‘Incoming signa—’ he started.

The doors slammed open, squealing on corroded runners. Something serpentine writhed on the far side before bursting towards the gap, a hydra of metal links, thrashing in a frenzy. The tech-priest magos swelled into focus, multi-limbed, clad in thick bronze-plate armour over a hollowed-out skeleton of iron, and swathed in robe-strips of Martian-red. Multiple eyes, green as burning emeralds, glowed in the dark from under a tattered cowl – and then the creature was inside the chamber, unravelling, uncoiling and extending until it towered over them. Mechadendrites unfurled, revealing circular saws, rotating claws and needle-hammers.

‘Remain static!’ it bellowed, the sound coming from grilles implanted across the creature’s chest. ‘Weapons down! Surrender selves!’

On return to Courvain, Spinoza did as she was bid and took the esoteric readings from her auspex and handed them to the surgeon Erunion, who seemed, in addition to his role as flesh-flenser, to be the one to whom anomalous tech was submitted.

‘I am a lover of systems,’ he told Spinoza, taking up the auspex data and feeding it with some care into his own diagnostic apparatus. ‘Human bodies, cogitator innards, binaric sequences. They’re all the same to me.’

Spinoza had smiled, or attempted to. There was something wholly unsavoury about the old man, with his pink eyes, his wattle-neck, his unwavering stare. ‘If you unearth anything,’ she said, ‘you have my vox-access.’

Then she left him to his slabs and his machines, happy to be away from the smell of antiseptic and ritual oils. She went next to her own chambers, where more files awaited her attention. Some were the ones from Huk, some she had brought from Rassilo detailing actions in the Boreates sector. After ingesting a regulation nutrient-boost to maintain alertness, followed by a caffeine slug, she started to work through them, reading official report after official report. All were in the format she was used to – headed with devotional mottos, followed by cross-references to other investigations in other

archives, most untraceable, then transcripts of interrogations punctuated with redacted sections and unintelligible responses. The latter became more frequent as the transcripts went on, until, with grim inevitability, they ended with the formal expression *qui exspiravit* and the monologues terminated.

There was little to learn. Rassilo's agents had uncovered much the same information as they had – the False Angel's exact location was unknown, but he was operating in the underhives. He would lead them out of darkness, they said, against the forces that oppressed them, for the authorities cared nothing for the travails of the weak and the sick. They always denied responsibility for the flesh-breaking, claiming other hands had been at fault – at least until the tools were applied and the truth began to flow. Some repented fully under scrutiny; others remained defiant, repudiating the worship of the Emperor and all His works. Those were the ones whose torment was prolonged. As she read the accounts, Spinoza found herself nodding in approval at the expert work of the truth-finders.

By the time she turned to the papers forwarded to her by Crowl, the chronos showed that the day was waning. With every passing hour her impatience to be *doing* grew, and she almost pushed them aside in favour of assembling her kill-team right away and leaving the citadel. With some reluctance, she reached for the topmost sheaf, and started to read. Huk had been diligent, and the material was artfully arranged. Halfway down the second folio, she suddenly halted. She read it again. Then, only then, she reached for her comm-bead.

'Sergeant, ensure your squad is assembled for immediate dispatch,' she commanded. 'I will be with you shortly.'

She placed the vellum sheaves back in their leather pouches, all except the last one, which she rolled tight and took with her. Then she reached for her combat-helm and mag-locked it to her armour. Last of all was Argent, suspended over the altar in the corner of her chambers. She took the crozius up reverently, mouthing the words Erastus had taught her – *to the glory of Him on Earth* – and stowed it carefully at her belt. The weight of it was an instant reassurance, a testament to the power and resilience of humanity's finest.

She should have felt a greater drag of fatigue, but somehow her muscles felt tauter, her tread lighter. The prospect of action again, on her own initiative and in search of a target she understood, was a powerful motivation.

Hegain was waiting for her in the main hangars. Clad in combat armour, his wounds were invisible, but a livid scar was visible under the flipped visor of his helm.

'You are recovered sufficiently?' she asked.

'Absolutely, yes I am.'

'You seem to make a habit of picking up damage.'

'Indeed so it is, lord! Twice in short time. But that is the business, is it not, and I do not mind it. And others had it worse. It'll do us good to spill some blood for it, and return the pain they gave us.' Then he grinned. 'But I *saw it*, lord. I saw the Custodian. Just for an instant, before he laid me low, but it would have been worth the dying, had he meant to end me, just to witness it. Nothing so fast, nothing so strong. I wish you could have been... Forgive me. Time is pressing.'

'Just so, sergeant,' said Spinoza, striding towards the prepped Nighthawk. The rest of Hegain's ten-strong squad clipped to attention and fell in behind her. 'We fly for Boreates. You will pilot.'

The squad buckled up, the doors slammed closed, and the turbines powered. Soon they were back into the air, boosting above the clogged streets and into the clogged airways. Hegain pushed the craft hard, sweeping and tilting between the heavy traffic flows.

‘More than ever of them,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘As it should be. They are preparing for the Rites.’

Hegain nodded. ‘I know it. There’ll be blood on the streets before sundown.’

Spinoza opened up a comm-link to Crowl. Just as she anticipated, the far end buzzed with static – he had warned her that Skhallax would be impenetrable.

‘Lord Crowl,’ she voxed, using it anyway. ‘I approach Boreates *castrum sextus*, following intelligence from the archives. Insertion point designated, *pontius novus*, overwatching main entrance maws. Will report in two hours when subjects sighted.’

Hegain shot a brief, questioning look at her, then returned to his flying.

Already the skies were darkening to their night-red. The spire trunks were deepening to black, strung across with their glittering necklaces of internal lumens. The western sky was aflame, a tortured wash of glowing cloud-banks, streaked with the dark trails of arbitrator crowd-control lifters.

‘So you have the coordinates,’ said Spinoza.

‘Yes I do have them. But, and I only ask this for enlightenment, I have seen no intelligence on this place. What can we expect by way of tactical deployment? Is this one of their centres?’

Spinoza looked straight ahead, watching as the towers swept past, their darkening faces rolling by in a shadowy blur of speed.

‘Fly steady, sergeant,’ she said.

Soon Boreates loomed ahead of them. It was a spire complex – a cluster of nine great towers linked by ridged transit bridges impaled high up their sides. There had once been a vogue for such monstrous conurbations in the distant past, spearheaded by the mega-urbanite Corbus and his visions of walkways in the sky, but the clusters of linked spires proved an even greater magnet for violence and squalor than the usual lone-spire pattern, and it was said their advocate had been executed during the bloody reign of the Administratum Master Tjemen, reputedly buried alive within the foundations of one of his colossal follies.

But still Boreates lingered, thousands of years later, its hab-levels fossilising, its creaking generatoria thundering, its walkways teetering on crumbling piers above the dizzying drops below. The winds still ripped through the chasms, generating eddies between the towers that scoured the iron supports and ripped the paint from the ancient stone.

‘Set me down there,’ Spinoza ordered, watching as the ninth bridge spurring out from the sixth tower swam into view out of the gathering dusk.

Hegain brought the Nighthawk down over the bridge’s upper surface. ‘You wish it that the rest of the troops are to dispatch now?’

‘No, not yet,’ said Spinoza, unbuckling. ‘Take the ship out beyond the perimeter and scan the conurbation intakes for armed convoys. The Militarum have been mobilised here – they will be targets. Contact me as soon as you detect movement.’

Hegain paused before replying, unsure what to make of those orders, but quickly corrected himself. ‘As you will it, lord. As soon as anything moves in, in whatever way, you’ll know it.’ He held the Nighthawk steady over the bridge’s surface, expertly feeding power to the turbines amid the buffeting wind. ‘May He protect you in all of the things, lord. May He guide your arm.’

Spinoza unlocked the door and dry wind raced into the cockpit. ‘I have never doubted that He should,’ she murmured, dropping down to the ground below.

Once down, she watched the Nighthawk power away, boosting high above the bridge-level before

dropping again to sweep around the cluster's rim. Soon it was lost in the murk, its tail lights last to go.

Alone, Spinoza walked a little way along the bridge, assessing its dimensions, its opportunities for cover, its links to the surrounding towers.

She guessed she was about six hundred metres above the first webs of transitways, clear of the flight paths of all but unrestricted air traffic. The bridge itself was about a hundred metres long, slung between the titanic bores of two massive spire-edges. The wind screamed around it, wearing at the disintegrating barriers that marched along either edge. The walkway looked like it hadn't been used for centuries, and it was not hard to see why – the vertigo was one thing, the lack of proper protective fences and the corroded surface another. It was not so much a bridge as a forlorn beam of iron hung between citadels, as bare and lethal as a thrown spear. Loose cabling hung below it, swinging wildly in the endless gale. Further down, plunging through the racing smog cover, the dazzling filtered lumens of the urban sprawl winked back, spread like a carpet of gaudy costume jewellery over the deep dark.

Spinoza shivered. The air was as caustic as ever, but so high up it had lost its punishing heat. The humidity was still present, though – the massed respiratory results of the quadrillions down in their warrens, those narrow worlds of damp and desperation. She had left her helm locked to her armour, and the clammy gale ruffled through her short hair. Every so often a buffet would catch her, a swell of pressure that threatened to shove her over the edge.

'Come on, then,' she breathed, strolling out to the centre of the open span, looking up into the growing night-gloom, listening for the telltale roar of atmospheric engines.

In the end, none came. The first sign of movement was a rattle of metal on metal behind her. Spinoza whirled around, her crozius whipping out and snarling, to see a long clamber-wire uncoiling. She snapped her head up in time to see her adversary sliding down it from another span fifty metres up.

Falx dropped to the deck, crouching low, her power sword crackling with the same lurid energy. The length of clamber-wire unshackled and whistled back into its socket, sucking closed as the last gripper slotted back into place.

The operative's cameleo armour had lost its scatter-sheen, and was now revealed as a close-fitting suit of carapace plates, light but strong, matt-black and scored with dozens of impact burns. Her face was covered, just as before, and a thick mesh vox-grille distorted the noise of her breathing.

'That last transmission,' Falx said, getting to her feet and edging towards Spinoza, blade in guard. 'You know I am listening.'

'I guessed,' said Spinoza, holding her ground. The two of them stood just a few metres apart, weapons drawn, the dry wind screaming about them.

'You should not have sent your guards away,' Falx said.

'They will return.'

'Not soon enough.'

Spinoza smiled. 'I know you care nothing for him,' she ventured, playing her hand. 'The False Angel. You have nothing to do with him. You were tracking *us*.'

Falx didn't make a move.

'You could have killed me, when we last met,' said Spinoza.

'I can kill you now.'

'I would be interested to see, then, how I match up against the Shoba school.'

Falx edged forwards, coiled tight, ready to pounce, but still the blade remained static. A hint of uncertainty weighted her movements. For all her confidence, she was still going warily.

‘You should have worked harder,’ said Spinoza, pushing a little further, watching the power sword like a hawk. ‘It is a distinctive accent, but I would not have known without the file from Huk. Now I do. You are Phaelias’ assassin. You are Niir Khazad.’

With a scream, the woman launched herself at Spinoza. The movement was dazzlingly fast, just as before, and it was all Spinoza could do to ram her crozius into the path of the sword. The weapons clashed in a hail of released energy, and Spinoza staggered backwards, driven towards the spire at her back.

Falx went after her, spinning her blade and leaving smear-trails of energy. The crozius swung back, catching the blade on the flat and nearly tearing it out into the void, but Falx’s grip was strong and she wrenched it away. The assassin lunged point-first, causing Spinoza to leap backwards, then parry, then parry again, harder, faster. The disruptor charge exploded around them both, snatched by the gale and ripped into a web of churning, rotating plasma.

‘I *should* have killed you,’ Falx snarled, furious, slashing wildly to knock Spinoza off balance.

‘Then you would have learned nothing,’ replied Spinoza, working hard not to get cut to ribbons. ‘That is what you trail us for, yes? You do not *know*.’

Falx kept on coming, her blade glittering, slicing, angling wickedly into Spinoza’s desperate parries. ‘Neither do you,’ she hissed, feinting to one side before kicking out, her boot catching Spinoza in the stomach. The interrogator flew back, hitting the deck and skidding towards the edge. For a horrifying second she could see the lights below, beckoning her over.

She caught the railing, using her momentum to swing round, scrabbling back to safety. Falx pounced, leaping high, her blade held two-handed. Spinoza brought up her crozius and the weapons shrieked together again. Prone still, Spinoza gritted her teeth, feeling her enemy push the burning maul closer.

‘Stupid, to stay here alone,’ Falx said, putting all her weight into it.

‘Would... not have come... otherwise,’ gasped Spinoza, feeling her arms tremble as she pushed the blade back.

With her last strength, Spinoza heaved, feeding Argent a pulse of plasma-burn to kindle against the sword’s edge. The detonation threw Falx clear, and Spinoza jumped into pursuit. The two of them threw more blows in, rocking back and forth across the narrow span. Falx swung a heavy crosswise swipe, aiming for Spinoza’s head. Spinoza ducked down and thrust her whole body forwards, catching Falx in the chest and crashing her off balance. Then she pulled back, swiped Argent once, twice, three times, using it like a bludgeon. The last stroke was the most brutal, launched two-handed, boosted by her armour and sent almost as hard as its old owner would have moved it.

The connection was heavy – a thick crack that caught Falx on the side of the helm, felling her instantly. Spinoza followed up with a crunching blow to her torso, showering the reeling figure with plasma. The interrogator dropped down, driving her knee into Falx’s stomach and crunching the air from her lungs. She jammed the maul up against the operative’s neck, pushing it up against the vox-grille and maintaining pressure.

‘Submit,’ she panted, ‘or I will end you here.’

Falx remained pinned, but managed to indicate something with a curt nod towards Spinoza’s flank. Spinoza glanced down to see the tip of the operative’s sword resting against the rib-joint of her armour. If she pressed the maul down, the blade would slide in too.

Slowly, Spinoza relaxed the pressure, but did not deactivate the energy field. They remained intertwined, both of them with a killing strike available, locked in poises of mutual murder.

‘I have no wish to see you dead,’ said Spinoza, speaking carefully. ‘Know this – I have nothing to do with the loss of your master.’

The operative resisted for a moment longer, her eyes flashing defiant anger through the narrow slits of her facemask.

‘If you can trust,’ said Spinoza, ‘just a little, you will see the truth of it.’

Then, eventually, the woman relaxed. The power field over her blade crackled out, and the tip was withdrawn from Spinoza’s armour by a fraction.

Spinoza did likewise, though she kept the maul in hand. ‘I know he is gone,’ she said. ‘Dead, or missing, running after something brought in on orbital transfer. We are after the same thing, you and I.’ She tried to soften the hard edge to her voice, which didn’t come easily. ‘We need not be enemies.’

Still the operative said nothing. Then, going cautiously, she reached up for her helm and pulled the visor clear, exposing a copper-brown face with Shoba ritual tattoos down the right-hand cheek.

‘Maybe,’ Niir Khazad said. ‘Maybe not. Say what you have to say, and I decide.’





## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Crowl stood, ensuring his rosette was prominent. The darkness in the chamber was near-absolute, but all participants had night vision of one form or another.

‘You have no authority over this,’ Crowl said, gesturing towards the sigil. ‘Withdraw now, lest I charge you with impeding the Emperor’s divine will.’

The magos did not withdraw, and its mehadendrites arched closer, like multiple scorpion stingers priming for the lash. ‘Is not Imperial territory here, inquisitor. Out of your element. Why come now?’

Gorgias was busy tracking the dizzying whirl of the serpentine killer-arms, while Revus calmly stood ready, his pistol trained on the magos’ eye-cluster.

‘You have no power to constrain me – not here, not anywhere,’ said Crowl. ‘I serve at His pleasure.’ ‘Had enough. Destruction brought here. Enough of it. Still repairing damage, in main chambers. All busy.’

‘We caused none of it,’ said Crowl, carefully.

The magos reared up suddenly, its needle-drills whirring faster. ‘Unbelievers, though,’ it hissed. ‘You brought it here. You broke the pact.’

‘What pact?’

Strobe lights flickered down the magos’ truncated neck. ‘Do not listen. Not any more.’

‘*Transmitare,*’ warned Gorgias, looking at the flickering light patterns. ‘*Skitarii in additio, rapid-rapid.*’

Crowl gave Revus a battle-sign command, and they opened fire in unison. The storm trooper sent las-bolts shattering into the magos’ segmented face, while Crowl went for the closest needle-hammer, shattering it with his first shot, then taking aim at a scything claw.

The magos screamed – a high-pitched wail of binaric outrage – and rushed them, scuttling into contact like some immense arachnid. Its mehadendrites swung, and the circular saw shot millimetres over Revus’ ducking helm. It seemed to fill the entire chamber, a spiralling storm of limbs and blades and glittering adamantium.

Crowl threw himself against the wall to evade a claw-strike and fired again, hitting the magos’ neck and knocking it back into its own clutch of tentacles. Gorgias flew wildly, firing wicked slivers of neon before pulling clear of the saw blades.

Revus kept up the barrage, hitting it again with sharp, perfectly aimed salvos, giving Crowl time to reload. Its torso aflame, the magos rushed the captain, enveloping him in a clutch of metal-linked

arms, its claws scraping down his armour and the drills going for his helm. Crawl fired once, twice, hitting the base of its neck and blowing burn-holes in the billowing robes, but that didn't halt it. Revus kept firing at point-black range until he ran out of space. Gorgias aimed another spike, but was hit by an electro-flail and sent spinning through the dark.

Crawl holstered Sanguine, glanding motovine, then hurled himself into the heart of the tentacle cluster. He reached out with both hands, grabbing the magos' damaged neck-stalk and tearing at the vertebrae.

The tech-priest shrieked in alarm, whirling away from the assault on Revus and clawing its tools down the back of Crawl's armour. The drills bit, the saws cut and ceramite flecks blew out in dust-plumes.

Crawl punched hard into the magos' mandibles, smacking its head back, then seized a thicket of neck-cabling, yanking hard until the wires tore free in a welter of fizzing sparks.

The magos reeled, collapsing in on itself, its mechadendrites suddenly jerking. Revus, free to move again, joined Crawl in the assault, smashing his way through the forest of limbs with his pistol butt. Together they slammed the creature up against the wall, cracking it into the rockcrete and forcing it, blow by blow, to the floor. Revus shoved his pistol muzzle into the magos' exposed ribcage and twisted it up against a metallic lung-sac, while Crawl restored his gauntlet-grip on the creature's ravaged throat. He pressed hard, popping out rivets on the tech-priest's augmented spinal column.

'What... pact?' he asked again, panting.

The magos' eyes flickered in and out, and snarls of energy rippled across its broken jawline. There was nothing like a human face there – just a gaggle of rebreathers, compound eye-lenses, sensory pores and heat filters. It wasn't respiring properly now, and its metabolic internals clanked like a sclerotic Rhino.

'You... *know*,' it wheezed.

'I do not,' said Crawl. 'I know very little. There was a ship – the *Ohtar* – is that right? It brought something down here. What did it bring?'

'So many... inquisitors,' blurted the magos, its machine voice close to garbled. 'Who are you with? The first or the second?'

Revus pushed the pistol hard against lingering organics within the shattered ribcage, and the magos writhed in pain.

'Is *out now*,' the magos gasped, a rattling, white noise-infected squeal. 'Cannot stop it. It was an error. Critical error.'

'What is it? A soldier? A machine? There are worse things than termination, magos, so tell me now.'

'*Alarum*,' warned Gorgias, spinning high towards the blown portal. 'More are coming.'

'Think I fear dissipation?' rasped the magos. 'Fear nothing.'

'Then for the sake of the Ommissiah, for the sake of the old treaty. We both serve the same source. Damn it, *tell me something*.'

The magos' cracked lenses dimmed, then flashed in a broken sequence. Its whole structure twitched, and fresh sparks of power ran down its web of cabling.

'No point now,' it crackled, its vox-unit slurring into static. 'Quantrain could not halt it. What chance you have?'

From the corridor outside came the echoing clang of metal claws on a metal floor, lots of them. Crawl shot a glance at Revus, who shook his head.

Crowl stood, drew Sanguine and placed it up against the magos' chrome forehead.

'You were not really very helpful,' he said, and blew the skull-unit apart.

Then they were running, both of them, with Gorgias swooping in behind, back along the paths and the chambers. Behind them came the rattle of advancing skitarii, and the mingled lumens of their gunsights flared in the broken dark.

'What now?' asked Revus, running swiftly but without panic, changing his pistol charge-pack while he ran.

'Nothing more to be taken,' replied Crowl, not moving so fluently, his power armour boosting his pain-spiked limbs. 'Primary tasking – get out alive.'

Spinoza told her everything. She told her of the Custodian's testimony, of the discovery on the *Rhadamanthys*, of Crowl's mission to Skhallax. Throughout it all, Khazad listened, absorbing the information hungrily, studying it for fallacies or inconsistencies.

The two of them had disentangled and limped along the bridge towards a partially sheltered hollow under the shadow of a halfway brace station. Night had fallen fully by then, and the skies burned a sullen, old red. Rampant fires were burning in the open spaces between the great towers, lattices of rubies spread out across the urban vastness. Down amid the endless roar below, klaxons blared from arbitrator squads and Ministorum fervour-bringers.

'So that is what I know,' said Spinoza, sitting in the lee of the brace station. 'How about you?'

Khazad did not respond immediately. She had taken off her helm to reveal a starkly beautiful face, albeit bruised. The assassin had the deep brown skin common to natives of the death world of Shoba. The cult tattoos on her right cheek were plentiful, a riot of her home world's iconography mingled with the death's heads and kill-marks favoured by the ordos. Olive-shaped eyes stared out at her with uncanny directness, and a full-lipped mouth remained sullenly closed.

Shoba's culture was entirely devoted towards the warlike arts of survival. Its male children were taken as aspirants for the Iron Shades Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, and both male and female adolescents were selected for service in the Imperial armies, usually as agents or shock troops for the specialised divisions. No Gothic was spoken on that world, not even amongst what passed for Imperial authority, and so it was always learned late. The difference in syntax made the transition difficult, something that served as a marker for those who knew what to listen for.

'It is months now,' Khazad said. 'My master works on it for long time. We have agent within office of Deputy Speaker of Chartist Captains, high enough to monitor comms between departamentos. For long time he gets nothing, just rumours within Palace. They know Feast is coming. There are cabals recruiting, slaying, close to walls, hard to pin down. And then whisper begins – a weapon, brought in, ready to carry insurrection. They are going to move on from random kills, stage something bigger. We obtain transcripts of coded vox-calls from adept in deputy speaker's citadel, but no detail, and then he is removed.'

'When was this?'

Khazad thought for a moment. 'Three weeks. A little more. We get nowhere, then my master has to talk to Provost Marshal. He is sure something is coming. They order soak-search. Every ship is tested. You know how hard this is to do? Thousands of troops, hundreds of lifters. It gets them scared. Our agent is shut down. The Palace is into kind of panic. They tell me word gets to Custodians – my masters says he speaks to one of them.'

Khazad's brown eyes flickered a little as she spoke. Her cheeks were hollow, the rings under her lids dark. Spinoza wondered how long it had been since she'd eaten properly, slept properly, or done anything but run and fight.

'Then we discover it is failed,' said Khazad. 'They find nothing. Lord Phaelias remains sure something has broken cordon, begins to scan orbital records. He has savant, Vaskadre, who is good. They are working fast, burning out. I am sent to underhives, to monitor gangs, in case they make delivery ahead of time. I study them, close, and that keeps me out of way. So I do not see it. They are being killed, and I never know.'

'Who?'

'All of us. They move quickly. Whoever does it can mobilise force. I do not know when they catch my master. I do not know where he is. Do you?'

'No. Crowl – my inquisitor – has been following the same trail. He believes a ship came down in Skhallax.'

Khazad pursed her lips. 'Maybe. Maybe. Fabricator General – he could be in this. We think there are three. Phaelias always thinks there are three.'

Mention of the High Lords made Spinoza instinctively resistant. They were the ultimate power of the Imperium, inviolate and sacred. Crowl's casual jibes at their expense had offended her, and this speculation was in the same vein.

'Who killed your comrades?' Spinoza asked.

'I do not know.' Khazad shook her head, and for a moment the shock of it was visible in those brown eyes. 'An order goes out. We are all targets, make us *excommunicate traitoris*. They say we are heretics of the gangs, witches, xenos-friends, you name it. Every arm is turned against us. I try to get back to my master, and they nearly get me. Still fast, though. Too fast for them.'

'Aido Gloch,' Spinoza said. 'He said he'd fought you.'

'Who?'

'The one you escaped from, when we last met.'

Khazad smiled bitterly. 'Do not know all the names. When world is after you, you run.'

'But you followed us. You followed me.'

'I had to know. Who gives the orders? Who is working to finish task? I follow you, I follow others. There are agents crawling through whole of underhives, you know this? They are all hunting something.'

'The Angel's Tears.'

'Some of them. Others, something else. I think plan has gone wrong. I think things have unravelled. Weapon is not delivered, not to the right place. But I don't know.' She shivered. 'I never learn much.'

Spinoza weighed up the information. Crowl would need to be told. He would need to judge whether it could be trusted, and whether the assassin could be sheltered. Such claims demanded testing, possibly under the trials.

She tested the comm-link, which still buzzed with static. She switched channels to Courvain, with the same result.

Khazad laughed. 'Too late for that.' She gestured with her outstretched hand, sweeping across the firelit vistas. 'It is begun. Rites. Every vox-relay in five hundred kilometres is overloaded. They move to Gate now.'

As if to confirm the limitations of that, Hegain's voice crackled over the close-range link, distorted

but just audible. ‘Lord! Militarum convoy detected as ... so you will it but ... coming in now, to ... trust you are preserved? Please, acknowledge signal when you...’

‘I came to Boreates on advice,’ said Spinoza, looking up at the hive summits that angled around them like the points of a great iron crown. ‘I was told the Angel’s Tears were concentrated here. That was my mission – you were a hypothesis.’

Khazad laughed. ‘So what now? You regret not killing both of us?’

‘I still have my orders, and you are under interdict. Unless there is something specific you can contribute.’

Khazad gave a weary, sceptical look. ‘Hypothesis?’

‘You have been out here a long time.’

The assassin shifted position, a little painfully. Her body must have taken a beating; Crowl had told her Phaelias had gone missing twenty days ago – a long time to be surviving alone in a world roused against you.

‘Your intelligence, it is good,’ Khazad said. ‘Up to point. He makes his base here, but it is not easy to penetrate. If it is, I try it already.’

‘If we are to do this,’ said Spinoza, ‘it must be now. I have troops, I am prepared. Show me the way, and this can be redemption for you. Crowl protects his bloodline.’

‘His what?’

She had slipped into the language so easily. ‘Will you show me?’

Khazad did not have to think long. The hammering whine of the returning Nighthawk began to beat from below, sending the wind-drawn clouds into fresh whirlpools of turbulence.

‘What choice do I have?’ said Khazad. ‘Yes, then, interrogator. I can take you to this False Angel. Then you will see what is what.’



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The skitarii caught up with them before they reached the precarious safety of the Shade. That was to be expected – they were heavily augmented techno-soldiers, used to the terrain and familiar with every twist of Skhallax’s dizzying innards.

Crowl had made it back across the landing stages when the first bullets skidded past, hitting the walls beyond in a blaze of green energy. He swivelled, still running, and fired Sanguine twice, hitting something that screamed and collapsed in a pile of bronze limbs and crimson robes.

More of them were following, loping like wolves, their galvanic flintlocks aimed and charging. Revus reached the portal that led back into the city’s innards, dropped down to one knee and let off a volley of las-bolts, sprayed in a horizontal arc at waist level. That sent the pursuers scrambling for cover, giving Crowl and Gorgias time to make the entrance door.

‘We kicked the nest,’ Crowl said, piling through the gap before reloading.

‘And the ants came running,’ replied Revus, loosing a final barrage before falling back through the doorway. Then they were sprinting across the vast empty floors of the abandoned halls. The desolate machinery lay just as it had done before, dark and sepulchral, and their bootfalls clanged on the rust.

Revus’ volleys didn’t keep them back for long. Before the three of them had made it halfway across the floor, skitarii swarmed through the portal. More appeared from hatches up in the high ledges, galloping along the walkways and kneeling to get a shot. More galvanic charges spun across the emptiness, cracking into bulkheads and old heaps of chain-links.

Crowl ducked, feeling a bullet zip over his shoulder. Revus was hit, a glancing blow on his armour-plate that nearly knocked him from his feet. He kept going, head low, still running hard. Crowl spun around to take out the two closest pursuers. He fired twice, letting his armour’s guidance systems find the target – one bullet found its mark, the other flew wide.

He turned and ran again, swerving to avoid the rain of projectiles now pinging and cracking into the corroded walls. Gorgias swooped erratically back and forth, firing all the while with his needle gun.

Once again Revus was first to reach the next bulkhead, sliding into a crouch and hammering down a wave of suppressive fire. Crowl ran on through it, trusting his captain not to hit him, before skidding down to join him.

They were near the junction that led into the long series of alleyways. Two empty hoppers shielded them from incoming fire, but their shells were too fragile to take many more hits, and already the rust-flecks were flying as the galvanic rifles found their range. At the other end of the hall came the

skitarii, dozens of them now, racing across the echoing space.

Revus fired coolly, picking off the leaders. He moved his hellgun across the planes – horizontal for the ground-level assault, angled up into the walkways for those clambering down the ladders from the roof. Crawl didn't join in, but pressed a series of call-runes on the inside of his forearm. Gorgias careened overhead, pursued by a flurry of bullets. One of them hit the skull, sending it spinning madly then crashing into the wall overhead.

'*Mamzeri!*' it shrieked, firing back.

'This will not shield us long,' said Revus, watching as their cover was steadily blown apart. The skitarii were getting closer with every second, heedless of the danger, and their green eyes glowed in the dark like a swarm of insects.

'It doesn't need to,' said Crawl, completing the sequence and joining in with Sanguine. A fresh scatter of bullets scythed across the hall floor, downing three more tech-soldiers, before the judder of engines boomed up from the wall at their backs.

'Keep down,' warned Crawl.

Just as he spoke, heavy bolters smashed across the thick wall-plates overhead. Debris cascaded into the hall, thrown metres by the impacts, and the heavy profile of the Shade broke through the destruction. The gunship's rotary cannons opened up, sending a brace of bolt-shells blasting into the oncoming ranks of skitarii.

Crawl leapt up and raced to the hovering gunship, grabbed a rail and hauled himself up to the cockpit door. The machine-spirit kept the machine aloft, auto-firing at the now-retreating skitarii, slowly rotating on a vertical axis to maximise the angle of destruction. Revus clambered up close behind, firing one-handed even as he leapt for the cockpit and pulled himself inside. The Shade spun round, Crawl at the controls now, and boosted back towards the breach it had just blown open. Gorgias ducked inside the still-open canopy at the last moment, tumbling to safety as the engines shuddered into full power.

The Shade smashed back out of the hall and down the narrow alleyways. The long pipes ran alongside them, so close they could scrape the edge of its folded-back wings, but they could not gain loft yet. A hundred metres ahead was the first opening – a narrow shaft of open night, flanked on all side by the heavy overhang of industrial architecture.

'Incoming signals,' reported Crawl, glancing at the tactical overlays.

Revus took control of the bolter-arrays, calibrating them for ranged air-to-air firing. 'I see them.'

They reached the opening and angled steeply upwards, accelerating out into the open air. Skhallax's inferno unfurled before them, angrier and redder than before, studded with lurid flames. Flyers had been scrambled from deep within – six of them, with more emerging beyond. They were servitor-drones, crab-shaped gun-pods skimming along on single-burner engines and armed with prow-mounted autocannons.

Crawl applied full power, sending the Shade kicking into the night. Its wings slipped open and the bolter-housings retracted. Revus took aim and sent a heavy bolter burst straight into the heart of the drone wing. One blew clean apart, its carapace splitting into fragments and its central capsule spinning wildly into the chimneys below. The rest scattered, running wide and high, their burners flaring into the night.

Skhallax's border sped towards them, and Crawl pushed the Shade higher. Armour panels on the rapidly approaching walls slid open, revealing the unfurling bulbs of gun turrets.

‘They might cause some tro—’ began Crowl, just as Revus locked on, smashing the three closest with a rapid arc from the bolters. Then the Shade shrieked across the perimeter, barely higher than the wall’s spiked summit, before dropping down low on the far side.

A storm of fire pursued it – lascannon beams, bolter shots, most skipping just above the gunship’s tail fin or over the stubby wing tips. Crowl swung and jinked, throwing the vessel hard one way then jerking it back the other. A projectile smacked hard into the starboard wing, rocking the gunship over and nearly sending it careering into the approaching face of a hab tower. Crowl hauled on the control columns, dragging it high and left. The engines screamed, the cockpit shook, and they made the turn, their undercarriage cracking into the extremities of a comm tower and warping the struts.

Clear of the tower’s edge, Crowl piled on the power and the Shade leapt into straight-line speed, streaking down the chasm between spire trunks. The drones kept pace for a while, firing sporadically, but soon they were back into Terran airspace and other vehicles began to cluster in front of them. At last the drones fell back, boosting upwards and swinging away towards the vast hulk of the Skhallax tower complex.

Crowl maintained full speed for a while longer, weaving through the steadily growing volume of aircraft. Slate-grey spire flanks soared up around them, dully reflecting the raging infernos at their base, and the labyrinthine street levels were once more congested with the raucous progress of the pilgrim cavalcades.

Revus steadily deactivated the bolter-array, checked over the ammunition levels, and sat back in his seat. ‘We didn’t learn much,’ he said, taking out his hellpistol to examine the power levels.

Crowl slowly reduced power to the main engines, letting the Shade drop to coasting speed. The tactical readout on the console showed the last of the servitor-drones falling behind and swerving back into the ambit of the enclave.

‘We learned they were happy to kill us,’ Crowl said, thoughtfully. ‘Even, for a while, in the open. Consider that, Revus – they were prepared to down an Inquisition flyer within sight of major hab-spires. I could start to get offended.’

He eased further down on the control columns, bringing the Shade within the main clusters of churning air traffic. The furnaces became more concentrated, making it seem as if they were flying down a volcanic crevasse.

‘Take the controls,’ Crowl said, letting go of the column. As Revus assumed flight-command, he reached for the vox-capsule retrieved from the interior. ‘What do we make of this? Has the Mechanicus hierarchy lost its mind? Or is this a local difficulty with Skhallax? That priest mentioned Quantrain – not the first time he’s come up.’

Revus said nothing. His armour was peppered with fresh burns. A long gouge ran along his left shoulder-pad, tracing the path of a galvanic shot that had almost found its mark.

‘Time to see what we recovered,’ Crowl said, placing the capsule in a socket in his armour’s gorget and hearing the hiss of the data-shunt. His retinal feed brought up a cipher requester, and Crowl blink-matched it with his level clearance. There was a further hiss as the audex was reassembled. A second later, and a recording crackled out loud.

*‘Summary report, Inquisitor Hovash Phaelias, the Ordo Xenos, Skhallax catacombs. I will be brief – I am detected and I fear their numbers are too great to evade. They have already killed Bors, and only I remain. I know not on whose orders they act, but I suspect Quantrain. The facts: this goes all the way to the Palace. I do not know the numbers, but we are betrayed from within.’*



*The cargo was taken here, I am sure of it, but the scheme has gone awry. There has been fighting. They have tried to contain it, but it has caused damage and they are struggling. I still do not know its precise nature, but that alone is justification for my concern. If it leaves this place I do not know where it is headed – I assume the Palace itself. Supposition – does the Feast make the Gate less secure?’*

Crowl listened grimly. Phaelias didn’t sound scared, only resigned.

*‘If this audex device is uncovered, these are the salient points. Inquisitor-Lord Flavius Quantrain is a traitor to the Holy Throne. His agents are the primary facilitators and are behind the destruction of my retinue. I do not yet understand his motivation for corruption, but there is a link with the heretic known as the False Angel, in whose name the underhives are being mobilised for rebellion. Quantrain’s sponsors are within the Council of Terra. I say it again, Quantrain’s sponsors are within the Council of Terra. Every attempt I have made to probe further has been repelled. I venture the supposition, without firm evidence and subject to Level Nine doubt, that the Fabricator General of Mars and the Speaker of the Chartist Captains are prime movers.’*

Revus, who could hear the testimony as well as Crowl, remained stony-faced. Gorgias’ eye dulled to a disbelieving auburn.

*‘A final thing. If I should die here, the only one of my company now unaccounted for is the Shoba assassin Niir Khazad. She is as faithful a servant of the Throne as ever lived. I would see her preserved.’*

The audex feed began to corrupt. Crashes, muffled and in the distance, crackled in the background, as if something was trying to break down a sealed doorway.

*‘No more time. I trust He will guide a loyal soul to this device, should it be needed. Ave Imperator! Death to His foes!’*

Another crash, closer this time, and the feed gave out.

For a while, no one said anything. The Shade powered on, flying sub-optimally due to the gash in its wing.

‘Where to?’ Revus asked eventually. They were pulling back into the southern reaches of Malliax. Salvator was the next conurbation-zone in line, after which the grids marched onwards and onwards, steadily building up in magnificence until they reached the megaliths of the Outer Palace.

Still Crowl gave no answer. Gorgias hovered concernedly, for once venturing no opinion.

‘He is Hereticus,’ Crowl said eventually, through a clenched jawline. The anger was palpable. ‘Quantrain is of my ordo. If this has any truth to it...’

‘Only guesses,’ ventured Revus.

‘More than guesses,’ said Crowl. ‘He was hunted. We are hunted.’ His face, normally severe, became as black as the thunderheads above them. ‘A hive-ganger reads a proscribed text and we skin him alive even though the harm is slight. A Lord of Terra leaves a trail of blood from here to the Holy Steps and we cannot touch him for fear of our damned souls. No, that will not be borne. He must answer for this, if I have to damn myself to hear his words.’

‘Then we seek him now?’ asked Revus, who would have spoken as coolly if he’d been ordered into the Eye of Terror.

Crowl laughed. ‘He dwells *inside* – you understand this? Even I cannot enter the precincts without cause, and if we breathe a word of it...’ He broke off, suddenly remembering. ‘But it’s the Gate. The Feast ends at the Gate. *That* is the danger.’

Gorgias began to get more agitated. ‘Burn-burn,’ he chirped. ‘Slay *in toto hereticus maleficare*.’

‘Quite,’ said Crowl. ‘For once we are in accord. Revus, set a course for the Imperial Palace. I care not if they aim every defence laser on the walls at us – we have to get there before the Rites conclude.’

‘As you will it,’ Revus acknowledged, turning the Nighthawk northwards. ‘But you know the guns will be active.’

‘You worry about the flying,’ said Crowl, already bringing up the vox-sequence that would – with luck – summon the attention of Navradaran. ‘I’ll worry about getting us in.’

Hegain was not happy about the inclusion of Khazad into the hunting party. He looked at her with an expression of studied loathing, keeping a hand ostentatiously close to his hellgun butt. Khazad herself remained entirely indifferent.

‘And you are sure of this, lord?’ Hegain asked, his voice part-obscured by the roar of the grounded Nighthawk’s engines.

‘Perfectly, sergeant. She has the location of our target.’

‘I have a fix on the *Militarum conv*–’

‘That has been superseded. Check your helm-feed.’

Hegain bowed, a little stiffly, and returned to the cockpit, his webbing rippling wildly against his armour-plates as he stepped across the intake of the engines.

Spinoza looked at Khazad. ‘Ready?’

The assassin nodded, pushing her bobbed hair back and replacing her helm. ‘Is not far.’

The two of them clambered into the crew-bay, leaving Hegain to pilot the gunship. The hatches slammed closed, the engines powered up to full tilt, and the interior swayed as they gained loft. Then they were plunging steeply, dropping over the side of the bridge and back down into the depths.

‘May be difficult,’ Khazad warned, inspecting the power unit on her sword. ‘Has many followers, down there. How many, do not know. Some trained well.’

‘How long have they been preparing?’

‘Long time.’

‘For what?’

‘Do not know. But you know Feast is almost here.’

Spinoza adjusted the fit of her gauntlet, knocked off-kilter during the combat. ‘Have you ever seen a ritual?’

‘Flesh-cutting? I see evidence. In underhive. They leave bodies.’

‘What purpose? For strength? Some kind of sorcery?’

Khazad laughed. ‘You are asking me? I was running, the whole time. Maybe they like it. Some do, and that is all.’

The Nighthawk picked up speed, angling further into the dive. The crew-bay vibrated, shaking the troops in their restraint harnesses. Those troops riding in the main bay with Spinoza kept their gaze somewhere else, studiously ignoring the assassin in their midst.

‘So what is this place?’ Spinoza asked.

‘Underground,’ said Khazad. ‘Where else? They move here just soon, driven out somewhere else. They learn lessons. Is guarded.’

‘I want him alive,’ said Spinoza.

‘No doubt he wants same for you.’ Khazad chuckled, a surprisingly gritty rasp behind her vox-mask. ‘I can get us close. But there will be fighting. They are not fools.’

A clunk from the hull signalling lumen power-down was followed by the engine pitch changing. Hegain had pushed the Nighthawk into approach mode, and the angle of the deck began to swing back towards horizontal.

‘*Coming in close to it now, lord,*’ came Hegain’s voice over the internal comm.

‘Prepare for full deployment,’ said Spinoza. ‘We seal the craft.’

‘*As you will it.*’

The Nighthawk spun around on its central axis, then crunched to the ground, its landing gear flexing under its weight. The bay doors hissed open, and Spinoza leapt out at the head of the exiting storm troopers. Hegain was last out, sealing the Nighthawk’s cockpit before hefting his hellgun and catching up.

They ran on into the dark. Enormous metal vanes marched away from them, each one the size of an Emperor Titan, ranked a hundred metres apart. Vast snarls of power ducting hung in tangled silos from the high roof, patched, re-patched and welded. The floor was a tight metal lattice under which an empty gulf fell away into the deeps below. The air was fervid, parched, swaying with heat, and the walls growled with the expulsion of subterranean energies.

‘Heat processor,’ said Khazad, running hard.

The weight of a hive-spire soared over their heads, floor after floor of it. The coolant shafts, some of them kilometres long, ran along the entire height of the structure. Vast power plants churned vats of viscous fluids through the arteries of the towers, channelling the excess into great exhaust vents placed high up in the wind-ripped summit zones. Down here was the core machinery itself, fuelled by arthritic old promethium furnaces and driven by pile drivers the height of a multistorey hab-unit.

Hegain issued battle-sign signals, and the ten-strong squad fanned out. Below them, masked by the lattice floor, plumes of flame flared up in the chasms – discharge from the great engines. A spire-class heat exchanger system matched the size and complexity of a line battleship enginarium, and had the crew to match. Thousands toiled in the sweaty dark, slaved to the arcane machines that kept the air above from becoming completely toxic and the temperatures from becoming routinely lethal.

Khazad led them further on, further down, and they passed between buttress-columns encased in scaffolding. Labour gangs looked up blearily from their work, holding sputtering arc-welders in calloused, unprotected hands. Industrial servitors lumbered blindly out of their path, hauling sleds piled with girders.

They reached the edge of a wide circular shaft, its rockcrete lip eroded into fragile chunks. ‘Down there,’ Khazad said, uncoupling a clamberwire feeder. ‘Old cooler wells.’

Spinoza nodded, gesturing to the squad to retrieve rappel wires. ‘How far down?’

‘Thirty metres. No more.’

The storm troopers activated grappling hooks, primed the counters for distance and clamped them to the shaft’s edge. Spinoza could see internal ladder-cages snaking down into the gloom, clinging to the inside curve in spidery lattices of steel. She leaned over the edge for a split second, studying the pattern of the ladders and gauging a route down. The base of the well shaft was lost in shadows.

Her fingers flickered battle-sign to Hegain – *two charges, blind-flash, three second delay* – then she gave the order to go in.

The two flash-charges spun down into the well, tumbling out of view. The storm troopers leapt over

the edge after them, their rappel lines pulling taught and paying out fast. Spinoza kicked out against the inner wall as she shot down, one eye kept on the rolling timers.

The charges went off in a flare of pure white, lighting up lichen-encrusted foundation stones. The storm troopers were protected by their helm-visors, but howls of sudden pain from below gave away the presence of unshielded guards.

Spinoza dropped to the ground, cutting free of the wire and sweeping around with her weapon. Six human-normals and an abhuman writhed on the rockcrete floor, their eyes streaming. Storm troopers dropped down among them, finishing them off with pinpoint shots to the head. A locked metal portal had been cut into the north wall of the shaft, and Hegain was already laying charges down the centre groove.

The limpet-mines blew with a muffled crump, and the right-hand slide-door collapsed in a shower of glowing chunks. Hegain was first through the breach, hurling a nerve-charge through the jagged opening and then piling in after it. Spinoza was next, shadowed by Khazad.

They emerged into a long corridor cut from solid rock. The walls around them were vibrating, as if some massive machine were turning under their feet. Three more guards lay on the floor, choking on the green blooms of nerve gas and scrabbling at their bloated throats. The squad raced on, their lenses glowing amid the luminous clouds. Another gate was blown, another guard-point swept aside before the defenders even knew what was coming. They passed chambers bored deep into the rock on either side, some piled high with ration crates, others lined with racks of weaponry. Most of it looked to be scavenged hive-ganger grade, but there were Militarum-issue lasguns too, plus strongboxes for krak and frag charges.

They pushed on, breaking down a long sloping tunnel before an ogryn-breed abhuman suddenly reared up ahead of them out of the gloom, bellowing, filling up the narrow corridor with its unnatural, stumm-swollen bulk. This one had chainblades clamped over its fists, the power lines running directly to cortex-boxes implanted in its hunched spine. The monster roared with drug-spiked fury, dropped its bulbous shoulder and charged. One of Hegain's troops sent a shot into its neck, tearing a slice through its flapping flesh, but that barely slowed it. The creature crashed into another trooper, slamming him against the tunnel wall and sending its blades whirring into his twitching body.

Spinoza opened fire with her laspistol, hitting it direct in its drooling face and making it stagger. Hegain powered ahead, switching from his gun to a combat knife and leaping up into the reeling mass of slab-muscle. The blade slashed left, right, then up, carving into the abhuman's ribs and spraying them both with black blood before he dropped back to evade the mutant's flailing fist-saws. More las-beams whickered out, then Khazad darted in close, slashing her power sword. The bloodied mutant, half-blind and flecked with its own blood, reached out to grasp her in its growling blade-hands, but she darted inside its reach, angled her blade up vertically and pushed, sending the tip up through its chin and into its skull.

The vast body mass shuddered, impaled on the snarling power blade, before Khazad withdrew with a flourish and leapt back as the abhuman crashed, choking, to the ground.

'Faster now,' ordered Spinoza, sighting another guard racing into the corridor at the far end and picking him off with a long-range shot.

By then the walls were drumming around them. It was getting much, much hotter. It felt as if the entire cavern were burning up. They reached a T-junction and swept to the right, unimpeded now, but the dull clamour was growing.

‘What *is* that?’ she voxed, sprinting towards a doorway at the end of the last tunnel.

No answer came. Khazad was close on her heels, but said nothing. Perhaps old processor-cells were still active down here, burning away on the other side of the thick walls – all the better to block augur sweeps and comm-lines.

‘Multiple signals,’ reported Hegain from his portable auspex as they neared the door. ‘Interference, interference, but I am... Holy Throne. Not interference. Fall back!’

But by then Spinoza had kicked the last door down, gun in hand, and burst through. Khazad came with her, her sword spitting. The storm troopers followed – down to nine now – spilling out into the open, hellguns aimed outwards.

Then they stood there, breathing heavily. Ahead of them, cavern walls rose up sheer, hewn from the world’s crust either by nature or by some forgotten ancient artifice. Twin rock faces were hung with banners, all crude depictions of bloody angels. Fires thundered in pierced metal barrels, hurling columns of angry red illumination up against the stone. The vault must have been fifty metres wide, but it swept back as far as the eye could see, a long chasm rent within the earth’s deeper skin.

High above, the spire’s promethium furnaces burned, but that was not the source of the roar. Nor was it coming from the blazing fires. The noise – as deep as the lost oceans, as rich as boiling blood – came from the hundreds, *thousands*, of people assembled in that hall. They were shouting, screaming, raising their fists into the horrifically hot, smoky air and chanting some mantra that Spinoza could not make out. They were all armed – most with improvised weapons any hive-ganger could have accumulated, some with Militarum-issue lasguns, some with more lethal tools. All of them wore red over their regulation woollen shifts, a motley sea of cloak-scrap, dyed sashes, hoods and armour-pieces, glossy with slaps of thick paint. Looming over them all, massive and brooding, was the sign of the False Angel – the winged cadaver painting in blood, twenty metres high, scored into the walls and lit by the flames.

‘So many,’ murmured Khazad.

For a moment, Spinoza froze, shocked by what she saw. Crowl would not have made this mistake. Crowl would have been more cautious. But then Crowl was not here to see it, and that, all things considered, was something to be glad of.

They were already turning. They were already reaching for their guns, the light of feral hatred shining in their eyes.

She holstered her pistol, reached for Argent, and kindled the disruptor field.

‘For Him on Earth,’ she voxed to the squad.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Even habituated to Terra's superlatives, the airborne approach to the Palace never failed to elicit a tremor of awe. Dawn was not far off, though the skies remained as black as the void, a pall of smoke and smog that writhed like serpents around the mighty boles of the thickening tower clusters. The spires reared ever higher, the triumphal arches spanned ever more insane gulfs. Sightless aquilae stared out over colossal vistas, all now marked with the skull motifs of the Adeptus Terra. It was said that ten billion adepts were required simply to administer the precincts of the Palace itself. Crawl had always supposed that number to be hyperbole until he had first witnessed the approaches for himself, years ago. Seeing those mighty walls of age-tarnished adamantium rise on – up and up, sweeping like the shoulders of geologically impossible mountains into the spore-filthed sky, then the next, and then the next, each bastion bigger than the last – gave at least some credence to the figures.

There was no respite from the immensity. Ten thousand years of hegemony, of tithes dragged in from every planet in the vast realm of man, found its terminus here. The land itself was ruptured, bored deep down into the core to hollow out new oubliettes and warrens, just as deep as the towering behemoths above.

The Shade powered on full thrust, heading due north. Gothic edifices with ornate rose windows passed in sequence, one after the other, hour after hour, until their number and expanse became numbing. The Palace itself, a temple-continent of titanic proportions, grew steadily larger on the northern horizon, its swollen profile backlit by perpetual storms. Blacker than the night behind it, the cyclopean Sanctum Imperialis rose into the lightning-barred sky, a dome of such mind-bending dimensions that it enclosed its own climatic system and had foundations delved far into the forgotten bedrock of Himalazian peaks.

The pilgrim columns below them had swelled into a living ocean of red-robed humanity, surging up from the maw-gates and out onto the greater Avenues Immaculate, teeming in their millions, filling every scrap of empty rockcrete and marching forth in dirty, swaying ranks. There were far too many to count, far too many to halt – a host of the devoted dredged from every backwater world in the Imperium of Man and hurled into its heart of tarnished gold. They were dying in their droves even now, suffocated by the press of bodies, parched and withered from months without adequate food or water, bloated with contagion from the passage in stinking void-hulls, but still they tramped onwards, crying out for salvation, swinging the regulation blood-lanterns they had paid their last coin to obtain, gasping out hymns to the Sacrificed before their strength gave out and they were trodden underfoot by

the thousands coming on behind.

The arbitrators could only watch that progress now, hovering high in their Raptor crowd-suppression gunships, powerless against the current of blind fanaticism that surged onwards and inwards. Millions of troops from the Astra Militarum regiments had been mobilised to line the high places, all standing in ranks five deep, but they could all have emptied their lasgun power packs ten times over and made little more than a dent in those numbers.

The hab-zones fell behind, and the Shade flew almost alone, broadcasting its exempted status on every vox-channel to ensure it remained unmolested by the shoals of watch-craft. Revus piloted it down a long, long channel between high towers, two kilometres wide, flat at its base and lined with immense statues on either flank. Far ahead loomed the greatest of the triumphal arches outside the Inner Palace perimeter – the great road that led to the first of the Great Gates, one of three portals into the sanctus sanctorum, where He yet dwelt in the agony of immortality, striving every hour with the infinite will of hungry gods for the souls of His people.

The outer wall emerged through veils of drifting smog – a long screen of blackened iron, higher than a hive-spire, its bulwarks formed from the adamantium piers of the First Palace, its feet resting on foundations hewn by the primarch Rogal Dorn. Those battlements now overlooked the pinnacle-fields of the world-city, but had once gazed out over nothing but mires of carnage, and still bore the scars. By decree of the High Lords, the marks of battle had never been erased, and now pocked and disfigured the gothic outer curtain, their edges eroded by the gnawing winds but always there, a reminder to the weak in faith of the consequences of ambivalence.

‘We’re being tracked,’ Revus reported, edging the Shade a little higher.

‘How many active weapon locks?’

Revus glanced at the console. ‘Three hundred and seventy-four.’

Crowl smiled. ‘They’re doing their job.’

He activated the comm-bead at his neck and scrolled through the access ciphers. Crowl’s retinal feed glowed with lists of runes, sliding smoothly across his visual field.

The wall drew closer. The processional way was packed with both foot-traffic and the sanctioned walkers of the Ecclesiarchy. An immense tracked land-train ground its way onwards, its ranked chimneys spewing thick black clouds of smoke, its sloped prow crushing any pilgrims dull-witted enough to stagger into its path. Priests floated above their flock on grav-pulpits, roaring out injunctions across overlapping vox-augmitters. Halfway along the route, two Warhound Titans of the Legio Ignatum stood sentinel, their guns garlanded with banners, their blunt cockpits facing one another across the swollen river of bodies.

‘We have a challenge,’ said Revus.

‘Maintain course. I am working on it.’

The Shade powered on, passing over the Titan sentinels, a lone speck of black against the hosts below. More challenge runes flashed up on the console, most from arbitrator command-fortresses, some bearing Astra Militarum markings, a few with classified origins.

The wall drew closer. More detail filled out the auspex screens. Their target, the Lion’s Gate, could just be made out as a floodlit haze among the coal-black surrounds, glinting from the slivers of lightning, its base stained dull red from the millions of blood-lanterns at its feet.

Long shadows fell across them. More craft were slowly descending, heavier variants of the crowd-suppressor gunships, their thrusters straining and their gun-banks swinging around to track.

‘Seven hundred active locks,’ said Revus calmly. ‘In a moment, one of them will engage.’

‘Maintain course.’

Crowl worked through the comm-protocol channels, scanning for a lock of his own. Even with Navradaran’s cipher-keys, opening a line was not simply a matter of finding a frequency – a billion comm-beads were opening and closing every second, swamping the ancient relay towers and filling the night air with hails of static. Crowl negotiated the symbolic gateways, appending his own ordo respond-codes and then threading through signatory synapse paths.

By Terran standards, the landscape around them was open, a vast field of plazas and stepped terraces. The Lion’s Gate had been the great voidport of the capital world, hundreds of square kilometres across, capable of receiving massive Crusade-era drop-ships. During the Great Heresy, legend told the site had seen some of the fiercest fighting as Traitors and Loyalists had slaughtered one another for control of the prime landing sites, and even now many of the old stages were revered centres of devotion, hallowed across the millennia and protected by the Ministorum, the original crumbling rockcrete preserved under high vaults, the scorch tracks and mortar craters meticulously tended by armies of slaved menials.

‘Energy spikes detected,’ Revus noted, bringing them into line with the Lion’s Gate itself, its bulk still half shrouded in shadows.

‘Noted,’ said Crowl, working hard. ‘Maintain course.’

The wall now filled the forward viewers, rising like a cliff-edge above the old void stages, its parapets spiked with gun-lines. The immense portal doors, each one over two hundred metres high, were closed and had been for ten thousand years. The two door faces were embossed with beaten ceramite, sculpted into representations of the battles that had taken place. Idealised Angels of Death clashed in bas-relief, their blades glimmering under an accumulated patina of ages. In the very centre, where the immense bosses swelled out, were two greater figures – the Holy Primarch Jaghatai Khan, and a nameless daemoniac monster wielding a scythe.

‘Now in interdict,’ said Revus, his voice as passionless as ever. ‘They tell me they will open fire in five seconds.’

Crowl could see the truth of it. Atop the closest parapets, linked lascannons were swinging around to gain a clear shot. The Shade’s console was swimming with warning runes, its main comm-intake clogged with challenge hails. Inquisitorial markers would buy them a little time, but not much.

He pushed on, filtering and mind-sorting, progressing through levels of symbolism. The key was there, locked down amid a thicket of overlapping astrological cartographs.

‘Time’s up,’ said Revus, noting the power surge on the lascannon battery. He neither slowed nor deviated course.

Then Crowl broke through, and his rune-feed blinked into a *>transmit* invitation. ‘You wanted to see me,’ he voxed. ‘Call off your dogs.’

The lascannons remained lit, their power coils swollen with electro-static. The Gate swam closer, its surface details now visible to the naked eye. For a moment longer they coasted, high above the artificial plains, angled towards one of the many armoured ship-access portals cut into the doors themselves, their every movement tracked by silent gun barrels.

Then the lascannons swung away. The coils powered down, and the closest shadowing gunships peeled clear.

‘You are early, inquisitor,’ came Navradaran’s voice, not through the teeming comm-channels but



direct into his armour's audex system.

'I have news of Phaelias,' said Crowl. 'And of others – I must speak with you.'

There was a pause. 'Follow the markers. Once inside, do not deviate – the guards will not give a warning beyond the wall.'

Ahead of them, one of the ship-access portals folded in on itself, sending a shaft of red-gold light bleeding out into the poisoned atmosphere. Revus shifted trajectory to match it.

'Not very friendly,' he remarked.

Crowl stared ahead, watching as they crossed the threshold and the Inner Palace unfurled before them in all its terror and splendour.

'We're just getting started,' he murmured.

It was not a cell, not a cabal, not a rabble. It was an army.

At the far end of the cavern, past the heaving crowds, half lost in the swirl of smoke and the ripple of the fire, was a great archway and a raised stage. A red-robed, masked figure stood there, arms raised, flanked by dozens of ogryn-breeds and armoured honour guards, surrounded by a halo of vox-augmitters. He had been addressing the crowds, whipping them into mania, but now he turned towards the interlopers into his subterranean kingdom, pointing them out with a dark gauntlet, his reflective facemask mirroring the leaping flames.

'Your persecutors!' he cried out, his vox-pattern fractured by a distortion filter. 'Take them.'

The crowd rushed at them, spilling over themselves to get at the intruders. Hegain and his troops backed off, firing steadily, dropping the first rank of cultists into a tumbling pile of bodies. Spinoza whirled around, only to see their retreat cut off by fresh troops emerging from the portal behind them. Guards in what looked like heavy carapace armour blocked other exits higher up, preparing to open fire. There was no cover, no escape route, only a seething mass of rage coming at them, eyes-wide and desperate.

Khazad swung her powerblade in practice-arcs. 'He is nexus,' she voxed, nodding up at the stage.

Spinoza was still frozen with indecision. There were more of them than she had thought possible. *Hundreds* more.

*Get a grip*, she told herself, angrily.

Stay where they were and they would die swiftly for nothing. Somehow get to the cult-master, and perhaps something could still come of this.

'We take the leader,' Spinoza ordered over the vox. Hegain responded instantly, moving alongside her and Khazad, and the three of them charged directly into the oncoming mass. The assassin pirouetted as she sprinted, somersaulting high before crashing into the first wave of cultists. Her powerblade whistled, taking two heads clean off before she was in close, kicking out, jabbing, cutting.

Spinoza took a more direct route, letting her armour absorb the sting of incoming lasfire and laying about her with Argent. The storm troopers pushed out on either flank, protecting her as they had been trained to, cutting down more cultists with each precise volley. They were brutal, direct, punching hard to break bones before twisting around to loose las-bolts at close range.

The shock of the assault broke the initial onslaught. These were ordinary mortals – sick, weak, given no special training and possessing little decent equipment. The Inquisition's soldiers cut a swathe through the crowds, pushing hard towards the dais where the False Angel waited for them. He made

no move to evade them, but stood in full view, watching calmly as they steadily cut his servants down.

Then the first storm trooper fell, dragged to the ground by more than eight cultists at once, his gun ripped from his hands and his power pack wrenched over. That broke the formation's unity, and soon three more of Hegain's force were bogged down, fighting for their lives as the crowds clawed at them.

'Further,' Spinoza urged, watching the great stage draw closer. She cracked the skull of a cultist, kicking the body away, then whirled to face the next.

Khazad was fighting less fluently now – something had taken a gouge out of her. Hegain shouted out his frustration as the pace dragged and more heavily armoured guards waded into the fray. They pushed on, but it was hard graft, and another two storm troopers were hauled down by a forest of fanatical hands.

Fifty metres to go. Spinoza twisted around, trying to spy anything – anything at all – that could get her close. All she saw was the heaving tide coming at her, their faces marked with ritual cuts, their skin pierced, their teeth glittering in the dark.

Crying aloud, she slammed Argent round in a wide circle two-handed, dragging four of them out of her path. She shoved her way towards one of the great iron braziers. While Khazad and Hegain took the fight to the cultists, she stowed the crozius, took out her laspistol and took aim at the figure on the dais. For a moment, they were staring at one another. His facemask was a polished mirror, his robes edged with gold. He made no move to get into cover, and the two targeting lines in her armour's helm slid to intersect over his forehead.

'May your soul burn for eternity,' Spinoza breathed, and fired.

The shot was aimed true, lancing into the man's head. Just before impact, though, a ripple-pattern of blue light cocooned him, spidering out and flexing like plastek.

'Force shield,' Khazad spat, fighting hard now but no longer making progress.

Spinoza pushed back to join her embattled comrades, taking up Argent again. She could almost see Crowl's patient, cynical face gazing at her in disappointment, and that made her furious.

'For the Emperor!' she cried out loud, felling another two cultists. She hacked and she punched out, but still the weight of bodies kept pressing in, dragging at her, scratching at her, screaming with inchoate loathing.

Hegain went down, then more of his troops were smothered. Then Khazad was finally dragged off her feet, and Spinoza turned to face a burly man with studs glittering across a blood-streaked forehead. She cracked Argent across his face, hammering two-handed now, spinning around to meet the attacks as they closed in on her. For a few moments longer she hewed them down, her armour deflecting every impact, the disruptor field of her maul flaring in the shadows.

Then something hit her hard on the back of the head, and she staggered. Las-bolts impacted along her torso, knocking her to one side, and she felt a hammer-strike across her spine. She tried to spin round, to bring the crozius to bear, but then she was taking more hits and her helm-visor erupted into static. Argent was ripped from her grasp, another heavy blow came in, and she was thrown onto her back. She tried to get up, but the muzzle of a gun was rammed into her gorget-seal, pressing into the flesh beneath. She tensed, ready for the shot, but it never came.

Slowly, messily, her visor-field cleared. She blinked the fuzz of tactical data away, and found herself staring at the mirror-helm of the cult leader. He was bending over her, weaponless, though his

acolytes still swarmed close on all sides, all guns aimed at her. Her hands and feet were held down by them, and more gun muzzles pressed up against her.

She felt hands seize her helm and twist it off. The air tasted of sweat and madness.

The False Angel crouched down, reached for his own helm and removed it in turn. The face beneath was male, human, not obviously distorted by corruption. A single tattoo marked his left cheek, but otherwise the flesh was unmarked.

‘You have been hunting us, daughter,’ the False Angel said. Free of the vox distortion, his voice was even, well spoken. An up-hiver, then, not gutter trash from the toil-zones. ‘You have brought us pain.’

He gave a signal to one of his bodyguards, who brought out a long syringe. Spinoza pushed back against her captors, but was held firm.

The False Angel brought the needle up to her neck.

‘I exist only to protect the righteous and punish the sinful,’ he said, smiling sadly. ‘There is so much you do not yet understand, and it is time you were enlightened.’

Then he inserted the needle into her neck and depressed the plunger. For a moment she felt only the pain of the wound, and spat into his face.

‘The Emperor protects,’ she hissed.

The False Angel smiled, letting the spittle run down his cheek.

‘Indeed He does,’ he said, withdrawing the needle carefully. ‘If you would only let Him.’

Then the true pain hit. Spinoza felt her back arch, her limbs go taut, and a crushing weight sink over her. Her eyes rolled back into her head, and she saw the roof of the cavern, far, far above her.

‘The... Emp...’ she spat out.

Then the darkness fell, and her consciousness slipped away.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

The long gallery was high up on the eastern face of the Basilica Torrentes. Narrow panes of stained glass slowly burned with variegated colour as the dawn sunlight pierced the clouds, throwing bars of gold over a thick crimson carpet. The far wall was a mess of gold leaf tracery, piled on top of itself in ever greater profusions of baroque exuberance. Astrological devices clustered about images of warrior-knights placed amid starships set amid fabulous bestiaries, on and on for the two hundred metres of the gallery's length – a frieze that must have taken decades to complete.

It was also fantastically ugly, Crowl thought. Revus hadn't missed out on much, down in the reception vaults keeping a watchful eye on the docked Shade. The inquisitor's boots sunk deep into the pile of the carpet – an odd sensation, after a lifetime treading the hard asphalt and rockcrete of the lower hives. By his side walked Navradaran, towering over him, his near-silent power armour glinting in the dawn light. The heel of his spear glided over the surface, never once brushing the fabric.

They were alone, the two of them. The gallery echoed softly, insulated against the roar of Terra's streets, a gilt-edged haven from the press of the unwashed.

'You have spent a long time in Salvator, Crowl,' the Custodian said, his voice just as sonorous as before.

'I like it there.'

'You have a fortress.'

'I inherited it.'

'How often do you come to the centre?'

'Rarely.' Crowl looked up at the windows, each one adorned with the records of battles fought half a galaxy away. Most of the world-names he did not recognise. 'Not easy to gain admittance, from the outside.'

'I am glad to hear it.'

'But Phaelias did, didn't he?'

The Custodian paused before an obsidian plinth, upon which had been placed a sculpture of Saint Katarina of the Miraculous Shroud. 'Phaelias was a lord of the Ordo Xenos. He earned his privileges.'

'And he wasn't resident on Terra,' said Crowl, looking sourly at the overwrought lines of the statue. 'What was he doing here at all?'

‘We had some communication.’

‘He was working for you?’

‘He was working for the Throne. But we shared certain concerns, that is true.’

Navradaran started walking again, a heavy, metronomic stride that seemed to match pace with the rhythms of the world itself. If Crowl hadn’t seen him in combat, he might have assumed the Custodian’s movements to be ponderous, but the heaviness was all part of the deception.

‘There is a common misconception,’ Navradaran said, ‘that the guardians of the Palace are somehow insulated here, that we see little and hear less. We would be poor wardens if that were so. Your orders are not the only ones to have agents throughout the Imperium – we hear much, in our own way, brought to us on the tides of dreams and the chatter of vox-traffic.’

‘Something has happened, then, hasn’t it?’

Navradaran turned to face him, still moving. His winged helm burned a deep gold, its lenses catching the dawn light and glittering like rubies. ‘Say what you came here to say. My duties are many and the day will be long.’

Crowl reached into a pouch at his belt, withdrew the vox-capsule and handed it to the Custodian. ‘Listen to it. It’ll tell you what happened to Phaelias. He says much about what he thinks has been happening. He mentions Quantrain. You know the name? Everyone seems to. He’s here, somewhere. I must find him.’

Navradaran stowed the bead within his armour and kept walking. ‘Quantrain is a powerful man. What are the accusations?’

‘That a weapon has been brought to Terra, and that members of the High Council are involved.’ Crowl smiled dryly. ‘He was serious. He was very concerned about it, and I think you know why. In any case, we have to speak to him. There’s blood all over the hab-zones, some of it inquisitors’. Quantrain would have the nerve, and the power, to do this. You have the testimony, listen to it.’

Navradaran reached a greater window, set under a tall arch. The panes were open, letting tox-pungent air waft in from over the temple roofs. He walked out, and Crowl followed him. The two of them stood before the balcony railing, looking east at the rising sun. Pale shadows crept across the sea of spires and cupolas, a meagre lightening of what remained a grey and soulless vista.

‘You think I can deliver you Quantrain easily,’ said Navradaran. ‘You are mistaken.’

‘Where is he, then?’

‘I do not follow every courtier around, and the lord inquisitor’s reputation gives me no reason to track him.’

‘That’s why he can do this. He’s got his agents active in the underhives – my interrogator ran into one of them. Phaelias said this weapon – or warrior, or whatever – has gone wrong, has got out, and they’re hunting it just as we are. You know what it is, don’t you?’

‘I give you my word I do not.’

‘Then what *do* you know?’ Crowl’s exasperation made him strident. ‘There’s no purpose in keeping secrets from me now.’

The Custodian’s cloak lifted in the breeze. Ahead of them rose the campaniles of a soaring, aquila-crowned cathedral, one of dozens, its interior flickering from devotional fires and its chimney stacks active from burned offerings.

‘There is a certain irony,’ he said, ‘in an inquisitor saying this to me. You are an unusual man, Crowl. You are an unusual example of your breed.’

‘That’s been said by others. Tell me.’

For a moment longer, the gilded helm remained silent.

‘It was Phaelias who came to me,’ the Custodian said finally. ‘He had been hunting a rogue trader named Naaman Vinal out in the Laurentis subsector. Phaelias believed Vinal had been misusing his Letter of Marque to acquire proscribed xenotech weaponry for his own arsenal, rather than for delivery to the Mechanicus depots at Laurentis Prime, and so had placed him under interdict. Locating him was not trivial, and Phaelias was never able to substantiate the matter of the accusation, for when he finally caught the trader’s galleon off the Torquatus Nebula, the ship was empty, stripped of all life and drifting without power. The hull was badly damaged with energy patterns Phaelias recognised as used by xenos corsairs, and his first instinct was to record the loss and move on. Only further analysis revealed underlaid Imperial-signature damage, and so he quarantined it for scrutiny.’

Crowl listened carefully, committing every point to memory.

‘Beyond the contradictory damage traces, there was nothing,’ said Navradaran, ‘save for a ciphered communication log sequestered in Vinal’s personal store. It remains unclear how this survived when all else was scoured – it may have been Vinal’s intention to preserve it. The contents could not be retrieved, but the intended subject could – a senior astropath named Cassandra Glucher working in the service of the Speaker of the Chartist Captains. For a rogue trader to be in personal contact with such an exalted official at regular intervals was unusual enough for Phaelias to make the warp stage to Terra, where he discovered that Glucher had been dead for five years. Any attempt to discover the circumstances of her demise met first with obfuscation and then with hostility.’

‘After several months of enquiry he finally came to me. I will not disclose the reason for our acquaintance, and there is much detail on Phaelias’ enquiry that was never clear to me, but he had seemingly made alliance with the Provost Marshal and had arranged for those searches. I put this down to some game within the Council – it would not be unusual for one High Lord to seek to embarrass another, and there is well-known animus between the Marshal and the Speaker. But the accusation was striking – that whatever Vinal had acquired had passed into the hands of agents working on behalf of a High Lord of Terra and was making its way under secrecy to the Throneworld. That was the last time we spoke, he and I.’

‘And you did not place much credence in his testimony.’

‘Many plots come to our ears.’

‘But now something has changed.’

‘You can see it yourself.’

‘Cargo was landed at Skhallax from a void-hauler,’ said Crowl. ‘There had been fighting – I saw the damage – and it’s made the tech-priests frenzied. This is no longer supposition. It is here, and it is loose, and Quantrain was prepared to kill to keep the trail hidden.’

‘Quantrain will be found, but you surprise me, Crowl – he is of your order, and you tell me you cannot locate him?’

‘I’ve been in Salvator a long time. Here’s the nub of it – you told me yourself of the Feast reaching the Gate. I didn’t know why then, but Phaelias said the same thing. That’s the fear, isn’t it? There are gangs organising the underhives and a billion pilgrims marching towards the causeways, and no one could possibly screen them all. It only takes one to reach the Gate, and there’s no Angel to guard it, and something has been brought here that will light the inferno, and you can’t find it in time.’

Navradaran took his gauntlet from the balcony’s railing. He turned away from Crowl, radiating

distaste. It might have been impolitic, thought Crowl a little late, to invoke the name of a Holy Primarch quite so lightly.

‘You speak of things you do not understand,’ the Custodian said. ‘Perhaps you have been in the shadows for so long you have forgotten what it is to perceive the light.’

Crowl watched him go. ‘So what now?’ he called after. ‘You’re leaving the hunt to me?’

Navradaran turned.

‘You are not a fool, Crowl, so do not act like one,’ he said. ‘You speak of the Gate and show your ignorance. There are uncounted mortals alive this day who would willingly die to witness it, and here you stand in blasphemy and ridicule.’

He started to walk again.

‘I will not make the offer again,’ Navradaran said. ‘Follow me now, and I will show you where the Angel stood. Perhaps that will cure you of your levity.’

When she awoke, Spinoza found herself restrained by her ankles and wrists, bound tight to a heavy iron chair. Her temples throbbed, and her veins felt sluggish, as if her blood had somehow been thickened.

She blinked a few times, and the worst of the dizziness went away. She tested her bonds, one by one, but they were fast. They had taken her armour from her, and she wore only her padded shift and greaves. A metallic taste lingered in her mouth, and swallowing it away was difficult. She could feel bruising across her back, her neck, the left side of her face.

‘You woke up fast,’ came a voice from the darkness. ‘They told me it would take a few more hours, but I thought you’d defy them.’

Spinoza squinted into the gloom. It took a few more moments for her vision to clarify. When it did, she saw that she was in a narrow chamber, the walls and floor cut from naked rock. The only light came from an old stained lumen tube that barely kicked out a candle’s worth of illumination, keeping them swathed in semi-dark. There were heavy iron doorways cut into the walls.

Standing in front of her was the man, the False Angel. He had taken off his mask and his robes, and wore standard Imperial garb – a dark grey tunic over a black bodyglove, a half-cloak, worn synthleather boots. He was standing at his ease, leaning against the far wall, his legs crossed at the ankle.

Spinoza tried to salivate, to get her jaw moving. Her heart was beating too fast, her breathing too shallow. The words of the old litanies began to cycle through her mind, steeling her.

*He is eternal. Through Him, I endure all things.*

She was under no illusion as to what was coming next. She had seen the lithocasts, the autopsy reports, the cadavers brought in from the underhives.

‘Where are the others?’ she croaked.

‘The assassin and your storm trooper sergeant are alive. So are six of the others. The rest were killed in the audience chamber, but you must not hold that against my people, for you killed many, many more of them. Indeed, all told you took a very heavy toll.’ He pushed himself from the wall and walked closer. ‘What is your name?’

‘Luce Spinoza, interrogator, the Ordo Hereticus.’

The man smiled. ‘Name, rank, ordo. And that is all you will tell me, yes?’

‘I am an agent of the Holy Orders of the Emperor’s Inquisition. They will come after me.’

‘Not tonight. Not for some time, given the madness that infects this world. For the time being, interrogator, we are alone.’

Spinoza looked up at him. Her breathing was coming under control. The worst effects of the drug were beginning to drain away, replaced by a more honest, bodily pain.

‘Who are you?’ she asked, lifting her bruised chin.

The man squatted down before her, coming to her level, resting his elbows on his knees and tucking the fingers under his chin. He had a weathered face, with defined muscle mass and smooth skin. This one had not grown up in the lightless habs.

‘The name I was given at birth? Salvor Lermentov. You know what they call me now? The False Angel. Ridiculous. I have no idea where it came from – a kill-tag from the arbitrators, most likely. We used it, though. We turned it into something they could believe in. That is what this is about – belief.’

Spinoza’s eyes narrowed. Quietly, she tested her bonds again, tensing up against the chair’s weight. ‘You believe nothing. I’ve seen what you do.’

Lermentov smiled dryly. ‘What *we* do? I’ve seen what *you* do. Your hands are the bloodiest, interrogator.’

‘We do what we have to and take no pleasure in it. Your rites are abominations.’

‘Rites.’ Lermentov looked amused. ‘You mean that screed back there – sin and righteousness. Forget it. It means nothing. We use it keep them motivated. After ten thousand years of superstition, they can only think a certain way. We make do with what we have.’

Spinoza began to push her back gently against the chair, probing for weakness. There was no trace of madness in the man’s speech. He was measured, dry, careful, which was unwelcome for many different reasons.

‘Here is where you tell me you are innocent of all crimes,’ she said, playing for time, wondering where Khazad and the others were being held.

Lermentov placed his palms together for a moment, holding them as if in prayer. ‘No, not all. There were crimes. But not the ones you think we are guilty of.’ He got up again. ‘How long have you served on Terra, inquisitor? I do not think long. You do not have the look about you.’

‘It matters not what–’

‘It *matters*.’ Lermentov’s eyes briefly flickered with anger. ‘Around us, above us, in the habs, people are dying. They are dying in agony, interrogator, and it is drawn out. They are made to experience pain that I can only begin to...’ He broke off, searching for the words. ‘And you believe we are to blame.’

‘It was confirmed by members of your cells.’

Lermentov laughed bitterly. ‘Yes, your fine techniques of truth-seeking. Let me guess – they begin with denials, and then you bring out your instruments, and soon they are telling you anything you want them to, and at the end you read your bloody transcripts and comfort yourself that you’ve unearthed this great conspiracy beneath your feet.’ He shook his head, contemptuous. ‘If I wished it, interrogator, I could bring in the skin-saws and the nerve-pins and before the hour was done you’d tell me the Emperor Himself was a daemon of the deepest abyss.’

‘That is heres–’

‘You are *wrong* about us. You were wrong at the beginning and you are wrong now. All of you, hunting our members and torching our meeting places, never getting closer to the heart of it. Even when you took us alive you learned nothing, because you asked the wrong questions. How could you



get it so, so wrong?’ Lermentov came closer again. ‘Because the people down here have learned to fear something more than you. It matters not how many of us you take into your fortresses, because there are more waiting who know that the enemy is not some abstract theological construct, but is *here*, now. So they look for someone to protect them, and they know that the arbitrators will not do it, and that the lords of the High Spires will not do it, and so it must come from themselves. And so we are arming ourselves and we are organising and we are growing in power, ready to order the underhives as they should be ordered.’

Spinoza gave up her testing of her bonds. They had bound her fast, the chair was solid, and in her weakened state there was no chance of breaking them.

‘To establish structures outside Adeptus Terra is forbidden,’ she said. ‘For that alone you would have earned death, but these other things – raids on the Emperor’s sanctioned agents, taking weapons–’

‘And how do you wish us to do this, if not with tools?’ Lermentov smiled again, but it was devoid of mirth. ‘Soon the Feast will reach its climax at the Gate and the priests will tell us to be thankful for everything we possess. Those with the power will smile, protected by the millions who keep them shielded from the worst, but what have *these* people got to be thankful for? They love the Emperor. Truly, they do. We ensure that there are no faithless among us, and they will die for Him just as you will. But they will not die for the High Lords. Not any longer. They will have enough to eat, enough to clothe themselves. Above all, they will be protected from the horror. That is why they come to me, and that is why we do what we do.’

Spinoza listened carefully, trying to establish what species of heresy this was. Perhaps Lermentov was merely a social revolutionary, foolish enough to believe that with a little compassion all the travails of his people could be somehow magicked away.

‘You have no idea of what you are protected from,’ she said.

‘Oh, really?’

‘You cannot.’

Lermentov shot her a contemptuous glance, and moved towards the wall to her left into which one of the iron doorways had been cut. He placed his hands, both of them, on a rusty lever sunk deep into the stone, and prepared to pull on it.

‘This is what we live with,’ he said. ‘See if you recognise it.’

He hauled down and the heavy door swung open with a squeal of metal on metal. A further chamber came into view, lit with strip-lumens that strobed painfully. Something crouched in there, something massive and coiled. As the door clanged back on its hinges, the thing unfurled, its limbs sliding and jerking over one another, its torso straightening. A domed metal head swung upwards, and pale grey flesh rippled under the harsh lights.

Spinoza’s eyes widened. The thing was horrific. Far taller and broader than a human, its ribs protruded starkly from a weeping mass of scar tissue. Its waist was wasp-thin, its chest and thighs engorged out of all proportion. Its hands were gone, replaced by claws fashioned from some glossy metal. Cylindrical vials protruded from the creature’s back and stomach, bubbling with liquid as they jostled amongst chitinous spines and vanes. Needles were half-buried under the skin, and wounds pulled apart by hooks. It hissed as it moved, swinging its head from side to side as if blind, then tried to leap at the open portal. Heavy chains yanked taut, pulling it back, and it thrashed wildly against its bonds. It stank of misery and confinement and... something else.

Spinoza recognised the stench from the *Rhadamanthys*. Perhaps not exactly the same, but with the same indefinable cloud of repugnance attached to it. She gagged, swallowing hard to dispel the nausea as the thing snaked and rattled against the chains.

‘Quite something, is it not?’ said Lermentov, unable to hide his own revulsion. ‘You know what these things are called? We had no true name for them, not until we took your assassin friend to see it, but she is of the Ordo Xenos and knew what it was straight away.’

Spinoza couldn’t take her eyes off it. Everything about it was a study in repulsion. It was clearly in terrible pain – every move was stilted and racked with trembling – but it was also driven by some malignant inner fury. Its limbs were distended horribly, as if the bones within had been broken and poorly set, and its muscles bunched in obscene clumps of bloodshot gristle, swollen into fists of churned flesh.

‘So now I can tell you, interrogator,’ said Lermentov grimly. ‘This thing was once a human – man or woman we can’t tell now. It has been turned into something your assassin called a xenotype eldar-beta, subtype *grotesque*. These things are hunting in the dark, all throughout the tunnels down here. The ‘blood rites’ you’re looking for? Look to these things. They are slaying freely. Nothing can touch them – they’re fast, they see perfectly in the night-dark, they’re stronger than our ogryns. They are *terrible*.’

She could believe it. The grotesque was trying to get at them again, lashing out against its bonds, pulling the chains tight and shaking them in their clamps. Drool hung in glittering loops from its hidden mouth, and its claws whickered in an insectoid clatter.

Lermentov hauled the lever back to its original position, and the thick doors slowly ground their way closed, sealing with a dull boom. Spinoza said nothing. Thoughts raced through her mind, one after the other, but few of them made any kind of sense.

‘That is what we fight,’ said Lermentov. ‘That is why the people come to our banner for salvation, because they know what these things will do to them if they are left alone. And there are even worse fears now, because we know what the origin of the monsters is. So when you discover these images of blood and horror, or find bodies pulled apart and corridors swimming in broken flesh, consider the cause, and *think*. We are not the authors, interrogator – we are the victims.’ He came closer to her again, and there was a savage pleasure of vindication in his eyes. ‘So we do hunt down weapons, and we do organise, and when we are taken by you we bluff and we hide as much as we can, even when the knives come out, because every one of us knows that unless we remain united there is no hope for those we leave behind.’

Spinoza thought back to what she already knew. According to Crawl, the *Rhadamanthys* had unloaded its cargo twenty days ago.

‘When did these... things emerge?’ she asked.

Lermentov shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘We’ve been active for months, planning to seize our chance when all eyes were on the Gate, but this changed it all. Three weeks, perhaps, when we first noticed the killing? No more than that, but it’s getting worse, quickly. This one is the only one we’ve been able to capture, and it cost us dozens. They’re being bred fast, and soon there will be no eradicating them.’

‘You should have reported it.’

‘Ha!’ Lermentov clapped his hands together. ‘To the authorities, yes? The first one of us to do so would have been condemned as a fantasist, a xenos-lover, and his family would have been quietly

disappeared. You do not understand this, do you? The people here have precisely three fears – the monsters, each other, and you.’

Spinoza remembered Crowl’s words then.

‘But I did not kill you,’ Lermentov went on. ‘See, even after all the pain you brought us, I took a final chance. We know where they are being made. Tonight is the night when we move on them, take our forces and burn them out. Many will die.’ He looked her directly in the eye. ‘It would be safer for me to kill you. Many of my followers urged me to do it quickly, lest more of you come. You have killed so many of us, Luce Spinoza, and it is hard for them not to hate. So why not do it?’ He shrugged. ‘Because I have no illusions about what we face. We will need every blade, and still the odds are it will not be enough. I cannot help but think He has a purpose in our meeting here. Now that you have seen these things, interrogator, you can guess the choice I will give you. You can die here, or you can do your duty and help us.’

Spinoza looked up at him sharply. He was entirely serious. Lermentov brought out a heavy key on a chain, and swung it idly, as if for temptation.

Every instinct railed against it. The man – the *heretic* – made her almost as sick as the creature in the cage. He was a fantasist and a rebel whose pride made him blind to the ruinous course he had taken, and deserved his place on the pyre just as truly as those who had listened to his poison.

But this was what Crowl had been hunting. It was *here*, buried under the mammoth spires, fomenting in the dark even as the hosts of blithe pilgrims coursed over the transitways towards the Palace precincts. This was what had come in on the *Rhadamanthys*, and if the source could be found then that would give them the answers he had been seeking.

‘The others,’ she said. ‘Khazad, Hegain – you gave them this choice?’

‘You’re the commander. They’ll serve if you order them to.’

‘I condone nothing you have done.’

Lermentov smiled wearily. ‘Yes, that would be too much to hope for.’

She could barely bring herself to look at him. Her pride, her training, her judgement, all fought back hard, but there was a greater goal at stake now.

Gritting her teeth, she nodded. ‘I will aid you, for just as long as these things draw breath.’

‘You will swear that on the Holy Throne,’ Lermentov said, seriously. ‘I know what those oaths mean to you – you will say the words before the shackles come off.’

Now it was Spinoza’s turn to smile, albeit to herself. Words meant nothing – Tur had taught her that – but if it gave Lermentov some sense of security there was no harm in speaking them.

‘As you will it,’ she said, turning her wrists in their bonds to expose the locks. ‘Just tell me what to say.’



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Navradaran did not speak to Crawl on the way in. They took a flyer from the Outer Palace, passing through hemmed-in skies eerily free of atmospheric craft. The buildings were older here, edged with real stone quarried from the old earth – granite, marble, eroded limestone and wind-sheared sandstone, artfully arranged, placed with care and set in ranks of arches and tiered colonnades. The scale was still astounding, but artfulness was there alongside it – the first prototypes of building styles that would one day be raised on every world across the galaxy, the first gothic turrets, the first death’s head finials, the first dank images of cowed, sword-bearing angels standing silent sentinel. Some of these buildings had been old when the Emperor had given the first order to take to the stars. Now they were relics, fossils of a foreign age, empty veins threading back into a past of undiminished vigour.

If the Outer Palace was a riot of noise and heat, the Inner was marked with somnolence. The crowds were still intense, but the greater mass of them were high-ranking adepts rather than off-worlders, crushed by their duties into near-silence. Towers and belfries reared up on all sides, strung out with the connective matter of flyover spans and lofted transitways, casting everything below into a perennial gloom. The carved aquilae on every gable were sombre rather than proud, and the statues wept lines of old lichen from age-hollowed eyes.

Navradaran’s flyer carried them across the gently decaying worldscape. The sun rose a little higher, bleaching the spike-pinnacles and standard-poles with a mantle of drifting grey. The rippling forks of lightning came closer now, lancing in thin lines of ivory from the gyre of the heavy skies, gilding the eroding stone with flashes of short-lived silver.

The Sanctum Imperialis loomed ahead of them, dominating all else. Its outer profile was akin to the great ziggurats of Mars, though darker, huger, its edges marked with dagger-crowned campaniles of beaten ceramite. Tallest of them all was the immense *turris virorum*, the colossal tower of heroes, charred across its octagonal face with ancient fires and decorated with the emblems of a thousand Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes. It was said that the only path to its summit, lost high in the churning clouds, was via the Unbroken Stair, winding up through the centre of the hollow monolith, its flags worn smooth by the tread of uncounted priests, until one reached the great bell that tolled intermittently for the souls of the lost. When that bell pealed, the whole world heard its doleful boom.

Thicker storm clouds circled above them now. The epicentre of the vortex became visible to the naked eye, a slow spiral across the apex of the Sanctum, lit from within by snaking tendrils of

lightning, underpinned by a steady roar of world-pain. The air itself felt heavier, tighter. When Crowl rested his hand on the arms of his chair, curls of static scampered across his gauntlet.

He could feel it. He could feel the residual actinic force, quickening in everything around him, driving the storm, making the immense constructions vibrate down to their lost roots. He could almost hear the whispers of the millions within that sprawling place – the aspirant astropaths led trembling to the amphitheatres of the Tower of Sight; the Imperial Courtiers gliding through velvet shadows of veined-marble halls; the cardinals overseeing prayers before the baroque altars – all of them ephemera around the one soul who truly mattered, who was locked deep under all the finery and the grandeur, who was *there*, and had been there at the start, and would be there at the end, and besides whose immortal actuality everything else was just a ghost of impermanence.

He found his heart beating faster. The more he looked at the Sanctum, the closer the colossal mausoleum drew, the thicker the air became, the greater the heat, the more his pulse picked up. He could have glanded something for that, but somehow he doubted the tranquilisers would work. What he was feeling had little to do with the physical, and everything to do with what fearful power lay encased within that cairn-temple, at once horrific and magnificent, dolorous and ecstatic.

The flyer set down before the first of the archways leading towards the Sanctum's looming carcass, gracefully falling under a shadow of one of the nine Titanoliths – Vulkan the Gatekeeper, by his theological markings.

Only then did Navradaran speak. 'The rest of the way, we walk. This is sacred ground.'

Crowl did not need to be told. He wondered what the purpose of this was – to awe him? To chastise him? He descended from the flyer's golden cockpit and breathed in the static-laced air, pungent with incense and incalculable age, laced with the stench of mouldering stone.

White-robed, white-masked priests escorted them both from the platform, their chasubles embroidered with mystical visions of the Emperor-As-He-Walked-Among-Us. Mirror-faced guards in thick black plate armour stood sentinel on every exposed parapet holding force spears that glittered in the weak sunlight. In the far distance, high up on the terraces of the Sanctum itself, gold-armoured figures marched across age-charred battlements. From far below, Crowl could hear the rising drone of ritual benedictions, swelling up, endlessly, as if emerging from the earth itself.

They walked out onto a mighty path suspended high up in the air, stretching from the landing stages to the baroque flanks of the Sanctum itself. As they went, Crowl caught glimpses of the vast processional causeways, four hundred metres down, teeming with slowly moving crowds. Those were the most fortunate of all who had made the long journey, the chosen that had gained admittance through the Lion's Gate and now trod the Blessed Path towards the holy of holies. A mere fraction of those present there would witness the great spectacle of the Feast itself, and yet for them it would be as if the world had ended and they had caught a fleeting sight of divinity itself, and if they survived it they would return to their home worlds as revered saints, pressed for every scrap of testimony by those who had not yet been born when the void-ships had first set out for the Throneworld.

But they were still far away from where they longed to be. None would be admitted within sight of the Gate until the final stroke of the Blood Chimes in two days' time and the mania of Sanguinala reached its height. Through the subtle arts of the astropaths and the Ministorum calendar-scryers, lesser bells would be tolled at the exact same moment across the entire Imperium, and yet it would be here, at its very heart, on the soil where the Three Exalted Primarchs themselves had once contested for the survival of the human race, that the fervour would be greatest.

The Sanctum drew closer, filling the sky before them, ringed by the fire-braziers that boiled endlessly into the heat-scorched air. Heavy, massed drumbeats became audible – *dhoom, dhoom, dhoom* – a heart-rhythm that shimmered up through every lightless chasm and down into every buttress, on and on, eternal, untouchable.

Crowl began to feel fear. Real fear. Over his career he had witnessed so many depravities that the toll had shriven his body and withered his soul, but never as an adult had he ever truly felt soul-deep *fear*, and yet here it was, creeping on him like a thief, sliding past all guards set against it and hastening his mortal weaknesses.

‘You are afraid,’ said Navradaran, right on cue.

‘There is nothing to fear,’ said Crowl, trying to shake the sensation off.

‘That is not true at all,’ said Navradaran. ‘Do not attempt to fight it.’

They reached the first of the portals. Custodians guarded it, each as gigantic and imposing as Navradaran himself. They did not so much as acknowledge Crowl, standing like soulless carvings on either side of the gilded aperture. Brazen doors over twenty metres high swung slowly open, and fusty air sighed out of from the pool of darkness within. Across the lintel were carved the words *Eius sacrificio, nostram vitam* in characters twice the height of a living man. Mute servo-skulls hovered around them, cataloguing, probing, before disappearing back into the gloom.

They passed within. The drumbeats became louder and more diffuse, resounding as if from vast wells below. Snatches of choir-dirge echoed and re-echoed from the vaults, drifting like spectres between vast, many-pillared columns. Arches swept above them into the murky heights, hung with weeping Ministorum pennants and age-pitted swords.

The ground trembled underfoot. It was almost unbearably hot. Once the doors had swung closed behind them with a soft echoing boom, the darkness became sweltering. Navradaran led the way, his armour a faint glimmer of gold amid the void-black shadow. Crowl caught only glimpses of what lay in those halls – shafts falling away towards the world’s heart, vertiginous naves marching into oblivion, immense orreries and planetariums tended by cowed adepts, masked priests prostrate before reliquaries of flame-stained gold containing old armour, old weapons, old bones, scraps of leathery flesh pinned within dark crystal lozenges...

He felt the cold swell of nascent panic rise in his gorge. His breathing became shallow and rapid. He could sense the immensity of it all pressing down, the age of it, the agony of it, crushing them both, toppling over them, entombing them here just as He was entombed here.

It was irrational. He had left such things behind him a long time ago, and yet the terror only grew. Every step became harder than the last. His palms pricked with sweat, he had to force himself to keep going. Navradaran remained silent, a brooding presence at his shoulder, striding heavily through the vaults and the transepts, his gait as secure and solid as the glinting basalt columns around them. They began to descend, to wind down long, long spiral stairways that seemed to go on forever. The last of the angled light from the world above them faded away, replaced by the dour flicker of votive candles.

Eventually they reached another portal. Navradaran gestured, and the doors unbarred of their own accord, swinging open to unfurl a yawning gulf on the far side. They emerged high up on the face of an internal wall over two hundred metres tall. Crowl hesitated at the threshold, feeling his residual assurance begin to collapse, but the Custodian beckoned him, and that was enough to pull him over.

They stood on a narrow balcony, less than three metres deep and ten metres in width. Heavy silk

drapes hung on either side of them, thick with dust. The baroque plasterwork flaked under his touch – the gilt finery was fragile. They were alone.

‘Behold,’ said Navradaran. ‘The object of your conspiracy.’

For a moment, seeing what he was being shown, Crawl forgot to breathe. When his lungs forced him to drag a gulp of air in, it only made his heart race harder. He gripped the railing, feeling like he might fall through it. He felt his lips moving, and realised he was praying, over and over, the words spilling unbidden from cynical lips that had foresworn ostentatious observance a long time ago.

There were stairs, rising gently from the southern end of the hall. They were hewn from grey marble, faintly glinting in sepulchral occlusion. Many were chipped or cracked, their edges broken by the impacts of bootfalls, and none had been repaired.

On either side of the stairway were banners. They stood like some frozen primeval forest, static in the dark, row after row, file after file, gently climbing in the distance until the mind could no longer process them. Some standards were bloody, mere threads of fabric clinging to charred poles. Others were intact, slung tight under the apex of mighty iron staves. There were skeletons on those battle-flags, and winged lions, and flaming swords, and masked angels, all painted with impeccable care on chequerboard grounds and argent fields. Swathes of fine mist sighed between the endless image-fields, sighing over the staves and slinking across their emblems.

Each standard had been stained by the dust of another world. Some of the regiments their honour rolls recorded were long-gone, their heroism lost to legend and their mortal constituents expired. Some ennobled detachments were still extant, carrying the eternal war into the deep of the void while their ancient battle-standards rotted here in the dark. Other sigils, many others, Crawl did not recognise. No living man, surely, could have catalogued them all. This was an infinity of remembrance. This was a grotesque and abundant surfeit of interstellar grief.

Child-faced angels floated high above the whispering shrouds spilling incense from thick chain-held ewers. Their metal faces, scored by metal tears and studded with metal eyes, swung back and forth across the landscape of mourning. Their steel pinions snapped and furled in clockwork jerkiness, swinging them around in lazy curves, tracing arcs of faint powder-burn into an artificial sky.

The walls of that hall were half-lost in penumbral distance, their smoky stonework merging with the drifting mist-banks. Crawl could just make out the immense curve of load-bearing arches, the lamplit outlines of austere column ranks, hints of aisles and chapels beyond. There were figures moving in those shadows, many hundreds at least, all in the ornate gold of the Custodians, their guardian spears glowing like stars in an earthbound void.

But in the end, the long stairs ran out. They rose towards their apogee at the far end of the immense hall, blurred into nothingness, and then the Gate itself, the portal to the Inside, rose up from their terminus, and that was an artifice of such outrageous extravagance, even on a world brimming with outrageous extravagance, that it near crushed the soul.

Crawl knew the Gate’s provenance, just as every educated child in the Imperium knew it – purest adamantium thrice-forged, inlaid with ceramite, braced with titanium alloys, then faced with gold, hectares of it, beaten down over sacred images stretching over half a kilometre tall, aureate like the armour of the Palace’s protectors. The Master of Mankind was depicted there, armoured, youthful, dreadful, smiting Serpentine Horus with spear and shield-rim, surrounded by a zodiacal bestiary and the occult symbols of his pantheon.

At the base of the Gate were ranks of Custodians in silent vigil, their weapons held ready, their

helms blending into golden coronae of diffuse reflection. On either side of that regiment, half hidden in darkness, were two Reaver Battle Titans, their cannon-arms draped in banners bearing the interlocking emblems of the Adeptus Terra and the Adeptus Mechanicus, of the Throneworld and the forgeworld. Those twin overwatchers towered into the echoing dark, static yet terrible, their cockpit lights smouldering within the shadows.

‘Now you see it,’ said Navradaran, his voice soft. ‘The holiest portal in all the Imperium. You see the Guards Visible, and you sense the Guards Invisible. Your heart is beating. You are sweating. You wish to fall on your face and offer your soul to He Who Dwells Beyond.’

It was all true. Crowl tried to breathe more evenly.

‘And you, Crowl, are a lord of Holy Orders,’ Navradaran went on. ‘You are trained to resist weakness of mind and body, tested in the greatest trials, and live every day knowing the terror of what awaits should we fail.’

It was hard to remember that now. The air around him was like an electric soup, thick with incense and heady with the accumulated decay of sacred banner-fabrics.

‘And you tell me,’ said Navradaran, ‘that a weapon brought down from a single ship and given to cabals of flesh-cutters could jeopardise this place. *This place*, where the Angel stood, where the tides of darkness crashed, then foundered.’

Nothing could break that gate. No army, no power, no mind could break it – not then, not now, not ever.

‘If Phaelias thought it, he was wrong,’ said Navradaran. ‘If you continue to believe it, you will be in error also. When the elect come before the Gates, they will be as secure as any place in the sacred realm of mankind. This is the last bastion. This is the ward against the Outer Dark.’

‘So you brought me here,’ Crowl said with effort, ‘to demonstrate this?’

‘I brought you here to show you how things stand.’

‘Have you been... beyond?’

‘I have.’

Crowl wanted to ask more. Despite all his training, he was desperate to know what it was like. Even from the far side he could sense the titanic power locked down there, and it made him nauseous and light-headed.

He collected himself. ‘But there is a threat,’ he insisted. ‘Phaelias studied this for longer than you or I. He believed the Gate was the target.’

‘This place was built to keep out armies,’ Navradaran said. ‘There is a reason that Titans guard it, for it is the only passage inside that a god engine can traverse. But you know Terra, inquisitor. You know that there are ways beneath ways.’

At that, Crowl finally understood. He looked back out across the emptiness towards the mute Titan guardians. ‘This is where all eyes will be turned,’ he said.

‘We cannot watch every crack in every catacomb. We will have millions entering the Palace, and only a fraction will be permitted to come this far. All must be watched, and that strains us further.’

‘But you must be able to—’

‘I could show you things, inquisitor, if the time remained,’ said Navradaran. ‘I could show you wells running under the crust of buried mountains, many of which have never been sounded. I could show you whole cities lying under the crypts of our cathedrals, some still bearing dregs of life, harbouring relics that entire sectors would go to war to possess. I could show you tunnels bored ten thousand



years ago that have never been capped. You understand me, I think.’

Crowl still could not take his eyes off the Titans. Somehow there, in the shadows and the silence, they looked even more formidable than on the open battlefield. ‘I do not know where,’ he said, trying to think if he’d missed something, if the clue existed in something that Phaelias had said.

‘Neither do I,’ the Custodian said. ‘None of my agents have come close.’

Crowl finally pulled his gaze away from the fields of banners. ‘It came down in Skhallax,’ he murmured. ‘From there it has stayed hidden, moving closer but remaining out of the light.’

‘And Quantrain?’

‘He must be found, but even if we locate him we are still no closer to our real target.’ Crowl laughed bitterly. ‘It’s escaped him, you see? He let it slip through his fingers. No doubt he’s hunting just as hard as we are.’ He shook his head, as if in self-reprimand. ‘No, you were right the first time we met. The killings, escalating since this thing arrived, they’re the key. I didn’t want to believe it – it was too neat – but having seen inside Skhallax my mind has changed.’

‘I have catalogued the sites of atrocity,’ said Navradaran. ‘For a week my loremasters have been collating the records, seeking a pattern.’

‘They won’t find one,’ said Crowl. ‘Not one they understand. You people spend your lives in these temples – you have no idea what it’s like outside.’

‘Then it is well you are here with us, Crowl.’

Crowl smiled. ‘Show me what you have.’ Then he turned for the last time, looking out over the twilight marches beyond, feeling the numinous press against his temples once more.

‘It is too much, though, this close,’ he said, quietly. ‘I don’t know how you stand it.’

Navradaran reached for the heavy curtain, and drew it across the balcony’s railing, sealing off the visions of Imperial mourning.

‘For me,’ he said, ‘I do not know how a man lives without it.’

For the first time, Hegain truly resisted an order.

‘He is a heretic, lord,’ he protested.

‘He knows the source of the flesh-cutters,’ said Spinoza.

‘Then take it from him, if you pardon me, and we may use it ourselves. Summon the Lord Crowl, if that remains possible, and bring in more of us. Sanctioned troopers, lord – ones that may be trusted to it.’

‘Take it from him? We are under his sufferance here. And you identify the problem yourself, sergeant – no time remains. Lord Crowl believed the weapon would be brought to bear when the procession reached the Gate, and we have already seen the calibre of those who would use it.’

Khazad said nothing. She slumped in the corner of the cell, arms around her knees. Bandages had been wrapped around her wounds, but she looked in a bad way. For all her skills, surviving in the underhive for so long had weakened her.

The other storm troopers of Hegain’s command also said nothing, letting their sergeant speak for them. Their looks, though, gave away what they thought of allying with the Angel’s Tears.

‘I’ve seen the things these people do, lord,’ said Hegain, clearly unhappy about protesting against her will but unwilling to concede. ‘You have too. I took vows, and my soldiers too. You ask for them to be broken now.’

‘I *ask* nothing,’ said Spinoza. She looked across the assembled dregs of her task force. They were

battered but essentially whole. ‘Listen. I do not trust this man. His sins are many, and they will catch up with him. For now, though, for *now*, we have a more urgent target. This is what the Lord Crowl was pursuing. If he has been successful, then he will be ahead of us. If we do not act then we endanger everything he has done. Lermentov has many hundreds under command, perhaps more than we’ve seen, but you witnessed how they fight – they are hab-dwellers and menials, not soldiers.’

‘And what cause do they fight for, lord?’

‘Their own, and that is sinful, but for the time being it elides with ours. We do this now, we join their hunt for the xenos pain-bringers, and then things go back to how they were.’

‘This is dangerous, lord.’

‘Life is dangerous, sergeant. That is how we like it.’

At that, Hegain let slip his old half-grin. ‘Throne, I knew it when I saw you,’ he mumbled, grudgingly. ‘You will give account of yourself, I said.’

‘They are the dark eldar,’ said Khazad then, grimly. ‘It take more than rabble to hunt them. Even you, even me. Grotesques – they are not masters.’

‘There cannot be many,’ said Spinoza. ‘It was a single landing.’

Khazad laughed scornfully. ‘*That* was not landed. I tell Lermentov this. It is *made*. Here, on Terra, maybe one week ago, maybe two. May be tens now. May be hundreds. And they are not worst. Ever fight a wych, interrogator?’

‘Not yet. But I matched a Shoba, so my expectations are high.’ Spinoza ran her gaze over the rest of them. ‘We have our armour, we have our weapons. Lermentov’s army is already moving, and we will join them. Enough talk. Remember your vows, and get to your feet – time is running short.’

The storm troopers, led by Hegain, complied. Whatever reservations they retained were subsumed for now under the absolute authority of an order. Khazad clambered up more slowly.

‘So where is it?’ she asked.

‘Armengand. You know the name?’

Khazad shook her head, and walked past her to the cell doors. ‘Why should I?’ she asked. ‘This not my world. Is yours.’

*Is yours.*

Perhaps it was, now. How swiftly ownership was assumed.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Navradaran took Crowl back the way they had come, out from the echoing halls of the Sanctum Imperialis and back into the gaping caverns of the vast basilicas. Life returned around them – mortal life, the bustle and hurry of robed adepts, the mechanised clank of gun-servitors, the heavy stride of the Palace guards. Every so often, rarely and always at a distance, he would spy a Custodian, half seen amid the yawning depths, standing sentinel over some nexus of significance.

The further they retreated from the Sanctum, the easier it became to breathe. The air remained gritty with toxins, but the terrible weight relented a little, the static slithered away. They passed, briefly, out into the open and Crowl looked up to see the darkening spiral of lightning-underlit clouds. For a long time he had assumed that the storm-that-never-broke was a chemical phenomenon, a consequence of the poisoned world's hyper-urban sprawls, but now it was less easy to maintain that belief. The presence under their feet, the god on His soul-throne, leashed to a life of unrelenting torment – it was *Him*, lodged in the wound, atrophying the elements themselves and turning them into endless stasis.

*We are becoming what He is*, Crowl thought. *We are all suspended between life and death.*

On the passage over, Crowl's audex unit crackled into life again, and he started to receive databursts. He blink-checked for Spinoza, found nothing, but then noticed a priority signal from Erunion at Courvain. It had been sent an hour ago, lost in the tumult of the world's overloaded grids, and once transmitted had been stored for retrieval. He accessed it while walking, negotiating the security protocols silently.

'My Lord Crowl,' came Erunion's recorded vox-print. *'I have attempted to contact Interrogator Spinoza with no success. Throne damn these failing grids, and now I am prevented from reaching you too. However, herewith the results from the interrogator's auspex probe, in case it proves useful when this is finally decoded by either one of you. The provenance of the radiation from the device is not of human origin. I do not have the facilities here to make a full diagnosis, but I estimate with seventy per cent chance of veracity that it is of the xenotype eldar. To be specific, the beta faction of the race, the pain-bringers. We may assume that the weapon is of alien provenance, no doubt accompanied by members of that depraved remnant. I do not have the means to probe further – in any case, your knowledge of them far exceeds mine. May you tread carefully, lord. You do not need me to tell you what their presence here portends.'*

The recording hissed out. Still walking calmly, Crowl mentally cursed. The dark eldar, on Terra – such a thing had not been heard of in a hundred lifetimes. Phaelias would have known more surely

how to counter them. Had he known with certainty what he faced? Doubtful – there had been no indication in the recording taken from Skhallax.

They passed over a long arched bridge, still hundreds of metres above the chasms where the pilgrims were being herded. Navradaran reached a plaza before a tall building with bronze doors and marble pillars. A huge circular window swept up across its west face, smoke-damaged but still bearing the eroded stained-glass depictions of aquilae and various occult symbology.

Crowl noticed that every door in the Palace opened for Navradaran. The Custodian never made so much as a gesture, and still the rosewood panels, the gold-beaten portals, the heavy adamantium blast shields, they all slid silently apart as he approached. It was as if the Palace itself moulded itself around him.

‘What is this place?’ he asked.

‘You asked for data,’ said Navradaran. ‘I brought you to it.’

They passed within the basilica’s gates, and the air immediately became thick with the familiar stench of an Imperial archive – mouldering parchment, mouldering vellum, mouldering leather bindings and rotten tallow stumps. They walked down a long aisle before entering the central chamber, a domed intersection that swept up high amid riots of lead-framed stained glass. Every wall was lined with flaking scrolls and chained tomes, their titles picked out in thin gold script and attended to by flocks of twittering servo-cherubs. Down at floor level, ranks of scribes a hundred long bent heavily over piles of retrieved manuscripts, obsessively copying the contents of books onto fresh vellum with iron-clawed hands and thick quills. Red lens glows bled out from under their cowls, illuminating both sallow flesh and the crustaceous masses of augmetic units.

At the far end of the immense nave, a priest was reciting passages from the Rule of the Administratum one after the other, leaning heavily into a vox-dispersal array as if he wished to collapse into its embrace entirely.

*‘...and the act of duplication is preferable to the act of creation, for duplication is an abundance of what has been sanctified, whereas creation is, by virtue of the principles of mortal fallibility, the destruction in potentia of the righteous and the introduction of the suspect. In all things recall the lexicon of precaution and do not deviate from the...’*

They passed across the width of the nave, ignored by the labouring scribes. Navradaran took Crowl into a side-chapel, where great charts had been piled on top of a wide marble map-table at least eight metres across. Hololiths flickered like ghosts over the creased vellum stacks, reacting to the glyphs on display and rotating to offer three-dimensional simulacra of the Palace environs. Servitors bowed jerkily as they entered, then went back to the methodical tasks of sorting, delivering, smoothing and scraping.

Crowl leaned over the heaps of parchment, marvelling at their intricacy. Each map had been drawn by hand in fading inks, embellished with devotional imagery and injunctions for purity, then stamped in red by various scrutinising bodies of the Administratum. The detail was fantastic. A mortal scribe might have spent an entire lifetime over a single leaf, carefully scouring ancient architects’ records and lost scrolls from semi-disclosed Mechanicus vaults before collating the data into this thing of rare artifice. Crowl began to turn the thick pages over, lost for a moment in the wealth of knowledge on display.

‘You keep the best for yourselves,’ he murmured. ‘If we had this on the outside...’

‘Here is what you seek,’ said Navradaran, reaching for the largest of the charts and hauling it across

the tottering heap. The hololiths picked up on the glyphs and a fresh ghost-image of the Imperial Palace's southern perimeter filled the incense-clouded space between them.

It rotated slowly, giving a full three-dimensional representation of the architecture. For a moment, the cornucopia of information was impossible to process. The Terran world-city was not built across a flat plain, but delved as far underground as it reared above it, everything intermingled and interlocked in a mad embrace of accumulated complexity. Only one factor remained constant amid the morass of connection – the wall itself, driving between the groves of grasping towers, cleaving them like a blunt axe-blade. Once you latched on to that, using it as a bearing, then the rest of the schematic began to make sense.

‘I will indicate where we discovered signs of flesh-cutting,’ said Navradaran. As he spoke, points of light scattered across the hololith, clustered under and around the walls themselves.

‘And where is Skhallax?’ asked Crowl.

Navradaran illuminated the enclave-city, and it became immediately clear that the trail of bodies traced a path from the northern edge of Skhallax towards the hab-zone complexes south of the wall itself. Once close to the Palace precincts, however, the scatter of blood became more diffuse, as if the impetus had run out, and the pattern dissolved.

‘What have you done with this data?’ Crowl asked.

‘Observe where the attacks have neared the walls,’ Navradaran said. ‘Extra patrols have been employed, and soundings made of the pits below. The entire southern rim between bastions thirteen and thirty-one has been reinforced with psycho-screened *Militarum* shock units. Six of my comrades have been taken from the Gate to oversee further strengthening of the outer watch. By any normal metric, it remains impregnable.’

Crowl looked carefully at the ancient schematics. The hololith showed some of the old catacombs like worming lines of light, twisting down into the crust like parasites. The Custodian was right – those uncharted depths were dangerous. Something determined enough might discover a way in, given enough time, enough power, and a great deal of luck. He scanned across the sites Navradaran had identified, and saw immediately how closely they aligned towards the warrens gnawing at the base of the ancient walls. It was as if a tentative hand were feeling along the expanse of wall, probing for weakness.

‘Why did they kill so often?’ mused Crowl.

Navradaran looked at him. ‘What is your concern?’

Crowl watched the light-points turn, and his unease grew. ‘Order the servitors out,’ he said. ‘Is this chamber secure?’

Navradaran dismissed the attendants, who shuffled and dragged themselves through the doorway. Once it was sealed, the Custodian turned back to Crowl. ‘Perfectly.’

Crowl indicated the distribution of kill-sites. ‘We have fugitives making their way towards the Palace. To say this place is heavily guarded would be a ludicrous understatement, and so their only chance of survival, let alone success, is to remain hidden. And yet they leave a smear of bloody corpses everywhere they go.’

‘They were ritual kills. There can be power in them.’

‘Of course, but how much? Seriously? There are wards on this place capable of halting the greatest servants of the Archenemy – sacrificing a few mortal souls would not dent them.’ He walked around the map table, drumming his fingers absently as he studied the topography of the Outer Palace. ‘We

are looking for xenos, or someone using a xenos weapon,' he said.

'How do you know this?'

'Information taken from the *Rhadamanthys*. The dark eldar. Consider what this means. There cannot be many of them, and so they will not take any of the major portals by force. Their purpose here cannot be sorcery, for their people shun it, and in any case the defences against unholy magicks are immense. They only have subterfuge. So I say again, why make so many kills?'

'It is believed that they live for pain.'

'Yes, yes, that is believed.' Crowl ran his hands over his brow, rubbing the skin. He could feel his own pain levels growing again, but dared not gland in case it slowed him. 'But they could hunt anywhere. Down in the tunnels, where the arbitrators don't go. Were we wrong about the Angel's Tears?'

Crowl felt his mind working sluggishly, perhaps a residue of his experience at the Gate, and worked to clarify his thoughts.

*The Angel's Tears. What were they? Never mind. Concentrate on this. Put yourself in their mind. They have to get in, but all ways are barred. How do they do it?*

He looked over the parapets, the turrets, the immense laser batteries, all defined in glowing lines of force. Navradaran was surely right – any attack would have to be underground, where the old foundations of old citadels crumbled under the weight of ten thousand years of accumulated construction. But that left hundreds of kilometres to survey.

'You showed me that the Eternity Gate was a distraction,' he said at last. 'All eyes will be on it. That is the purpose with the other sites too. Create havoc, create terror, pull troops to watch over the murder-sites. The xenos grow stronger from the kills, true, but they have no other significance. When the attack comes, the *true* attack, it will be nowhere near them. It will be in a place where the walls are strongest and attack unimaginable, from where watchers have been pulled in order to guard these bloody fingerprints.'

'There are no unguarded walls.'

'There are a million guards within this place and still it is not enough. You said it yourself.'

Crowl looked harder, analysing the scatter of the sites, the relationship to Skhallax, the arteries, the tunnels, the insane intricacy of transitways and shafts. Taken together, it was impossible. But there were limitations – the xenos cargo had been landed twenty days ago. Its bearers had remained within a radius of about a hundred kilometres of Skhallax, rarely straying much further in pursuit of kills. Perhaps they needed to. Perhaps they could not move too far, because they were building something, or working on something, or...

'They do not just feed on pain,' said Crowl, rapidly now, growing more confident. 'They use it. They can create monsters, creatures to aid them, but that takes time, so there are limits to where they can move.' He shuffled further along the map table, watching as the hololith's gradual rotation brought fresh detail into view. He saw long, straight subterranean transit tunnels running north-south, then snaking under the titanic foundations of the hive complexes – Boreates, Romandus, Clytemstrata, and then further into the industrial wastes of Armengand leading up to the Xericho waste-sinks.

'It would need to be out of the way,' he muttered, seeing what his prey would have seen. 'Hidden, far away from the visible kills, but with access to the southern walls when the moment came. Somewhere... there.'

Navradaran moved to stand beside him. 'Those foundations are deep,' he said. 'No known

weaknesses.’

‘That’s the point. Can troops be moved there?’

‘Not soon. So many have already been drawn to the Gate.’

‘And that’s the problem.’ Crowl’s eyes narrowed, committing the layout to memory. ‘I’ll travel there. Ensure I have sanction – if someone shoots me down I’ll be very annoyed.’

‘What can you do?’ asked Navradaran, his deep voice unconvinced.

‘What I spend all my time doing. Hunting.’

‘This thing has killed many times.’

‘So have I. And I’ll have Revus, unless you’ve caged him again.’

‘It will not be enough.’

‘Then come too.’

Navradaran looked at him for a long time. The ruby-red of his helm-lenses gave nothing away. For the first time since meeting the Custodian, Crowl sensed doubt there, a conflict between instincts. Navradaran would have been raised and trained in a world of ancient, immutable protocols, steeped in the arcane rituals of the unchanging Inner Palace. To leave the holiest sanctums now, when the great Feast beckoned and the population of an entire planet surged towards the epicentre of its austere faith... Perhaps he asked too much.

‘I sought to punish you by showing you the Gate, Crowl,’ the Custodian said at last. ‘And to test you – only the devout withstand it. Despite it all, despite what you wish the world to think, you passed. And now I am tested in turn. So His will unfolds.’

Crowl laughed. ‘Is that a yes or a no?’

‘I will show you to your vessel,’ said Navradaran, hefting his guardian spear and moving towards the doorway. ‘In the time it takes to reach it, I will decide.’

The hunters broke out from the catacombs under the shadow of Boreates, divided into platoons and jogged down narrow capillary tubes. It was pitch-black, and coil-powered lumens bobbed on makeshift helms, throwing meagre pools of illumination across a scabrous landscape of ruin. The fighters ran surely, their eyes used to the eternal gloom, their feet used to the slippery metal floors and the toxic pools of sludge. Just as before they carried improvised weapons, rifles and shotguns, combat knives, the odd power saw looted from a production line, masonry drills and claw hammers.

Lermentov led his main divisions north east, breaking down through sparsely occupied ganger levels until the vanguard emerged inside an old sewage conduit heading up towards the Armengand industrial zone. As his bodyguard, mostly burly abhumans equipped with shock mauls, rumbled through the narrow mazes the blind and ivory-pale inhabitants scuttled into the shadows, cloth-bound feet splashing in the dark.

Spinoza, Khazad and the storm troopers ran with him. The False Angel had been as good as his word, and their full armour and weapons had been restored to them. Back in the fortress, one of Lermentov’s men had hauled Argent up to her, his brow sweat-soaked from the weight of it, and she had taken a cold satisfaction in taking it from him lightly in one hand. The False Angel himself wore decent armour of his own – a Militarum-issue flak-suit, closed-face helm, synthleather boots – and he carried a regulation M35 lasgun.

‘You’re Guard, then,’ Spinoza remarked to him once they’d set off.

Lermentov nodded, breathing hard. ‘Was.’

‘What brought you down here?’

‘Served for ten years,’ he said. ‘All across the sector. Saw a lot of fighting. Then I came here.’ A hollow laugh. ‘I was a pilgrim, you believe that? Applied for leave, and they gave it to me. We were shot to scraps, our commissar was dead – they knew the end was coming. I told them I’d be back.’ He kept on running. His command group, such as it was, came on behind, filling the sewer with foul-smelling eddies of kicked-up water. ‘I never went back. It’s not hard to disappear here. But then you see what the world’s like once you’re nothing.’

They jogged on in silence for a while. Spinoza’s tactical readout had been damaged during the attack on the assembly hall, and her comm-unit was scrambled. She tried to open a channel to Crowl, and met the predictable wall of static. Then she tried Rassilo, and to her surprise got a faint counter-reading.

‘My lord inquisitor,’ she voxed over an internal ciphered link, shielding the transmission from Lermentov. ‘Transmission from your servant Interrogator Luce Spinoza, retinue of the Lord Crowl. Onward coordinates are sent with this databurst. I take you at your word, and request immediate aid. Xenos encountered under Armengand. Supposition: large numbers, significant force required to repel. Am in the company of irregular militia and temporarily making use of their numbers. If you find us, request respectfully you do not terminate allies until xenos priority threat neutralised. End transmission.’

That was it – there was no indication of whether it had made it. She only just finished when Lermentov spoke to her again.

‘I didn’t want this,’ he said. ‘Why would I want it? But they were good to me when my luck ran out. They’re not all vermin and gangers in the underhive. There’s a better system, and we show them what it looks like.’

‘Do not attempt to excuse yourself,’ said Spinoza. ‘I do not wish to hear it.’

‘No, of course you don’t.’

‘How far?’

‘This takes us under Armengand. It’s on the western sprawl. Not far.’

‘Those... things. They’ll cut you apart.’

‘They know it.’

There were few illusions down here, where life was measured in a few half-decades and the sun was never seen. Still, the rabble-army ran on with enough enthusiasm, knowing what inaction would cost them. Spinoza had told Lermentov nothing of Crowl’s suspicions over the purpose of the xenos incursion – it would make no difference to their desire for vengeance, something she could approve of even if everything else was anathema.

They ran, and the air became cold and clammy. Spinoza had not been cold since arriving on this roasting, parched planet, and it felt strangely alien to her. The stench became overwhelming – if the sewer tunnels had once fed into active processing stations, the systems had long since broken down. The sloped walls and roof were caked in a glowing mat of organic pulp, and straggly creatures scampered through the shallows ahead of them, draggled and sleek. All told, Spinoza had around her the only living things still capable of thriving on this old, spoiled world – humans, rats and algae.

Their course took them down steeply. The water became viscous and slime-choked, the tunnels narrower and more decrepit. Whole ceiling sections had collapsed into rubble, and cracks opened up in the walls and floor, gapping blackly into nothingness. The warbands maintained a good pace for the



most part, though the weaker began to struggle as the fumes intensified and their malnourished bodies began to creak.

Spinoza sniffed hard, flaring her nostrils to draw the air in deep. Amid the filth she could almost detect it again – that musk of sickliness, the one from the void-hauler, also exuded by that horror chained up in Lermentov’s fortress. They were getting nearer.

‘Stay close,’ she voxed to Hegain on the closed squad-channel. ‘Any sentient xenos, they are the priority. If we can extract one and withdraw, we do it.’

‘As you will it,’ replied Hegain. ‘And the Lord Crowl?’

‘I will maintain attempts at contact. We are a long way down.’

‘Heh. You have the right of it. Further down than I’ve been, I will say it. It is cold. Imagine it – *cold*. I had dreamed of that, some days and nights. So there’s that.’

Spinoza smiled. Hegain seemed restored. Only Khazad remained silent, running hard in the dark alongside them, a little less fluently than before, but still exuding power.

‘You could have left,’ Spinoza voxed.

‘And go where?’

‘This is not your cause.’

‘Is what Phaelias wish to know. Say no more, interrogator. Course is set.’

Spinoza cut the link. The level of mutual distrust was almost amusing, and the only thing binding them together was the promise of uncovering more abominations, which if they existed in any number would likely be enough to kill all of them, down in the dark and far from any conceivable help.

The tunnel began to level out. A chamber loomed ahead of them, and the bootfalls echoed strangely in the unfurling space. They burst out into a sodden, stinking subterranean hall, and weak helm-lumens swept across rotting piers of brickwork. The floor was scored by what looked like old rail tracks, thick with slime and pitted with the endemic rust.

The aroma was pungent now. Several of Lermentov’s troops began to retch as they breathed it in. More exits led away from the chamber, many little more than raw cavern maws, blacker than old bile. Lermentov’s abhumans, too stupid to fear, started to push ahead into them, ducking under sagging girders and grunting noisily.

‘Hold,’ said Khazad, edging towards one of the openings, her sword drawn and glimmering in the perpetual night. ‘Tell them not trample over this.’

More of Lermentov’s forces arrived in the chamber, many already limping and breathless. Yet more would arrive soon as the warbands caught up. Lermentov held up a closed fist, and Alvia, a woman who seemed to be his second in command, called the ogryns back and ordered the remaining fighters to form up.

‘What is it?’ Lermentov asked, approaching the opening warily.

‘You cannot smell it?’ Khazad asked, treading carefully.

Spinoza gave battle-sign for Hegain to come with them, and the storm troopers and Lermentov’s command group fell in behind them. The archway had half fallen in, leaving piles of rubble amid the pooling effluent, but the passage was still wide enough for them to enter in pairs. As they passed under the lintel, clusters of lumen beams swept across decaying brickwork, all plastered with patches of bleached lichen. Amid the streaks of glistening slime were patches of darker matter, and long scratches along the soft, rotten walls.

‘Proximity signals?’ voxed Spinoza, not trusting her helm unit.

‘Nothing,’ Hegain replied, staying tight on her shoulder, the lumen beam on his hellgun’s muzzle rippling across the tight spaces ahead.

The chill had become crippling, and puffs of condensing vapour issued from the storm troopers’ rebreathers. Spinoza felt something crack underfoot, and saw ice riming the puddles. The smell was becoming maddening – a toxic fog that crept under the skin, making her itch all over. The more she smelt it, the more she wanted to scream.

Then the air pressure suddenly relaxed, and the lumen beams angled up into a sweeping void above them. Things were suspended in the dark, bumping against one another, and the trickle of liquids echoed in the distance.

‘Can’t see a damned thing,’ said Lermentov, gesturing to one of his troops. ‘Get us some light.’

A soldier came forwards with a flare gun, angled it up into the murk and fired a charge. It spiralled up and up, throwing sparks behind it in a long trail, before the charge went off, releasing a slow-burn phosphor flare that drifted slowly back down to ground level.

The chamber was big – more than fifty metres up and perhaps twice that in length, burrowing back into the earth and supported by heavy hammerbeam arches. The walls were thick with the same slime as everywhere else, weeping in a curtain of semi-frigid mould-webs, but no one was looking at the walls.

The suspended objects were bodies. Eyeless corpses hung from the arches, throats pierced with spiked chain-lengths. The floor was littered with more bodies, contorted and broken. Bone glistened whitely from meat-slick muscle. Some cadavers still carried the instruments of agony within them, jutting like ice picks from ravaged skin, while others looked to have been sewn up, or sewn together, or rearranged in bizarre reconstitutions.

One of Lermentov’s troops pulled his helm off, bent double and vomited noisily. Others backed away, their lumen beams suddenly held less securely.

‘Hold,’ Lermentov ordered again, watching grimly as the flare gradually burned itself out. Then he turned to Spinoza. ‘You see this? You see *this*?’

Spinoza walked out across the carpet of limbs, scanning for more than corpse remnants. It was just as the lithocasts had been. None of these victims had died quickly. The sadism was daunting in its variety, even to one with her training.

‘Assassin,’ she voxed, treading carefully. ‘Recognise anything?’

‘Keep going,’ Khazad said sourly. ‘More to come.’

There was, much more. Soon the tally of pain became numbing, a charnel-yard of steadily freezing body parts, piled up, heaped into pyramids. There were what looked like gnaw-marks, and long gouges, and surgically precise incisions, all laced with ink-black webs of blood.

‘What... purpose?’ Hegain voxed, his normally equable voice shaken.

‘For this,’ said Khazad, pushing her way through a brace of hanging bodies.

Spinoza and Lermentov followed her, and were confronted by a series of metal cages running back into darkness along the near wall. Their design was like nothing Spinoza had even seen – curving, serrated, more like screens of thorns than artificial constructs. Each one was huge, fully three times the height of man. All were open, their doors swinging freely. Inside were half-frozen slops of what appeared to be pus, blood and clear liquids, splattered crazily. Tubes, empty and dripping, hung in clusters from the roof of each cage, many connected to glass vials.

Khazad turned to Lermentov. ‘That thing. What I call grotesque. Made here. In these cages. Fed on

flesh, given chems. Should take years, but they can speed up, when they have to.'

Lermentov counted the cages. It was hard to tell how many in the dark – he stopped after thirty. 'Do not allow any more of my people in here,' he ordered his second. 'Find another way round.' He turned back to Khazad. 'The creatures. They're not here now. Where have they gone? Can we follow?'

There was a loathing in his voice now. Credit to him, thought Spinoza – his anger is greater than his fear.

'You can follow them now if you are both blind and stupid,' said Khazad. 'They need no secrecy – they march. Are unleashed. Look, the trail goes.'

She pushed on, crunching over the bones, heading further down into the dark. The chamber seemed to have no end, disappearing eventually into a black haze of more tunnel mouths leading further down. Spinoza and Lermentov followed, accompanied by the storm troopers and those of Lermentov's command who could stomach it.

Spinoza checked her orientation on her helm's internal sensor. They were moving north now, having already come a long way. Only one thing lay in that direction, and the thought of it made her shiver.

'We need to be quicker,' she urged, imagining the horrors loping down the tunnels ahead of them, goaded by whatever master had created them. Just one of them had taken an entire army to capture. It was disconcerting to think what so many could accomplish.

Just as they neared the hall's far end, she was disturbed by a sudden movement to her left. She spun round, ready to deploy Argent, only to see one of the corpses shift. It slid down the heap, slick and fluid, and a trembling hand reached out from under the pile. Like some horrific underground parasite, human shoulders emerged, extending a trembling arm.

'Pl... ea...' a calloused face croaked. The owner of it tried to claw her way out from under the mass of suppurating flesh.

Spinoza crouched down, ready to extend her hand, when she saw what remained of a woman's torso. Or rather, how those remains had been grafted, and how many more vials pulsed steadily into that long swelter of naked organs and shivering skin-scrapes.

The woman's face was agonised, sent mad with pain and terror, her eyes milky and unseeing, her bloodied fingers shaking in bewildered shock.

'His grace, sister,' said Spinoza quietly, taking her laspistol and pressing it to her forehead. The flash of light was brief, and the shaking stopped.

Spinoza stood back up, only to see Lermentov watching her.

'You see it, now?' he said again, insistent, outraged.

'We will find them,' was all she said, pushing past. 'We will find them.'



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Revus greeted Crawl with a curt nod. Gorgias flew overhead, its eye pulsing with what looked like indignation.

‘*Molto tempus,*’ the skull voxed. ‘Kick-kick heels.’

The landing platform extended out across the summit of the guard tower, high up on the southern face of a big defence bastion. The sun was setting again, marking the end of another day of frenzy below. Lights began to flicker on across the expanse of the great wall, accompanied by searchlight beams piercing the encroaching gloom. A heavy troop-carrier powered overhead, destined for the Lion’s Gate approaches, its underside studded with cluster-charges. The drums had started up again, booming in the chasms, and the lightning flashes had grown stronger. It was hot, just as ever, and it was febrile, like the breaking cusp of some planetary fever.

The Shade waited on the apron, guarded by white-robed Palace sentinels. Other ships stood around it, their engines winding down in the parched wind. One of them, a gold flyer-barge with ebon livery, was dispatching a cargo of high-ranking Ministorum dignitaries, their robes flapping over fat-slick bodies.

‘Did you use the time well?’ Crawl asked, making for the flyer.

‘Not what you hoped for, but something,’ said Revus.

They climbed up to the cockpit, and Gorgias swooped under the canopy as it hissed closed. Revus took the controls, winding up the engines.

‘And you?’ the captain asked.

‘I was shown... things.’ It was still difficult to talk about. ‘And discovered some more.’

‘Where to?’

‘Xericho perimeter section. I will shunt you the coordinates.’

Revus applied the power, and the Shade rose into the air, sending turbulence buffeting across the apron. He tilted the angle a little, sending a blast of draught at the tottering cardinals and making their robes billow.

Crawl snorted a laugh. ‘Now, then,’ he said.

Then the Shade was rising above the platform, high into the evening sky. The domes of the great cathedrals were lit by a faint sheen of gold, competing briefly with the haze of blood-red rising up from the smoky pyres. In the distance, Crawl made out the Titanolith of the Holy Primarch Corax, standing in gaunt splendour as the rays of dying light played over his drawn face.

‘Tell me,’ said Crawl.

‘We were watched the whole time,’ said Revus. ‘But the skull was useful.’

‘*Tergiversatio*,’ said Gorgias. ‘*Subterfugio*. No one suspects.’

‘And you found?’

‘Nothing concrete,’ said Revus. ‘Quantrain’s base of operations is a long way inside. You’d not get close to it if you had fifty years. But the skull accessed a comms system in the approach tower. There were frequencies to extract, coded channels.’

‘And you cracked the codes, because...’

‘...they were in Hereticus cipher. You can try them. I do not guarantee success.’

‘It’s a start. Give me access.’

Gorgias bobbed closer, activating its ethercloud resonance vane. Crawl’s internal comm-augmetic picked it up, and a selection of possible vectors slid over his retinal feed. The activity made his already severe headache crippling, and he winced. His calves were throbbing, his joints on fire. Still, no glancing. Not now.

‘This is no good,’ Crawl said, cycling through the options. ‘This is ancient. These I do not recognise. These... now, this one. Well done. This one.’

He applied the comm-vector, negotiated the internal ciphers, pulled up its internal screeds. It took a few moments – even inside the Outer Palace wards the grids were under severe strain. Then the connection was made. It was an old audex-capillary, one-way only, an emergency vector for use, no doubt, by Quantrain’s aides alone.

‘My Lord Flavius,’ voxed Crawl. ‘Speaker is Inquisitor Erasmus Crawl, O.H. You have mislaid something, I think. I believe I have located it. You may join me, if you wish, at the base of the Xericho wall section. Precise location to be determined, but you will, I trust, know what you’re looking for. Bring some friends – your guests are proving quite troublesome.’

Revus laughed as the link closed. It was rare for Revus to laugh, and the sound was unpleasant. ‘Wise, to tell him?’

‘I want to see his face,’ said Crawl, losing his smile. He caressed the hilt of Sanguine absently. ‘I want to see it, and then I want to know why.’

The Shade pulled out east, heading low over the sea of jumbled domes and spires. The sunset was dying fast, draining the light out of the sky and leaving only the growling undercurrent of the fires below. Crawl looked over his shoulder to see the mausoleum of the Sanctum Imperialis wallowing amid the press of lesser structures.

‘Understandable,’ said Revus, picking up a little speed. The wall loomed ahead of them, sweeping up out of the morass in a sheer black face like carved flint. Defence towers emerged from the smog, gothic-roofed, festooned with lascannon batteries, underpinned with volcano cannon emplacements. ‘But, with respect, there are only two of us.’

‘*Tertio*,’ interjected Gorgias.

‘Not quite,’ said Crawl, settling back into his seat. ‘Observe your proximity scanner, bearing four five oh.’

Revus switched vid-feeds to match the coordinates, and the screen filled with gold. He looked up at Crawl, surprised, and then banked the Shade to bring the origin into visual range of the cockpit.

A heavy flyer filled the sky, turreted and crenellated, powered by enormous down-burners that kept it aloft on a curtain of booming soot. Thick, down-angled wings jutted from a bulbous superstructure

marked with the emblems of the Adeptus Terra and surrounded by fabulous arcana picked out by inlaid rubies and silver wire. Rows of underslung autocannons competed with what looked like heavy bolter emplacements, crowding over a sunken cockpit cowled by a jewelled spine-vane. It was bigger than a Thunderhawk and embellished further than a cardinal's pleasure-barge – more an airborne oratory than a ship of war, and yet its deadliness could not be in any doubt.

‘Striking, is it not?’ Crawl said, smiling. ‘Or obscene, depending on your taste.’

‘Your Custodian friend?’ asked Revus, resuming course with the golden flyer thundering alongside.

‘Not a friend. Not yet, anyway,’ said Crawl, turning his attention to the walls. ‘Gorgias, you will be required here. You have records of the radiation signature from the *Rhadamanthys*?’

‘*Affirmativo*, yes-yes.’

‘I want them online and fed to the Shade's augur net. That is what we are scanning for, somewhere down there. It'll be far below ground – ready the auspex for close-range use.’

He peered out through the narrow slit of armourglass, watching the walls swim towards them. As yet his Shade and the Custodian flyer were the only aircraft in that vicinity, and there was no sign of other Inquisition craft rushing to join them. The last shafts of sunlight faded away, plunging the vista below into a pall of lumen-studded darkness. The transitways were like blazing arteries, corridors of flame that stretched out into the night in vast spokes.

‘Any word from Spinoza?’

‘I will keep trying,’ said Revus.

Crawl nodded, watching the eternal parapets approach – the ramparts from which men had once gazed on the approach of the Warmaster's Legions. They looked unbreakable, forged in the Age of Wonder and bolstered by millennia of constant vigilance. No army had come close since those half-forgotten days, and the sentinels had stared across nothing but a vista of slow degradation for a long time.

*Never regret that war has become our race's constant state*, Crawl recalled, reputedly the words of the primarch Rogal Dorn. *Treat it as a friend, the means by which we keep our vigour. In conflict, strength. In vigilance, only decay.*

‘Down there, somewhere,’ he murmured, reflecting on that. ‘And still unseen.’

From the undervaults of Armengand, Lermentov drove them hard. They pushed into wider, deeper outfall tunnels, ringed with bars of crumbling iron and now as dry as dust. Soon the passages became vast, great man-made shafts under the world's roots, and the entire army coalesced again, running fast, their helm-beams swaying against the wide sweep of the inner walls.

Spinoza said nothing to the False Angel. Lermentov had not spoken since leaving the charnel chambers, and now moved with a grim fury, his lasgun held ready for use. Khazad had been right – it was trivially easy to follow the path taken by the abominations, and slime and blood coated the walls, mingling with the detritus of under-urban filth. They had even come across one of the xenobreed creatures abandoned on the way. It was some kind of stillborn horror, only half converted into a full grotesque, its ribs poking from its chest and its organs pulsing in glistening sacs. It had tried to fight them, propelled by the stimms that mercilessly injected into its half-finished circulatory system, but its tendons snapped before it could lift its claws. The ogryns stamped it into the ground, crushing its skull and skeleton under their massive ironshod boots, but even then it took a long time to die, screaming the whole time.

Then they were running again. The stench began to grow once more, cloying in their nostrils as they panted. Spinoza looked over her shoulder, trying to gauge the condition of Lermentov's ramshackle army. The ogryns were driving ahead just as powerfully as ever, their heads swinging as they snorted and bucked. Most of the vanguard, including the better-equipped of the Angel's Tears, were keeping up, but many more were struggling with the pace.

'They will not last more than moments,' she voxed to Khazad.

'No,' the assassin agreed. 'But grotesques not masters. There will be master. Kill it, and there is chance.'

'If we can get to it.'

The ground started to rise again. Soon they were moving up, and the brickwork walls gave out, replaced by stands of ancient stone. The ambient temperature started to rise, and Spinoza began to sweat. The stench, the claustrophobic tunnels, the endless dark – it was interminable and hateful, just like everything else on this damned world.

They came across bodies. Like most of the catacombs under the shadow of the walls, these places had harboured a kind of life, scratching food and shelter in the grim holes of the underworld. These corpses were ripped apart, a collection of strips and entrails, thrown in a madness of rage against the stone. They must have been fleeing, disturbed by the xenos suddenly emerging from the deeps, and had never stood a chance.

'Getting close to the walls, lord,' voxed Hegain, studying his auspex. 'This was the target, then. The Lord Crowl–'

'–was right, sergeant,' said Spinoza. 'I am aware of it. Your squad is prepped? We will not get much help from the others.'

'All ready, lord. All prepared. And very much in the *mood*, lord, if you take the meaning of it.' Hegain's tone was grim. 'I'll look forward to seeing more of those things. I'll look forward to it very much.'

The slope became steeper. Soon they were struggling up old rough-cut stairways, smoothed by age and erosion, overlooked by half-lost galleries in the heights above. The air was foul – a musty clag that spoke of millennial confinement. Slinking amid the mess of smells was the growing aroma of perversion and extremity, the musk of the xenobreed.

'Now I hear them,' voxed Khazad.

Then Spinoza did too – a high-pitched whine, almost unbearably thin, echoing down the shafts from up ahead.

'Prepare flares,' ordered Lermentov. The perfect dark made them vulnerable, even with massed lumen coverage.

The ragged army swept up through the twisting paths, scrabbling on loose rocks, stumbling over broken steps. They never saw the graven images of angels and daemons in the alcoves high above, carved before the Master of Mankind had ever come here, hung like petrified ghouls over the empty vaults and rotting into lumpen twists of stone. All hearts were beating rapidly now, all palms twitching with sweat.

'Remember your orders,' said Spinoza on the closed channel. 'The master. Let all else go.'

And then they were out, pushing up through a final derelict archway and into a chamber paved with cracked flagstones and withered columns. It was still pitch-dark, and the lumen beams switched and swayed, oval pockets sliding over snatches of half-glimpsed detail.

‘Flares!’ roared Lermentov, and the first of the charges spiralled up into the high void, blowing apart to expose a rock-bored hall of immense proportions.

Flickering light spread across a mass of uncurling horror, an ophidian swarm of alien surfaces. Black hooded masks swung their way, already laced with glowing drool. Wasp-waists twisted unnaturally, straining warped spinal cords. Claws unclasped, some clutching long serrated cleavers, other terminating in thickets of dripping syringes. Bloodshot eyes lit up behind slits in the masks, deranged and famished.

Lermentov hesitated, his gun frozen in his hands. The rabble-army spilled into the chamber, then slowed, halted by what they saw. Even the ogryns, too dull-witted to dread, stumbled in their onward charge.

‘For the Emperor!’ cried Spinoza, igniting Argent in a blaze of gold. She and the storm troopers sprinted forwards, accompanied by a burning halo of lasfire from the hellguns. Khazad came with them, picking up speed for the leap that would take her crashing into the ranks of horrors ahead.

That roused the rest. ‘For the Throne!’ Lermentov shouted, opening fire. His bodyguard did likewise, adding to the blistering volley of las-bolts that sent overspill flashes swinging up into the distant heights. The abhumans lumbered back up to full tilt, roaring in wild aggression, followed by the masses still arriving from the tunnels, the hundreds who had limped and scampered through the underdark in hope of exterminating the nightmares that preyed on them.

Ahead of them, vast and smooth, rose an expanse of pure black adamantium, curving gently away until it disappeared through the rocky roof a hundred metres up – the base of the wall, its roots laid deep underground, cutting down into the corpse of buried cities older than the Imperium itself. These were foundations of foundations, planned in outline by the Emperor Himself, bolstered by the labour of the blessed Dorn, sunk into the honeycombed layers of mankind’s forgotten empires as a marker of permanence, of stasis, of domination.

Between the army and the wall were the xenobreeds, a teeming mass of black-pinned, grey-skinned giants. There must have been more than sixty there, twice the tally of counted cages, hunched, contorted, massive. As the las-bolts slapped and scorched across their hides, they screamed in an overlapping chorus of blind hatred, and loped jerkily towards the threat.

They were huge, malefic terrors, three times the height of the humans – far faster, far stronger, implanted with spines and wires and spike-clamps, berserk and blood-hungry. Spinoza met the first of them as it bore down on her and swung her crozius heavily. It connected with an outstretched gauntlet, frying the metal glove and hurling the xenobreed’s arm back out wide. Then Hegain’s squad hammered a barrage of las-bolts into it, puncturing the stretched flesh and shattering capsules of glowing fluids.

Still it came on, screaming with something like a human’s voice. Hegain kept firing, round after round. Spinoza smashed it again with the crozius, showering it in crackling energy. Khazad leapt across its turning back, slicing into its exposed spine and blowing a row of feeder-vials.

Still it came on, crunching aside a storm trooper with a heavy lunge, punching a spiked gauntlet into an oncoming fighter from Lermentov’s command group. Blood streamed down its muculent chest and arms, but it waded further, tearing the head from a third warrior even as las-beams lanced directly into its screaming facemask. Spinoza slammed her maul into the creature’s trailing calf, crunching through muscle and bone and cauterising the wound with disruptor-flare. Hegain’s soldiers kept up the fire-rate, punching more holes in its pale grey flesh.



Still it came on, pushing past Spinoza, throwing her to the ground and limping straight into the oncoming mass of the rabble army, shrugging off its wounds, reeling drunkenly as it bludgeoned fighters aside in a whirl of thrown blood.

Hegain dropped down by Spinoza, firing steadily as more neared. ‘Tough bastards,’ he spat, panting. Khazad hadn’t given up. She raced towards the next grotesque, her sword slashing in wild arcs, matching it for speed if not strength. The bulk of Lermontov’s troops were now shambling into contact, filling up the floor of the huge chamber. The ogryns were leading something of a charge up the left flank, the only ones able to come close to physically matching the xenobreeds; the rest were already being ripped apart.

Spinoza got to her feet. Already more of the grotesques were closing in, their movements jerky and over-rapid.

‘Where’s the master?’ she asked.

Her helm’s proximity auspex was swimming with targets, awash in a haze of white noise. More flares went up, exposing bloody carapaces heaving amid a sea of frenzied limbs. Up ahead, against the wall itself, something was happening. The grotesques were shielding something, and the air began to fizz with gathering static.

‘We have to get to it,’ Spinoza ordered. Hegain nodded, and the surviving storm troopers pulled together. ‘Right flank. Go.’

They pushed on, firing steadily, making for a wide stair cut into the rock along the nearside wall of the great chamber. The grotesques flailed at them, though the sheer number of bodies in the flickering space now made the battlefield choked and confused. A xenobreed leapt straight at Spinoza, claws extended, and took a whole volley of shots direct to its chest, which dropped it heavily. Spinoza pounced, ramming Argent into the grotesque’s neck and pressing down. The energy field raged, burning and cutting. Hegain raced to aid her, firing at point-blank range as the creature tried to lash her loose. The grotesque shuddered, its neck spewing stumm-fluids, its chest streaming with puncture wounds.

Then she pulled away, running again, her squad coming with her. Khazad followed, darting and ducking under the roaring assault of the grotesques that tried to bring her down.

Spinoza made the stairs and raced up them two at a time. From the vantage she caught sight of something buried beyond the mass of raging xenobreeds, still hidden but active. Snaking lines of coal-black force were kindling, rippling out across the stone and snaking up the wall itself.

‘Bring it down!’ she ordered, dropping to one knee and reaching for her laspistol.

The storm troopers fired, but the press of xenobreeds took the impacts and kept coming at them, loping closer in a rolling tide of hissing malevolence. Spinoza got a glimpse of the thing beyond the tide of warped bodies, just for a second – something hovering, skeletal and emaciated, with a hyperextended neck, whiteless eyes, fluttering robes of night-black.

Then the world shook. An elemental *crack* shivered out from the epicentre, making the rock beneath their feet tilt and shudder. More black lightning speared out against the wall, latching on and flickering like caught flame. The air seemed to suck out of the chamber, tearing towards an unseen singularity, and the high-pitched whine became unbearable. Black sparks raced across the adamantium, spinning and bouncing, before coalescing into a pulsar of darkness.

‘No...’ breathed Spinoza, reaching out as if she could somehow stop it.

Reality blinked. The entire chamber reeled, then suddenly reconstituted, and tendrils of black matter

cobwebbed out from the nexus, crawling across the wall and leeching at it. The adamantium froze, cracked, flexed, then sucked inwards like water pulled down a whirlpool.

‘Not *possible*,’ Khazad hissed, crawling beside her as the unbreakable stone liquefied and ran deeper, dissolving into nothingness, snatched out of existence. A perfectly circular tunnel opened up, glowing darkly at the edges, burrowing further in.

‘It will get inside,’ said Spinoza, getting to her feet, firing again. ‘By the Throne, bring it down.’

Half the grotesques were now piling into the circular breach in the walls, the sheer edges surrounded by a raging corona of black electricity. The creature at their heart went with them, disappearing over the cracked lip of the tunnel, swept along as if by a palanquin of its slaved horrors. The rest of the xenobreeds stayed where they were, killing freely and rampaging further into the oncoming battalions of the rabble army.

Spinoza watched it go, horror making her sluggish. She looked across the chamber, where the grotesques were killing, Lermentov’s army dying, the last spirals of the flares tumbling into hopeless darkness.

*It is inside.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Shade plummeted fast, falling below the parapet levels and down into the inside lee of the great wall. A blurred line of shadow fell across it, the terminator of the wall's long summit, smothering the diffuse haze of the billion lumens out beyond the perimeter. The flyer dropped between mighty defence towers crowned with aquila-lined bolter banks and kept on going.

The Custodian flyer came down with them, content for now to follow Crowl's lead. Its engines hammered, throwing out power extravagantly.

'Did you detect it?' Crowl demanded, turning to Gorgias.

The skull chattered indeterminately. '*Veritas*, yes, yes, for *momentario*, then... no.'

Revus swore under his breath, battling to hold the Shade steady in the turbulence caused by the heavy engines roaring above him. They were falling fast, and the defence tower's lower lumen tracks blurred past them and up into oblivion.

'No strong fix,' the captain muttered, fighting the control columns. 'Work harder, skull.'

Gorgias' eye flared up in anger. '*Foulness!* You fly the—' Then it swivelled, processing hard. '*Affirmitivo*. Trace signal, *longa via*, down-down.'

The Shade's console flickered with light as Gorgias shunted the data to the captive machine-spirit. Revus reacted instantly, dropping the Shade's nose and sending them running along the base of the wall.

Crowl sat back, wincing at the sudden shift of direction. 'How far?' he asked. 'What nature of detection?'

Revus accessed the auspex feed from Gorgias' instruments. 'No idea,' he said, hesitantly. 'It looks like... No. I have no idea.'

Crowl reached over to look at the data himself. 'So I see. Not possible indeed.' His eyes flickered up, out ahead, watching the nominal ground-level race up to meet them. 'But actual, *something*, and concrete. That's it.'

His audex-feed crackled into life. 'We sense nothing,' came Navradaran's preternaturally calm vox voice. 'Confirm course of action, inquisitor.'

'A radiation signature,' Crowl replied. 'In sympathy with the ones recorded in the void-hauler. It's faint, but trust me – this is our target.'

The two flyers shot down further, sinking below the level of garrison blocks and training squares. Floodlights whirled overhead, picking out the hovering gunships of rapid-reaction Guard units, many

liveried in the white and gold of the Palace's own.

'Will you alert more forces?' Crowl asked Navradaran, just as the Shade boosted over the edge of a vertical shaft-mouth and the last of the light from above was swallowed up.

'Negative.'

Crowl hesitated. 'There are hundreds of—'

'Negative. Prepare to disembark – we approach the base.'

Both aircraft were now far below the level of the great halls and spires, and had travelled deep down the straggling curve of the inner walls.

Revus looked at Crowl. 'What do you make of that?'

Crowl reached for Sanguine. 'That there are still secrets he is unwilling to share,' he said.

The Shade's lumens kicked in, throwing bars of harsh light across steadily darkening rockcrete. They passed tenements pocked with empty windows, collapsed lintels, low smouldering fires. Deeper chasms striated filth-ridden platforms, old tiers of columns cracked and bowed under the gargantuan weight above.

Then they made a landing, hard against the corroded plinth of some ancient statue – a winged knight with hollow eyes, striding out into the grimy murk to face some unseen enemy. Dust kicked up by the Shade's descent billowed around them, and Crowl reached for the cockpit release.

The Custodian flyer set down a few metres away, making the earth tremble with the impact of its landing. Crowl watched its occupants disembark – Navradaran leading four others down a gilt ramp. They were all the same – arrayed from head to foot in a complete shell of gold, immaculate, their black robes snapping in the heatwash of the turbines. All carried guardian spears, and the blades shimmered coldly in the dark.

'Just four?' Crowl asked.

'It will suffice.'

Doubt seemed to be something Navradaran did not entertain. Perhaps he was incapable of it.

'It's a long way down,' Crowl said, checking the auspex reading and moving to the edge of a deep, square-edged well-mouth. A stone stair wound down the inside of it, clinging to the face of sheer rockcrete. There were no railings, no barriers, and the hot wind sighed up out of its dark heart with what felt like malevolence. Above them, perched on age-withered pediments, rows of gargoyles leered out into the eternal gloom, tongues poking out over rows of curved teeth. The rad-streaked sky was lost, a memory of the levels far above.

Navradaran strode to the head of the stairs, and gestured for Crowl to lead on.

'Then there is no time to lose,' he said.

Spinoza shook off her shock. She saw Lermentov struggling out in the centre of the chamber, surrounded by his ogryns and his best fighters. His beleaguered formation was holding its ground but little more.

'The wall,' she voxed to him. 'We must make the wall.'

She saw him look up at her, his helm covered in blood, then acknowledge. A vox-augmitter order went out, just audible over the screams and the roars, and the ogryns suddenly pushed forwards, driving a wedge through the ranks of the xenobreds. Spinoza leapt down from the stairs, accompanied by Hegain's troops, and they fought their way to his side, weaving between the flying blades and hooks.

‘This will kill us,’ Lermentov panted, firing in rapid bursts as his ogryns threw themselves suicidally into the enemy.

‘You are dead already,’ Spinoza said coolly, reverting back to Argent and sending the maul cracking into the hides of the grotesques pressing around them. ‘The master. That is everything now.’

The toll of the charge was terrible. Abhumans went down in droves, their heavy bodies pulled into strips by the surgical weapons of the xenobreds. The human troops fared even worse, their armour too weak and their weapons too crude – dozens were flayed into gore-flecked chunks by the whirl of blades, their screams cut abruptly short. With their guiding intelligence gone, though, the grotesques fought without formation and without strategic purpose. They went for blood, for pain, for slaughter, caring nothing for where they got it, and the hordes of fodder still charging at them provided an orgy of targets for their agony-blinded minds to process.

That left a narrow window for a disciplined core to cut through. Spinoza and Lermentov fought at the apex of it, backed up by the remains of Hegain’s squad, now down to four after taking further losses. The sacrifice of the abhumans proved just enough to break through, and they pushed towards the wall breach even as the last of the ogryn bodyguard fell under whirring talons.

Spinoza was first, leaping up into the mouth of the tunnel as the energies of its creation crackled around her. Argent’s light glittered along an impossibly perfect inner surface – the breach was over ten metres in height, circular, driven ramrod straight as if created by a precision excavation tool. Ahead, she could just make out the onward progress of the intruders, still cutting their way further in and heedless of pursuit.

Lermentov joined her. Less than fifty of his vanguard had made it through – behind them the orgy of slaughter was ramping up, fed like a furnace by the huge numbers still pouring into the chamber from the deep tunnels beyond.

‘There is nothing we can do for them,’ Spinoza said, grabbing Lermentov and pushing him bodily into the tunnel ahead of her.

Hegain and Khazad came with her, and they started to run again. Even as Spinoza picked up speed, feeling Argent snarl in her grip, the madness of it was perfectly obvious. Perhaps thirty of the huge xenobreds remained up ahead, all of them loping into the heart of the Palace itself. Stripped of the ogryns, what remained of Lermentov’s forces was hopelessly insufficient to match them, and even if the hunters caught them they would surely be finished off swiftly.

But there was no alternative. Whatever tech-sorcery the creature had employed had done what was needed, rending physics, imploding pure adamantium, and now it was in the Palace. *In the Palace.*

She ran harder. The delved tunnel felt like it went on forever – the wall must have been over two hundred metres thick. By the time they reached the end of it, the xenobreds were far ahead, galloping across the deserted floor of another yawning, dust-filled hall and into the mazes beyond. The grotesques travelled with single-minded purpose, racing up forgotten stairwells and streaming across dank, echoing balconies. They clearly knew where they were going, and yet Spinoza had no idea where she was, her helm-unit still scrambled, her senses disorientated by the dark and the flailing lumen beams. At any moment she expected them to hit an inhabited section where the defenders of the Inner Palace would come swarming to counter the threat... but perhaps they were too far down. Perhaps they had emerged into sections so ancient and enclosed and buried in ignorance that no watch was kept on them.

Her lungs burned, her leg muscles throbbed. They had been on the run for a long time, and the

creatures before them were more powerful and seemingly never tired. From distance, she caught sight of the xenobreeds sprinting out over a long, narrow span, suspended high over a chasm that fell away into unguessable depths. At the far end was a gate in the shape of a gaping dragon's mouth, barred by doors of verdigrised bronze. The creature, the master, paused for only a moment to destroy it, shattering the barrier in a blaze of unnatural whip-curl energies, but that lost them time. Spinoza saw the chance, and drove herself even harder to catch up. Khazad, fastest of them all, came with her. The two of them gained the broken gate and burst through into the chamber beyond.

The space was silted with blankets of dust. An octagonal floor stretched away in all directions, overlooked by ranks of skull-headed column clusters. Devotional statues stood in their hundreds, half-hewn, unfinished, their empty expressions blind to the curtains of unbroken shadow.

Xenobreed nightmares turn to face the incomers, their ranks briefly parting to expose the withered horror in their midst.

Khazad and the others skidded to a halt, opening fire as soon as they entered, spraying the ranks of grotesques with a flurry of neon-hard las-beams.

For a moment, Spinoza didn't understand why the beasts had turned to fight – they should have been far ahead still. Screams rang out from the grotesques. Their momentum left them, and their pale limbs thrashed in the flicker of shadows. Las-beams scythed across, latticing the open space and searing black scorch marks into the ancient walls.

Something hissed in her helm's audex unit, then a stream of raw sound waves roared out of the damaged intake. She reached to shut it down, just as the feed juddered back into intelligibility.

'...sponse to your message. Take cover and pull left – we will pin them down. Thanks to the Throne, child – we had rather given up hope.'

Rassilo's voice. Spinoza narrowed her eyes, blinking against the flare of las-discharge, and finally saw the reason for the firefight – rows of Inquisitorial storm troopers in regulation grey, maybe two hundred, lined up along the far wall of the chamber, dug in and already firing in disciplined drill-lines. Their inquisitor lord was there with them, leading the foremost into a charge against the xenobreeds, a smoking boltgun clutched in her armoured fist.

*Praise Him*, thought Spinoza, relief washing over her. Rassilo had answered. A defence had been organised, and now the ways further in were barred.

'Pull left!' she roared, driving the others to comply with the orders, knowing that the barrage from the storm troopers would only give them so much time. The grotesques were reacting now, lurching with typical abandon towards the humans hemming them in. There were still so many – perhaps too many – but at least they were fighting now.

'My lord!' Spinoza cried, seeing Rassilo fighting her way towards her. 'How did you—'

'Not now, child,' Rassilo replied coolly, swivelling smoothly on her heel to take aim again. 'Just fight, if you please.'

'I hear them,' said Navradaran, picking up the pace.

The Custodian ran with a heavy, fluid grace, powered by armour systems far grander than Crowl's own. His squad sped through the labyrinth of the lower levels, churning up dust that had lain undisturbed for millennia. Their helm-lenses glowed a vivid red in the dark, their armour glinted in thin outlines of dark gold.

Crowl struggled to keep up. His lungs felt like they had been scraped clean by rusty blades, and his

breaths came with effort now. He could no longer hide the limp in his right leg and had to run through the pain. Gorgias hovered overhead, Revus maintained a solid pace, and the chambers passed by in crepuscular procession.

He was tempted to look. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of aisles leading back into gloom, alcoves and antechambers swathed in dried-out cobwebs. Everything down here was as old as the Imperium itself, some of it possibly older. A rogue trader might give up his fortune for just a few minutes alone in those rooms; a warlord of the outer worlds would trade her empire, a cardinal his diocese – and yet there was no time to look, to absorb, to study, and despite all that was at stake, that near broke his heart.

Such was the tragedy of the times. Terra still held its riches, diminished from glory but still greater than a thousand other worlds combined, and yet they were forever cloistered, kept locked down by ignorance. If some catalyst could be found to revive the species' questing spirit, to shake off the terror of the new and escape the dread hand of the Mechanicus and the Priesthood, then those treasures might yet be used.

But they never would be, not now. All that remained was the continual struggle for another decade or two of life, to endure just a little longer amid the gasping terror while the beasts circled. Human presence here was an aberration, born of desperation, and when they were gone the shadows would close over, perhaps never to be broken again.

'Signals,' Revus reported.

Crowl blinked his proximity scanner across the retinal feed. There were hundreds of signatures, close-packed, just up ahead. He looked at Navradaran, who must have seen the same thing, but the Custodian said nothing and kept going without pause. His squad's guardian spears were alight now, flaming like brands, their silver disruptor shrouds streaming into the dark.

And then he saw it – Spinoza's auspex signature, there among Hegain's, and the others. His heart leapt, and a sudden burst of energy shot through his agonised muscles.

'We are in time,' he breathed, to himself as much as Revus, reaching for Sanguine.

They burst into another wide chamber, its floor a sea of dust, its cavernous interior marked by an eerie procession of half-made statues. Old electro-tools lay discarded in the filth, cast aside by long-dead masons before their works could be completed.

Las-bolts criss-crossed between the stonework sentinels, smashing carved heads and torsos, and sending shadows jumping crazily across the floor. Crowl saw huge outlines stalking between the graven images, far too big to be human, moving fast amid a maelstrom of noise and confusion. He took aim, only to see a squad of human troopers retreat across his path, firing steadily at one of the monsters before it tore into them.

The Custodians charged directly into the heart of the battle, their spears kindling a blaze of iridescence that sent the shadows flying back. They were just as fast as the nightmare creatures, just as strong, their staves swinging around them in tight, brutal arcs, leaping from one strike to the next before crashing down among their prey in scattering clouds of thrown blood. Two of them pushed on past the battleground, hunting for xenobreds fleeing back into the dark, the other two stayed with their captain and began the slaughter in earnest.

'I see her!' Revus shouted, firing as he ran, pulling towards the right flank and darting between tottering, las-blown statues. Crowl raced after him, jumping clear of a secondary column even as the weight of impacts sent it smashing to the ground. He could see Spinoza's armour now, lambent blood-

red in the light of the Custodians' blades. She was in the heart of the fighting, wielding her crozius two-handed in mighty, bone-shattering swipes. She and others stood before some kind of stone altar, huge and heavy, their backs against it as they fought off more of the xenobreds. He caught flashing glimpses of the others – an assassin, the remnants of Hegain's squad, a man in an Astra Militarum uniform carrying a bad wound, more Inquisitorial forces doing their best to hold their rapidly diminishing ground.

And among them was Lord Inquisitor Rassilo – *Rassilo* – fighting against something wizened and blackened and bedecked in tatters of shadow.

'That one,' he ordered Revus, indicating the withered creature.

Revus reacted instantly, switching his aim towards the creature in rags. Crawl tried to get a shot away, but the creature seemed to have an aura of misdirection crackling around it, a shimmer of fractured reality that slid and popped with its every move. He fired a single round where its head looked to be, only to see the bullet slip into nothingness.

The creature swivelled, discharging some spidery web of kinetic force that hurled Rassilo to the floor and sent a dozen storm troopers tumbling after her. It lurched towards Spinoza, hoisting a hooked blade in one of its many hands, moving too fast to halt. Crawl fired again, too far away to intervene, and could only watch his bullet flicker out of existence as it hit the reality-warping field around the alien.

He wouldn't get there in time. Nothing could stop that blade falling, shearing through dimensions to shatter its target.

Except for Navradaran. The Custodian hit the centre of the battleground like a forge hammer, smashing through grotesques to get to the prize. He travelled like a god out of legend, wreathed in streamers of pure gold, the runes on his armour coruscating and swimming with unshackled ether-light. He leapt for the tattered wretch and seized it by the neck, reaching through the distortion field unscathed, hauling it back, then slamming it hard to the ground. The thing screamed, writhed, tried to fight back, but Navradaran was inexorable, crunching his fist in and cracking the bones in its glass-fragile face. The xenos tried to lash out at him with spine-mounted scything arms, but Navradaran broke them, smashing them, snapping them across the haft of his blade and twisting the black-blooded remnants aside.

He dragged the xenos to its feet, now a bedraggled and wounded mess, then crunched its battered body onto the altar top, grinding ravaged flesh into the stone and blasting the reality field into black-edged slivers.

Crawl limped closer, unable to take his eyes from the display of pure, brutal dominance. The remaining grotesques were being taken apart by the other Custodians, impaled on their blades even as they tried to stagger back into the dark, rendering irrelevant the Inquisitorial troops still present on the battlefield.

But the xenos master was still alive. Crawl crept closer to the altar, feeling waves of nausea emanating from its crushed body. Spinoza limped alongside him, her armour bloodied and her maul still fizzing with power.

'You were right, lord,' she panted, looking unsteady on her feet. 'The *Rhadamanthys* was—'

'Later, Spinoza,' said Crawl, taking her by the shoulder, looking her over. 'You are preserved? You are not wounded?'

She shook her head weakly. By then Navradaran had pinned the xenos to the altar as if in preparation



for sacrifice. He raised his blade to sever its neck, and harsh light spilled on to the thing's face, exposing for the first time just what manner of being had penetrated so deep into humanity's most sacred site.

It was emaciated by human standards, so thin that its bones protruded like iron staves from under a lace-slender press of skin. Veins were visible, a black web just under the surface, pulsing weakly. Its spine was as arched as those of the grotesques, implanted with blades and wickedly curved devices, now mostly smashed into fragments by Navradaran's fury. Under its leather robes it was dressed in figure-hugging greaves studded with steel pins, and loops of chains hung about its impossibly narrow waist, from which dangled crystal bottles filled with virulently coloured fluids.

Its face was covered in blood, its cheekbones cracked. Its lower jaw looked to have been entirely excised, replaced with a mask of spattered steel connected to ripped cheek-flesh by rings of jewelled metal. Its skull was bald and tattooed with arcane symbols from its debased xenos culture.

The worst thing was its eyes. Nothing in the deepest of the Palace dungeons was as black as those eyes. They were like pits, ringed with creased lines punched through with flecks of wire, holes into an abject nothingness. Crawl had looked into many eyes over his career, knowing all the character traits given away by them, but these orbs betrayed only an awful, hungry ennui, a desperate gnawing that had long since outstripped any hope of being satisfied. Those eyes had witnessed things no living thing should ever have sought to witness, atrocities that dwarfed anything seen in the criminal vaults of the underhives, and the imprint of it lingered in patterns of concentric, kohl-black horror.

It still breathed. Navradaran pressed the tip of his blade against its neck. The xenos looked up at its executioner, struggling to inhale, bubbles of oily blood forming at the edges of its thin-lipped mouth, its many limbs broken. There was no hatred or desperation in that look, only a meagre kind of contempt.

'End it,' hissed Crawl, urgently.

But Navradaran did not move.

'End it!'

Crawl whirled around, looking for a reason why he had stayed his hand.

Rassilo had recovered her feet. Her bolter was aimed directly at the Custodian, and at a range that would puncture even his peerless armour-plate. The rest of her battalion, still over a hundred of them and freed of the need to fight the grotesques, had similarly levelled their weapons at the remainder of Navradaran's squad, all of whom had devoted their attention to slaying the surviving xenos and were now exposed.

'Adamara?' Crawl asked, warily. 'What is this?'

'The end, Erasmus,' she said, never moving her bolter muzzle. Behind her, dozens of storm troopers began to edge closer. 'Custodian, move clear of the xenos. You should never have come for it. It is, and has always been, mine.'



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The last of the las-bolts fizzed away. The screams had gone, echoing into the long vaults, but the blood was still hot on the stone. Spinoza, breathing hard, her head swimming with fatigue, looked at Crawl, then at Rassilo, then back at Crawl.

She stood with what was left of her own squad and Lermentov's soldiers, a pitiful remnant of what had been brought up from Boreates. They were surrounded on all sides by Rassilo's own forces – heavily equipped storm troopers in full carapace armour bearing both hellguns and carbines. Khazad had been fighting hardest of all, and was now bent double, panting hard, her power sword still glimmering in a loose grip. The greater part of the illumination in that catacomb came from the five Custodians' power weapons, all of which still snarled away with vivid silver energy fields.

Even in the very midst of fighting it had been impossible not to be drawn to their magnificence. They were something else – imposing, arrayed in a dazzling overabundance of heraldic livery, standing like living repudiations of the species' long decline.

And yet they were frozen now, each of them tracked by multiple targeting beads from the ranked hellguns. Rassilo, Spinoza's sponsor and confidante, held her weapon taut, aimed at the lead Custodian's helm, her stance unyielding.

'It will not be suffered to live,' the Custodian said, making no move to drive his blade further.

'Indeed, but it will not meet its end by your hand,' said Rassilo, as collected as ever, her voice crisp under the resounding arches. 'This creature is under the auspices of the Holy Orders.'

'This is the Palace, lord inquisitor.'

'That makes no difference.'

Spinoza looked at her in disbelief. Khazad had fallen to her knees, cradling some fresh wound taken during combat, while Lermentov looked merely exhausted and bewildered. Only Crawl retained his composure, standing beside Revus with Sanguine still in hand.

'Don't be a fool, Adamara,' he said. 'You've failed. My advice – don't anger this one.'

Rassilo never even looked at him. Her severe face was drawn tight in concentration. 'Take the blade away,' she said again, speaking to the Custodian. 'Have no doubt, at the first movement to end the xenos, I will open fire.'

Spinoza took an uncertain step forwards, her own weapon still fully active and crackling. 'My lord—' she ventured, in truth not knowing which of her masters to address.

'Silence, child,' Rassilo snapped. 'You are of the ordo. Do your duty.'

That was correct. Spinoza was honour-bound to obey her superior, an instinct that had been honed and strengthened over many years of psycho-conditioning. Even before thinking, she found herself holding Argent more tightly, preparing to use it, and her gaze was drawn once more to the massive figure in its baroque armour, still motionless over the prone body of the xenos.

But then the spell broke. Crowl laughed – the same dry scrape she had heard in his private chambers, as cynical as it was unaffected.

‘I thought it was Quantrain,’ he said, slowly and carefully reloading. ‘That was the name that kept coming up, again and again. I even summoned him here.’

At the mention of Quantrain, Khazad’s face suddenly lifted, and the hatred in her brown eyes was virulent. One of Rassilo’s storm troopers, her captain by the sigils on his armour and his bulk, noticed too and edged protectively closer to her, all the time keeping his weapon aimed at the Custodian.

‘It’s not often I’m wrong,’ Crowl went on, snapping the chamber closed on Sanguine. ‘So you can imagine how it feels to discover the truth.’

He raised the pistol and fired a single shot. Rassilo’s captain was hit full in the helm, sent sprawling back against the bole of a stone column. He slumped, dazed, and the broken faceplate fell away from where Crowl’s shot had sheared the ceramite. With a start, Spinoza recognised the face underneath – a grey-streaked beard, spilling out at the gorget where the helm had fractured.

‘Gloch,’ she breathed.

‘How could he answer the summons?’ Crowl said, turning his pistol on Rassilo then. ‘He couldn’t. Only on Terra could a man as universally famous as Quantrain never exist. Or, to be more accurate, share existence. With you, Adamara.’

Khazad suddenly screamed, her sword snarling, and leapt up at Rassilo, her face contorted with loathing. Crowl lurched forwards, trying to interpose himself, but too late. Rassilo swung round, firing her bolter and missing before the assassin barrelled into her.

The storm troopers opened fire, hitting the Custodians and sending all five reeling. Gloch roared back to his feet and raced after Khazad, firing from his autopistol and reaching for a combat blade. The entire chamber erupted again in a hail of noise and light. Caught between the explosion of violence, Lermentov’s troops cowered helplessly, running for cover as the storm troopers took on the Custodians.

For a split second Spinoza had no idea what to do. Hegain looked to her urgently for guidance, unsure where to aim or who to take on, and she had none to give him. Gloch engaged with Khazad, winging her and then going after her with the knife. Rassilo had disappeared, lost in the blaze of las-discharge and the sudden surge of bodies. The Custodians were fighting back now, wading into the storm troopers and laying about them with their spears. She was duty-bound to aid both sides, and yet had no idea why they were fighting.

‘What orders, lord?’ asked Hegain.

She saw Khazad being battered by Gloch then, driven back into the press of advancing storm troopers. The assassin was in no shape to resist, but still fought back, just as she had done before.

‘Locate the Lord Crowl and protect him,’ Spinoza ordered Hegain, hefting Argent and racing towards Gloch. ‘I will handle the giant.’

Crowl glanded a heavy slug of motovine, giving up on the pretence of restraint. Running again was pure pain, shooting up his diseased limbs and striking at his labouring heart, but the need for haste

was now acute.

He had miscalculated, exposing Rassilo while the assassin was so close. Then again, only at that moment had he realised who she must be – Phaelias’ old acolyte, sufficiently driven by loathing of Quantrain to risk everything for the kill.

The xenos had reacted instantly, taking advantage of the confusion, shifting under a cloak of darkness and scampering through the mass of advancing bodies. Its physical demise, seemingly, had been illusory, artfully constructed to project weakness, and now it was loose again, bereft of its servants but still racing towards its goal.

The shouts and cries of combat faded into the distance. Crawl had lost sight of it, but the tunnels only led one way now. For all its subterfuge, the thing had been battered by Navradaran – surely even a creature of its perverse abilities would be slowed a little by that.

Now they were headed even further down, threading through deep capillaries cut into the stone. The heat became crushing, just as it had up in the Sanctum Imperialis. The arched roofs descended with every step, narrowing the stale airspace further, choking under the press of the Palace’s straggling foundations.

He was alone. Revus had raced to aid Navradaran, and he had no idea where Gorgias had ended up. If there had been time he might have called them back, but now it was too late, and he was already deep into the tortuous mazes snaking through the roots of the old mountains. His body was giving up on him – he could feel the old wounds cluster, draining his strength, fighting against the artificial stimms that clogged his blood.

*This can only end badly*, he thought to himself, breathing hard, running hard, driving himself onwards through the depths.

Down, down and ever down he went, following the trace stench of corruption, trusting to instinct, never pausing. He vaulted down spiral stairs, raced under the eaves of ancient, empty vaults. He passed great barred doors, braced with iron and sealed with runes of obscure provenance. Slivers of static snaked across the ceiling again, sparkling in the deep dark. He must have been as far down below as the spires soared above, and felt like an insect scrabbling through the soil of humanity’s eternal domain, lost under the furnace-slag of its long forging.

He lost track of time, lost track of space. At points there was nothing to hold on to, and he staggered blind, his night-vision faltering. He heard massive growls from below, as if tectonic plates ground up against one another, and the rock beneath his feet became hot even through the soles of his boots. There were sounds in the dark – eldritch wails, the echoing clank of infernal engines, the slow beat of the world’s heart.

He was going mad. He could feel his exhaustion catching up with him, amplified by the insanity of this place. More runes swam before his vision, surely graven aeons ago, dull red with residual warding power.

Then he was out. He felt the oppression lift, the air decompress. A flat plain of empty stone stretched away, broken by a chasm running transverse just before an immense screen of granite that soared up on the far side. The screen was carved just as the Eternity Gate had been carved – a vast tapestry of overlapping, elaborately occult depictions of bestial and legendary figures. There were twenty great knights shown in a huge circle surrounding a magisterial icon of the Emperor Enthroned. Some of those knights looked like the Ministorum-sanctioned images of the Holy Primarchs, but why were there twenty of them?

The chasm stood more than fifty metres away. Above him, a great void opened that went up and up, bridged by vast spans of gothic stonework. Huge pipes interlaced with the stone, ringed with bundles of thick cabling and the unmistakable mark of Mechanicus devices. It all hummed, barely audibly at first, but deep and throbbing and redolent of something unutterably gigantic. A faint glow, like the first blush of dawn sunlight, bled down from the heights, only partly obscured by the haze of smog and darkness below. There were stairs threaded up into those high clerestories, wrapped around the boles of gigantic columns and twisting through the filigree of flying buttresses.

Dust lay everywhere, still like a fall of grey snow, choking and matted. The heat was incredible, the sense of oppression absolute. Crowl felt an almost overwhelming urge to sink to his knees, to give in and let his labouring heart judder and his tortured lungs cease their wheezing efforts, but he couldn't, for he was no longer alone. Out in the open, on the edge of the chasm, two figures faced one another.

Rassilo had been faster than he, and had the xenos pinned down. The creature looked to have been shot again, and carried its eldritch blade weakly now. Grimly, checking that Sanguine was fully loaded, Crowl dragged himself towards the both of them, keeping his weapon aimed firmly at Rassilo.

'Remain where you are!' he shouted, coming closer, working hard to retain focus.

Rassilo did not move. The xenos sank to its knees, its nightshade eyes unblinking, watching Crowl draw up.

'What shall I call you, then?' Crowl asked Rassilo grimly. 'Which name serves best?'

Rassilo smiled. 'Whatever you want, Erasmus. But you do not look well. Why not sit awhile?'

Crowl kept Sanguine aimed at her forehead. Rassilo kept her bolter aimed at the xenos, while the xenos stared hungrily at both of them.

'You do not wish to kill it,' Crowl said. 'This was your cargo. Why?'

'I had my orders,' said Rassilo. 'Set in motion a long time ago. I am only a small part in it. You are an even smaller one. If you think you can stop it now, you are, I am afraid, quite in error.'

'Tell me why.'

'Or you will shoot? Come, now. Our friend here will finish you before my body hits the ground.'

The xenos let slip a fractured smile of its own then, exposing black teeth in pearl-white gums.

'For the sake of the past, Adamara,' said Crowl, softly. 'Whatever you planned here has failed. Tell me, before they wring it from you later.'

Rassilo lost her smile. 'Ah, Erasmus,' she said. 'I always said it – you spent too long in Salvator. The battle was here, within the Palace, and you wasted yourself out there.' Her bolter never wavered. 'I counselled against it. When all this is done, tell them that. I told them the creature could not be trusted, but still they persisted. And I was right. We got it as far as Terra, and then we were betrayed.'

'It cannot *betray*,' said Crowl. 'It is the enemy.'

'There were guarantees, for what it is worth,' said Rassilo. 'Bargains made. Many souls were handed over, and I do not like to think what happened to them. All for this one, to come here, to confer with us and advise us on the Project.'

'The Project?'

'Forged in desperation. Tell them that as well. Tell them if there had been any other way, then even this would not have been countenanced.'

'You are speaking in circles. Tell me plainly.'

'They cannot repair the Throne. You understand that? You see what that means? So they are

searching for something else, something beyond the understanding of the Martian Priesthood. Embassies have been sent. Treaties made. Technology, souls, planets – all have been traded. To judge if... *they* could truly help us, one would have to be brought here, to speak to those charged with maintaining what remains, to be shown the faults. And though we knew the risks, and we knew there were those on the Council who would never agree to it, the order was given.'

Crowl listened with mounting disbelief. 'Then you have damned yourselves,' he said.

'We have. But consider the alternative.'

'Only rumours.'

'Yes, rumours. But from the mouths of High Lords. Could you discount them? I could not.'

Crowl swallowed painfully. He could feel blood trickling down the inside of his breastplate, and his head became light. He gripped the hilt of Sanguine harder.

'Kill it here.'

'I cannot. It goes with me.'

'Your orders are void. The Palace is roused. You will never make it.'

'I must.'

'Damn you, Adamara!'

'Remain vigilant – it hungers for both of us.'

He could sense himself slipping. The xenos was aware, and began to twitch under Rassilo's scrutiny. If he aimed at the xenos then Rassilo would disable him. If he shot at Rassilo then the xenos would leap at his throat. His head swam, and a numb prickling broke out below his knees.

'You could recant, even now,' he ventured. 'I would be your advocate.'

Rassilo laughed. 'Erasmus,' she said, sadly. 'For a clever man, how little you know.'

'More than you, it seems.'

She looked at him, and there was a terrible regret on her refined face. 'Maybe it was ever thus,' she said.

Then she swung to aim at him.

Instinctively, Crowl fired, sending a bullet through her forehead. Even before her body hit the ground, before he could twist around to face the xenos, it went for him, leaping with frightening speed and sending them both tumbling across the stone. Crowl struggled, feeling the stench of terror sink over him, but felt something spiked bite into his ribcage.

He cried out, thrusting with both gauntlets. Sanguine skittered away, teetering on the edge of the chasm, and then the xenos was on top of him, its horrific face just inches from his.

'Clever man,' the thing echoed, its eldritch voice a bizarre corruption of a human's. 'This will *hurt*.'



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

There was an insanity to it. The storm troopers had been given their orders and so obeyed them, even though it was getting them systematically killed. Spinoza saw the evidence of it as she ran between them – the bodies flung through the air, the echoing crackle of power glaives whistling to and fro like butcher’s knives. By the time she closed on Gloch’s position, weaving through the web of las-bolts, it was clear this would not last for much longer.

Khazad was still on her feet – just. She traded blows with the much larger Gloch, giving ground, smashed and battered back away from the epicentre of fighting and into the shadows.

‘Murderer!’ she spat, her voice shaking with hatred. ‘Traitor!’

Gloch said nothing, parrying her power sword with his own blunt blade before firing at her again with his autopistol. A shot connected with her dropping shoulder, sending her sprawling across the floor. He followed up, ready to issue the killing blow.

Spinoza caught up and swung the maul, slamming him off his feet and straight into a column. Gloch’s armour took the brunt of the impact, but still he struggled to turn to face her.

‘Leave her,’ Spinoza ordered, standing between Khazad and him.

Gloch grinned, a gruesome sight in the flashing dark with his helm half hanging off. ‘So you did know where to find me,’ he laughed. ‘Good. I thought you had promise.’

He leapt towards her, firing again while keeping his blade raised. Spinoza veered away from the shot, balanced to swing the crozius two-handed. Gloch’s blade swept in close and she smacked it away, wrenching it from his hands with a heave of power-armoured strength.

He reeled from the blow, levelling his pistol again, but she never let him get enough space, following up with a flurry of wild blows that crunched and cracked into his carapace plate. She flailed out hard, feeling every impact with grim relish. The crozius fizzed as blood boiled off the disruptor field, and she kept on going, driving him back and back until he was pinned against the same column as before, slamming into it and still trying to get a shot.

She drove Argent into his gun-hand, grinding it hard against the stone and pushing downwards. With a cry of pain, Gloch let the gun fall from his grip, and it bounced across the dust. Spinoza released the pin only to drive her maul crossways into his chest, breaking his breastplate open and hurling him to the ground. Then she dropped down to him with her fist clenched and punched once, twice, until his chin was broken and blood poured down freely to the gorget seal.

‘I told you,’ Spinoza growled, readying for the final blow, ‘to *leave her*.’

He tried to speak, but she hit him so hard that his head snapped back sickeningly, more bones breaking, and he lolled weakly into unconsciousness.

Then she was running again, weaving back across the chamber as the las-bolts flew and the cries of anger and pain rang out. Khazad had dragged herself out of the centre, leaving a long trail of blood on the floor. Spinoza crouched down beside her.

‘Preserve yourself,’ she said. ‘Justice will be done, Crowl will see to it.’

Khazad grinned at her, and only then did Spinoza see just how badly she had been wounded. ‘Already has.’

She reached out, her arms shaking, and seized Spinoza with an uncertain grip. Her power sword lay in the dust, still burning.

‘Watched you do that,’ she slurred. ‘True Shoba.’

Then she went limp, her grip loosening, and her hands fell away. Spinoza let her down gently, then turned.

Rassilo’s storm troopers were still suicidally taking on the Custodians, though there was no sign of the inquisitor herself. Spinoza ran a quick check for her signal, and found nothing. She was gone, Crowl was missing. Gloch was out cold, Khazad was near death. Lermentov, if he still lived among all the confusion, had no authority.

That left her.

Spinoza strode back into the heart of the fighting, making no attempt to hide herself from the oncoming Custodians. She fed the maximum flare-pattern to Argent, sending a cloud of gold flooding out across the entire crypt.

‘Enough!’ she roared, using the full spread of her armour’s vox-augmitters. ‘Soldiers of the Inquisition, stand down! Damn you all, *stand down!*’

For a second longer, they kept fighting. That was all the time they needed to determine that their master was no longer present and that the order came from the highest ranking member of the ordo left standing. The lasfire shuddered out, the advance halted, the chamber sank back into echoing silence.

Dozens of bodies lay across the floor, some twitching, some still. The Custodians stood amid piles of them, their blades bloody, their armour criss-crossed with las-burns. The closest one to Spinoza inclined his helm by a fraction, then lowered his halberd.

‘Lord Rassilo has fled,’ she told him, picking her way closer. ‘This is over.’

The Custodian shook his head. ‘Not yet.’

It was only then that she noticed the xenos was gone. She started to move, a sick sensation kindling in her stomach.

‘Where is your captain?’ she demanded, pushing past the Custodian.

The Custodian pulled her back, taking her arm firmly to prevent her leaving, and she found herself looking up into his implacable, unknowable golden facemask.

‘Where do you think?’ he said.

Its breath was foul, stinking of rotten flesh. Crowl felt its talons pierce his armour as if it were soft leather. He punched out frantically with his gauntlet, catching it on the side of its skull. He hit it again, working the wounds Navradaran had already given it, and managed to shove it back far enough to crawl out from underneath it.

It came after him, scuttling across the stone. Sanguine was too far to reach, and the xenos leapt back



in close, its blackened eye alive with greedy malice.

Crowl blink-clicked an activation, and needle-spines flicked out from nozzles in his armour's forearm, striking the xenos just as it got within talon range.

It froze, its veins bulging, and started to choke. Crowl pulled clear, pushing back to his knees, breathing heavily. His heart was racing. There was enough toxin in those darts to fell an ogryn, but the xenos remained conscious, coughing up a thick dark bile from its swelling throat. It looked up at him, grinned widely, then swallowed. The creature's skin, caught in the light of Crowl's armour lumens, seemed to darken, to stiffen, then restore itself.

Crowl levelled his needle-launcher again, and the creature gazed at the nozzles fearlessly.

'Try again,' it slurred, the words forming strangely from alien lips.

The xenos looked half-destroyed. The limbs it had carried over its spinal cord hung uselessly, their sinews wrenched out and their bones broken. Its leather bodyglove was ripped open, revealing long gashes down the length of its skeletal torso. Long lines of dark fluid traced their way down its bony throat.

And yet it breathed still, albeit in a disconcerting rattle. Its steel jaw was intact, and at least one of its arms still clutched a long, curved dagger. The pain could halt it, but only momentarily. Give it long enough, and it would feed off its own destruction.

Then it stumbled, coughing. Its dagger hand trembled. Crowl kept his arm raised, aiming the needles, holding position with difficulty.

'You're dying, human,' the xenos rasped. 'I taste it in your blood.'

Crowl shifted painfully. The creature's speech was grotesquely accented, pulled from a mouth that rarely made such sounds, and yet it was Gothic, perfectly comprehensible and artfully cruel. It tried to rise again, limbs shaking, failed, and smiled ruefully.

'I wished to see it,' it murmured. 'The carrion throne. Before it dies.'

'You lie.'

'All the time.' It tried to smile, and coughed up more bile. 'I wished to see your Emperor's face, just me and Him. We've both been around a long time. And after that...'

'You'd never have got that far.'

'But I was close.' The xenos shuffled closer, and Crowl saw its eyes gazing at him from the dark.

'And there will be more of us.'

'Give me names,' said Crowl, feeling the muscles in his arms begin to fail.

'Dangerous knowledge.'

'I'm dead already. Tell me.'

The xenos looked at him strangely then, as if devising some new torment, or perhaps recognising something of interest where it had not expected to find any.

'There were three. They were—'

The spear slammed into its chest, whistling silently through the dark and carrying the creature back with it across the stone. Impaled on an arc of ravaging plasma lightning, it twitched and screamed, unable to rise.

Crowl started, tried to get up, then collapsed again, spewing up blood. His muscles felt heavy, far too heavy. He barely saw Navradaran stride past him, heading towards his kill to finish the task. As his head swam and his strength collapsed, he heard the final shrieks of the xenos, cut short suddenly.

He rolled onto his back, gasping. Far above, many hundreds of metres up, past the cables and the

pipes and high spans, he could see the faint sheen of gold again, spilling down towards him like distant rain.

But it never rained on Terra.

Navradaran came towards him, his heavy armour marked with a hundred las-scorches. The Custodian stooped, kneeling beside him.

‘You could have let him finish,’ Cowl muttered.

‘This is ended,’ Navradaran told him.

Cowl felt his last strength ebb away. He’d fought hard against it, but his awareness was fading. ‘Too old for this sort of thing,’ he slurred, focusing on the nimbus of gold far above. ‘Maybe I’ll just stay here.’

‘You have earned death already,’ said Navradaran. ‘Remain, and I shall enforce it.’

Cowl looked up at him, both amused and annoyed. ‘Earned death? For running down a traitor and a xenos?’

‘This is sacred ground.’

‘This is the Palace. It never got as far as the Throne.’

Navradaran said nothing.

Slowly, Cowl lost his crooked smile. He looked up at the cabling again. He looked at the ancient granite frieze with its twenty heroes engraved on it. He looked up at the massive mechanisms suspended above, level after level of them, and he looked at the stairs winding up towards the haze of gold. He heard the low hum that never ceased, that made every surface shake, and that filled the air with static. Far above, far, *far* above, he perceived vague shapes hidden amid that haze, impossible to make out clearly, shimmering as if caught in a burning heatwash, churning like a furnace, radiating both awe and fear.

He tried to reach out, to lift his hand towards it.

‘Oh, my—’ he began.

Then his strength failed. His head fell back hard, hitting the rock floor. The walls dissolved around him into eddies of swaying liquid, the world tilted, the haze snuffed out, and then, at last, he knew no more.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The air was filled with cheering. A billion voices were raised in unison, swelling into the toxic air, burgeoning through the narrow ways between the endless towers. Drums rolled and hammered, war-horns blared, huge batteries of defence cannons discharged in salute. In every cathedral, priests raised bloody offerings before their altars, and the congregations wept and roared. A great shaft of blood-red light, powered by lumen banks the size of battleships, shot into the night air over the Sanctum Imperialis, creating a ghost-memorial so huge that every eye within a hundred kilometres of the Palace could witness the apex of the Feast.

Spinoza watched it from Courvain's summit. The worst of her wounds had been treated, but her entire body still ached from overexertion. She hadn't slept properly for days, and she felt feverish. Still, the column of light gave her some comfort. That told her the procession had reached the Eternity Gate. Those assembled there, the elect of the elect, would only have moments to glimpse the splendour of the banners, the Titans, the great golden doors, before they were hurried away again. In their exhaustion and their excitement, most would see nothing at all. Only a few might retain a grasp of their faculties, and realise that they gazed at the immortal halls of the Emperor Himself. They would see the great hololith of Sanguinius standing defiant across the threshold, and their devotion would reach its apogee.

Incense-laden wind brushed against her face, scouring the bruised flesh. A billion lanterns wafted into the dark sky, blown by Terra's sluggish air currents. For a moment, just a moment, the populace had forgotten its fears. There would be many prayers accompanying those fragile baskets of flame and paper, whispered quietly from fervent lips.

She remembered Rassilo's words to her.

*That's why they light the fires, to push the shadows back.*

It was primeval, a celebration whose form had existed since the earliest days of the species, one that would continue as long as humanity existed in a hostile galaxy.

'Impressive, is it not?' Crowl said, coming alongside her.

She had heard him coming from a long way off. Even out of armour, his trace limp was now recognisable to her, but she did not wish him to know that.

Of course, he probably did.

'My soul exalts,' Spinoza said, and that was true enough.

Crowl nodded. His grey gaze traced the path of the lumen-shaft.

Spinoza stole a brief glance. Her master's face, always gaunt, looked haggard now. A scatter of cuts across his skin was healing messily and his lips were blistered.

'You should take time to recover, lord,' she said.

'As should you.'

Ahead of them, out in the lamplit skies, an Ecclesiarchy sky-crawler traced a long arc across the forest of spires. Hymns blared from its vox-augmitters, enthusiastically taken up by the teeming hosts below. For once, the manufactoria were still, the forges cool, the Munitorum production lines quiet. All were out in the terraces and the streets, embracing one another and crying out fervent praise to the God-Emperor.

'I could not help but notice, lord,' Spinoza ventured then, cautiously. 'You referred to the Lord Rassilo by her given name. I reflected on that. It struck me as unusual.'

'Did it.'

'And was your association... close?'

'Mind your own damned business.'

She smiled. Out in the fevered night, ghostly shapes were being projected into the shafts of red light – the primarchs, the saints, the great heroes of the Adeptus Astartes. Each one brought a fresh cheer, a wave of displaced sound that briefly overshadowed the perennial growl of Terra's urban processors.

'I have learned some things,' Spinoza said at length.

'Oh?'

'Some things you told me. About fear. I think I understand what you meant.'

'Good.'

'Though I shall speak frankly. I do not much like your methods. I find your impiety troubling.'

'You sound like someone else I know.' Crowl leaned heavily on the balustrade. 'So was there anything else, Spinoza, or is that the sum of your complaints for this night?'

'Only that it is unsafe for servants of the Emperor to labour alone, for many eyes may be required to identify dereliction of character.'

Crowl raised an eyebrow. 'I see.'

'And that we may suit one another,' she said. 'That is all.'

'I told you to speak your mind, once,' Crowl said, sourly. 'I recant that now.'

'As you will it, lord.'

'Though you could, for the love of Him on the Throne, please stop calling me that.'

'I promise I shall make the attempt.'

Crowl became breathless, and his scarred hands clutched at the stone more tightly. Questions clustered in Spinoza's mind, ones that had been formulating during the rare snatches of time she had had to herself since arriving on the Throneworld. It did not feel right to raise them now, when the entire world was gripped with rare thankfulness, but then she did not know if she would ever get another opportunity.

'I asked about you,' she said. 'When I could. They always told me the same thing.' She turned to face him. 'They said you were not always alone.'

Crowl looked straight ahead, his thin face turned to the lights in the sky.

'No, not always,' he said. 'It was a long time ago.' Perhaps it was his wounds, but he looked worse than ever. 'It takes that long, to get over some losses. We're human, Spinoza. Some of us, anyway.'

Spinoza did not know what to say. That admission might have struck her as indulgent before, but somehow did not now.

‘What happened?’ she asked.

‘Your master happened. The butcher of Forfoda happened.’ Crowl’s face was static, a mask of old sorrow. ‘He didn’t stop to question why, just as ever. It was pointless, and it was a mistake, but that mattered nothing to him. She was innocent. How could she not have been, since she and I were...’ He trailed off, then shook his head. ‘When her body was gone he barely paused before lighting the next pyre. And then the next, and then the next, tracing his bloody path across the galaxy. Another man would have sought vengeance then, but I was too slow, and there were always duties, and so it festered.’

Spinoza looked away. ‘Tur died on Karalsis.’

‘So they tell me,’ Crowl said. He drew in a long, wheezing breath. ‘And I’ll join him soon enough – you know by now I’ll not live out this millennium.’ He looked down at his gauntlets. ‘So once he was gone, I looked at my life, and its solitude, and saw an empty throne in Courvain and relived the loss of the one soul who might have given me a reason for enduring. I resolved to spite him in the only way he would never understand. I would take the best of his retinue, the proudest and the most pious, and I would change it. He raised butchers and I would raise a soul in my own likeness. He had deprived me of my legacy, I would subvert his.’

Spinoza raised her eyes to the hololith. The spectral image of the last primarch, Sanguinius, was beginning to fade, to dissolve back into the myriad light of the world-city.

‘I was a tool in your disputes, then,’ she said, softly.

‘That was how it began.’

‘And what do you think now?’

She did not look to see if Crowl’s expression had changed.

‘That not all cruelties are of the body,’ he said. ‘That there are feuds that must be let go lest they never end. That you have exposed the foolishness of an old man, and that you do not need to stay here any longer, should you wish to leave now and make your own way. You will be a formidable inquisitor whichever creed you choose to cleave to.’

The cheering never relented. As the primarch-ghosts faded into nothingness, fireworks began to shoot up into the sky – military rockets converted to shower starbursts over the cathedral heights. The celebrations would go on until the grey dawn came, and the manufactoria klaxons sounded once more; a weary world would return to its drudgery after a brief, cathartic interlude of euphoria.

It was impossible not to be angry. Tur had taught her that beyond all else – to use anger, the last and most powerful emotion. She could hear his strident voice now, reminding her of her dignity and her destiny. She could hear what Erastus would say too, confronted by decay in the place of vitality.

And yet... From only days ago, though it already felt like a lifetime away, she remembered some of the first words Crowl had spoken to her.

‘Pay no attention to the voices you can hear,’ she said, repeating them. ‘Pay attention to the ones you can’t.’

Crowl looked up at her, then smiled wryly. ‘Who told you that?’

‘I forget.’

He nodded. ‘An enlightened attitude to take, though,’ he said.

‘This is Terra,’ she replied, watching the golden stars as they fell to earth. ‘One gift given, another

returned.’

He had been sitting in the cell for a long time. How long was impossible to tell. They had treated him for his wounds, just enough to keep him alive, taken him in a transport with no windows, deposited him in a lightless room with a pitcher of oily water and no food. There had been no brutality – one of the guards had even apologised for tightening the wrist-shackles too much and drawing blood – but then there had been no need for it, for his fear had become crippling.

At first he had tried defiance. As the hours wore on, that became harder. He started to shout, to rail against the injustice of it, but there were no answers. That was when the fear truly began to take over. Much later, having had no contact for however many hours it had been, he found himself pacing methodically. Then, after more hours had passed and physical weakness had set in, he could no longer do that, and sat slumped in the cell’s stinking corner. Then the shaking started. You could hear strange noises in that place, terrible noises, and it got to you, just as was intended.

He knew what they were doing. He was versed enough in the arts to understand exactly how they were taking his mind apart, but knowing made it no easier to resist.

By the time the door opened again, he was exactly where they wanted him to be – in the chair, shivering despite the oppressive heat, his hands clasped together in their shackles, his face down.

He only looked up again as his interrogator entered – a tall man in fine black armour with silver detailing. His face was severe and bore the marks of recent illness or injury, though his grey eyes were calm and he moved fluidly enough.

The door closed behind him, sealing them both in, and he took a seat opposite.

‘Salvor Lermontov,’ the man said, clasping his gauntlets together and looking directly at him. His voice was low, intelligent, flavoured with more Low Gothic than he might have expected.

Lermontov found he couldn’t take his eyes off a skull-form rosette fashioned from iron and pinned to the trim of the man’s cloak. He resolved to keep his eyes fixed on that. In what was to come, he had been trained to find something to latch on to, for that was supposed to help him hold out for a little longer, which despite everything he was determined to do.

But this was the end, he knew. All that remained was token defiance, for once you entered a fortress of the Inquisition, you did not leave.

He nodded. His interrogator brought out a thin sheaf of parchments, and began to turn them over, studying the script upon them carefully.

‘Say nothing,’ Crowl told him dryly, precisely, beginning all over again. ‘Listen with utmost care.’

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Chris Wraight** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series.

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An extract from [\*Magnus the Red: Master of Prospero\*](#).





Magnus did not know this place.

Not as it was now.

He remembered the Pyramid of Photep as a place of light, of polished glass and dazzling reflections. A place where starbeams and sunlight made sport on the earth below.

Beautiful people had once gathered within its golden-vaulted atria, holding impassioned debates on ethics, morality and virtue. They once delighted in the knowledge that their world was founded on principles of reason, wisdom and the pursuit of higher truths.

Now its interior was cold and lifeless, home only to muttering shadows and broken glass reflections he dared not heed. Its fellow pyramids of the Fellowships were sagging ruins of charred-black adamantium, hollowed out skeletons adrift in a dust-choked wasteland.

Lightning danced on the horizon beyond the pyramids, their broken framework throwing stark shadows around him. Magnus took a moment to orient himself. Once he would have known exactly where to go, but times had changed.

The frames of the pyramids had buckled in the heat of their burning, but it had been the translation from Prospero to this protean world that rendered every one of them into something hideously deformed. Their angles, once so true, were twisted unnaturally, as if to mock their perfect forms.

He looked up into the echoing void, picturing his final battle with the Wolf King. Sadness welled within him at the memory. Two brothers, opposites in many ways, yet so alike at their fundamental levels. How different it might have been.

The dust swirled above Magnus, forming a hazy image of that moment, and he averted his gaze, unwilling to relive his deepest shame once more.

That his world had been razed was a cut to the heart that would never heal, but the Pyramid of Photep's loss was the deepest wound of all.

One of the wonders of the galaxy, it had been his sanctum sanctorum, the representation of all that was great and noble on Prospero. It had contained his greatest treasures: texts dating back to mankind's first impressions on clay; its blind, stumbling strides into science and philosophy; its great dramatic literature, and irreplaceable works of art.

All gone, burned in a single night of unimaginable violence.

The night his father unleashed the wolves of Fenris.

They had howled and raged at the moon.

They had feasted well.

But they had failed.

Magnus and his Thousand Sons had escaped, borne through the howling chaos of the Great Ocean to this world of madness. He had never seen this planet before, never known or suspected its existence,

but he knew its name as well as his own.

*The Planet of the Sorcerers.*

An apposite name, for power coursed through every one of his sons that remained.

Power that might soon destroy them all.

Magnus picked a path through the wreckage, a numinous angel amid the ashes of his guilt. His corporeal body had been sundered across the knee of the Wolf King, but this new flesh – fashioned of warp matter – was as solid as it had been in life. But what had that transition done to his soul? What had he become?

He did not yet know.

A ghost? A memory given form?

Or the purest expression of his true nature?

Debris choked the interior of the pyramid, and he stepped over towering bookcases toppled like the mightiest trees of the forest and data-crystals crushed beneath Fenrisian boots. Fluttering pages of ashen grimoires drifted on the mournful wind, and Magnus plucked one from the air.

He recognised it. Of course he did – there wasn't a tome on Prospero he couldn't recall.

*Indeed, it is a strange disposed time:*

*But men may construe things after their fashion,*

*Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.*

One of the plays penned by the famed dramaturge of Albia. Even among all the great works of architecture, mathematics and science that lay in ashes around him, this loss struck Magnus deeply. Great works of technology could always be rediscovered, but works of art were unique and would never come again.

Magnus went down on one knee and splayed his fingers in the dust, letting the power of the Great Ocean flow through him. He drew the memory of the ancient wordsmith's art from within the halls of his memory. Glittering motes of golden light rose like fireflies from the ash. They drifted around him, spiralling in a double helix pattern and flowing into the scrap of paper.

Like a conflagration in reverse, the page reformed. Magnus smiled with pleasure as the motes of light conjoined around the remaining page, forming others in a rush of newly wrought parchment. He closed his eye and let out a breath that was not truly breath, feeling the same joy as the play's mysterious creator must have felt as he first scratched the words into existence.

Magnus felt weight settle in his palm and opened his eye. The manuscript was complete, the words glistening on the page as though fresh-inked.

'Do you plan to restore everything you lost like that?'

'If I have to,' said Magnus.

'It won't work.'

'And you know this how?'

'Because I know what you know,' said the unseen speaker, 'and *you* know it won't work. But you'll try anyway.'

Magnus rose to his full height and turned, letting memory clothe him in the war-plate he had worn on Prospero's last day: burnished gold with curling horns, pteruges of boiled leather and a wild mane of crimson hair bound with a bronze circlet.

Before him stood a black-robed figure with the unmistakable bulk of a legionary. His hands were laced before him at his waist, and a golden Crusader ring glittered on the middle finger of his right hand. His features were handsomely clean-cut, and his long black hair, severely swept back over a tapered skull, gave him a hawkish aspect.

‘I have not thought of that face in an age,’ said Magnus, resting a hand on the red leather cover of his eponymous book.

‘Lie to me and you only deceive yourself,’ said the legionary. ‘Remember, I know what you know.’

‘Very well,’ said the primarch. ‘Then let us say that I *try* not to think of him.’

The figure circled Magnus, studying him as though they were newly reunited acquaintances. The notion was not completely absurd.

‘He remembers the first time he saw you like that,’ said the legionary. ‘He was almost dead and thought you a vision come to usher him into the beyond.’

‘I remember it well,’ said Magnus. ‘I am surprised *he* does.’

The legionary opened his hands and grinned. ‘Maybe I remember *you* remembering it, or maybe I read it in the pages of your grand grimoire. Either way, he was not himself back then. Few of you were. But you fixed them, didn’t you? Just like you fixed us.’

‘I tried,’ said Magnus, walking deeper into the ruins of the pyramid. ‘I tried so hard to save all my sons.’

The legionary followed him. ‘I know you did,’ he said, ‘but your cure was worse than the disease.’

‘You think I do not know that?’ snapped Magnus, following a spiralling path towards a wide shell crater filled with razored shards of glass. ‘What choice did I have?’

‘You could have let them die.’

‘Never. They were my sons!’

‘But what are they now?’ asked the figure, descending into the crater. ‘And what will they become? Look into the Great Ocean, Magnus. Read the tides of the future and tell me if you still feel pride at their deeds in all the centuries to come.’

‘No!’ cried Magnus, stumbling down into the crater, all thoughts of regret and shame pushed aside by anger. Glass cracked underfoot, ten thousand reflections staring back at him in silent accusation.

No two were alike, each facet an aspect of his soul he dared not confront.

‘The future is not set,’ said Magnus. ‘Horus fell into the trap of believing that on Davin. I will not make the same mistake.’

‘No, you will make new ones,’ said the figure, tapping a finger against his forehead. Magnus felt his gaze drawn to the legionary’s golden ring. The motif worked into the metal was unclear, but he did not need to see it to know what it was or understand the guilt of what it represented.

‘You will make worse mistakes because you still believe you can fix everything,’ continued the legionary. ‘The all-powerful Magnus – *he* can save everyone, because he is cleverer than anyone else. He knows things no one else knows.’

‘That face you wear? He cannot be here,’ said Magnus. ‘My brother killed him on Terra.’

‘So?’ asked the legionary. ‘You know better than anyone that the death of the matter binding our souls to this existence means nothing. *Less* than nothing on a world like this.’

‘I felt him let go of his silver cord.’

‘But you were the one who cut it,’ the legionary reminded him, holding up his ring so Magnus could see the eagle and crossed lightning bolts worked upon its surface. ‘You were the one who sent him

back to Terra as a symbol, too broken to serve at the forefront of the Great Crusade.'

'Russ smote me far worse than I suspected,' said Magnus. 'My mind is unravelling.'

'There's truth in that, too, but you know I am not a figment of your disintegrating mind. I come bearing a warning.'

'A warning?' said Magnus, taking a step towards the legionary and drawing the destructive power of the Great Ocean into his fists. 'What warning do you bear?'

'Only what you already know – that the powers you bartered with have not finished with you and your sons. There is a price yet to pay for past misdeeds.'

Magnus laughed, a bitter bark freighted with boundless regret and unending sorrow.

'What more can the Primordial Annihilator take from me?' said Magnus, sinking to his knees and lifting handfuls of broken glass and dust. 'The Wolves razed my world and burned our knowledge to ash! My sons are dying and I am helpless to save them!'

'Magnus the Red, the Crimson King, *helpless*? No, you don't really believe that or you wouldn't be here.'

Magnus let the glass and dust spill from his hands as he saw the gleam of partially exposed metal beneath him.

'There is still a way to cheat your fate,' said the dead legionary.

'How?'

'You remember Morningstar?'

'Yes, Atharva,' said Magnus. 'I remember Morningstar.'

**Click here to buy [\*Magnus the Red: Master of Prospero.\*](#)**

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*To Hannah with love*

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